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Women, work and family in the Arab region: Toward economic citizenship

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Introduction

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. 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 they are of short duration, leaving working mothers dissatisfied and anxious. Where mothers have the possibility of lengthy, unpaid maternity leaves, their status in the workplace and possibility for advancement or promotion may diminish.

The global economy, with its attendant flexible labor markets, places tremendous pressures on families. In many of the core countries, real wages are flat or declining, hours worked outside the home have been rising, and family leave policies are not generous—and this at a time of unprecedented female labor force participation. For example, Sweden, Finland, France, and Germany offer parents up to 156 weeks of leave; in contrast, Canada offers only 10 weeks of leave, and the United States only 12 weeks of unpaid leave (Kittelson 2008). The global financial crisis, which led to home foreclosures and loss of jobs, placed in sharp relief the vulnerabilities of many families. Meanwhile, the cost of university education has increased, especially in the U.S. and U.K. These trends strain the labor resources of families, often adversely affecting the ability of people to care for children or older relatives (Dau-Schmidt and Brun 2006). As the older population of the core countries expands, concerns about institutional and family care for the elderly has become a major policy concern.

The trends outlined above have affected the Arab world as well, with some variations. The population of young people remains much larger in the Arab world than in the core countries, but fertility rates have been declining, with the expectation that the older generation will expand in the decades ahead. Maternity leave policies are in place in MENA countries, but they are not generous. As in other countries, Arab women are responsible for the care of the home and children, though wealthy Arab women, like their Western counterparts, may resort to a nanny, usually one from another country. One key difference, however, is that women in the Arab region

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have yet to achieve labor market attachment, and their labor force participation remains lower than in other world regions.

As recently as 2010, women's activity rates were lowest in the MENA countries, when compared with other developing or middle-income regions (see Table 1). 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 International Labour Organization (ILO)—alleviate and prevent poverty, and such conditions certainly are needed to encourage women from low-income households to seek employment.¹ 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. Specifically, labor laws, family laws, and social policies should complement and not contradict each other.

Table 1. MENA Women's Labor Force Participation Rates in Global Perspective, 1980-85 and 2005-2010 a

	1980-1985	2005-2010
World	55.2	56.9
Latin America and Caribbean	39.6	54.6
East Asia and Pacific	69.6	69.3
South Asia	34.9	36.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	44.1	60.9
North America	61.5	69.1
Europe and Central Asia	58.5	61.4
MENA	22.1	27.9

Note: a. Percentage of female population aged 15-64.

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators (Washington, DC: World Bank). <http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do?Step=12&id=4&CNO=2>, accessed April 2012.

The paper is informed by the literature on women, work, and family and recent discussion of the care economy, and it draws on T. H. Marshall's conceptualization of citizenship. The empirical part of the paper examines patterns and trends in women's employment across the Arab region since 1990, with some distinction between oil and non-oil economies, and countries at different levels of human development. Data are presented on states' ratification of international conventions pertaining to women, work, and family (e.g., ILO conventions and CEDAW), and on maternity leave policies and other institutional supports for maternal employment.

Key questions addressed are: what are the patterns and trends in female labor market participation across Arab countries? What role is played by political economy, legal and policy frameworks, human capital, and social norms in the variations across the region? 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 non-Arab countries at similar levels of development and income highlight similarities and differences. I also offer some suggestions

¹See <http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/decent-work-agenda/lang--en/index.htm>, which focuses on creating jobs; guaranteeing rights at work; extending social protection; promoting social dialogue.

for women's economic citizenship that would balance work and family.

Women, Development, and the Social-Economic Rights of Citizenship

Social-economic rights constitute the third pillar of the rights of citizenship—the other two being civil rights and political rights—and include an array of social and labor rights, from the right to organize and form trade unions to the rights to education, training, health, and welfare. In Marshall's framework, social rights are those connected to education, training, a decent standard of living, and good work conditions. They refer to the gains made by labor movements in the early part of the 20th century and their codification in the labor laws and social policies of welfare states, particularly around health, education, vocational training, and social insurance. As Marshall (1950:72) stated: "By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security, to the right to share fully in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized beings according to the standards prevailing in the society." In Marshall's historical analysis, social rights followed the civil and political rights established in the course of democratic revolutions and struggles in the 18th and 19th centuries. A summary of civil, political and social rights of citizenship as per Marshall, with some minor adjustments, is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Civil, Political, and Social Rights of Citizenship: A Summary Illustration

Civil rights	Political rights	Social rights
Right to contract	Right to vote	Health services
Equal treatment under the law	Right to run & hold office	Family allowances
Freedom of expression	To form or join a political party or trade union	Primary and secondary schooling
Freedom of religion	To engage in fund-raising	Higher education
Right to privacy	Nationality rights	Vocational education
Control over one's body	Refugee and contract worker rights	Compensatory rights
Choice of residence	Minority rights	Social insurance
Choice of occupation	Dissident rights	Paid maternity leave & subsidized quality childcare

Source: Adapted from Marshall (1950, 1964) and Janoski (1998).

In terms of international standards and norms, social/economic rights are found in the International Covenant on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966). The ICESCR prescribes the right of people to a freely chosen job; equitable and equal wages for work of equal value; dignified working conditions for workers and their families; professional training; equal opportunities for promotion; protection for families, especially for children; maternity protection; protection of boys, girls, and teenagers against economic exploitation. Social/economic rights also are found in conventions and declarations promoted by the ILO, notably the four core labor standards represented by eight conventions, which call for freedom of association and the prohibition of child labor, forced labor, and discrimination in employment.²

Women's economic citizenship and social rights are defined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Charter of Women Workers Rights of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU, now the ITUC). They are also inscribed in the ILO conventions pertaining to maternity protection, non-discrimination, and equal remuneration. Many countries have adopted these standards and inscribed them in national laws. Thus, women workers may enjoy rights to paid maternity leave, nurseries at the workplace with nursing breaks to feed their babies, subsidized child care facilities in the community, and retirement that is several years earlier than that of men. Women also may be the beneficiaries of laws against discrimination in employment

²See www.ilo.org. See also Moghadam, Franzway, and Fonow 2011, especially the introductory chapter by the editors and ch. 2 by Moghadam.

and pay, and against sexual harassment. Other social/economic rights for working women include vocational training, skills upgrading, and opportunities for advancement; and prohibition of discrimination and sexual harassment. Indeed, in MENA, major campaigns have been launched by women's rights groups against sexual harassment, and in some cases, governments have passed laws in recognition of a working woman's right to a healthy and dignified work environment free of sexual harassment.³

One of the most basic rights—the right to an occupation of one's choice—spans civil and social-economic rights in that it entails control over one's own body for freedom of movement and the ability to offer one's labor power for various occupations and professions. In a capitalist world, workers are free to move from one job to another, although there are restrictions on labor mobility or migration across international borders. For women, patriarchal constraints have historically limited their mobility and control over their bodies. Mobility by male kin or the state have effectively limited their citizenship rights, and the care work that women do across the world is typically unacknowledged as “work.” In some cultural contexts, including the MENA region, family laws continue to place women under the protection—or control—of male kin and require that they obtain the permission of their fathers or husbands to seek employment, sign a contract, or travel. In addition, Muslim family law limits women's portions of inherited family wealth, with the result that they may be at a disadvantage, compared with males, when they try to start a business. As such, women's social rights are constrained and economic citizenship denied.

Economic citizenship is conventionally tied to work and employment. The position of women within the labor market is frequently studied as an empirical measure of women's status. Access to remunerative work in the formal sector of the economy—as distinct from informal-sector activities—is regarded by many researchers in the field of women-in-development (WID) and gender-and-development (GAD) as an important indicator of women's social position and legal status. For those who argue that women's economic dependence on men is the root cause of their disadvantaged status, the gender composition of the labor force and change in the structure of labor force rewards are key targets.

Employed women tend to have greater control over decision-making within the family; households also benefit when women control income and spending, and the well-being of children is increasingly linked to female education and income. Many women's rights advocates regard women's involvement in paid employment as a pathway to social and gender consciousness, autonomy, and empowerment. The societal benefits of increased female employment include diminishing fertility rates and a more skilled and a competitive human resource base. Investment in women's education and employment is increasingly understood as integral to building the national human resource base.⁴

The Middle East and North Africa region has not figured prominently in the WID/GAD literature, in part because of a common perception that religious and cultural factors shape women's lives more than do economic ones. Some scholars, however, have singled out the oil economy, the neopatriarchal state, or rentierism as key determinants.⁵ Indeed, there exists longstanding literature on the economic and political effects of the “rentier state,” but less has been written about its gender dynamics.⁶ When a state depends on “rents” (state-owned oil, minerals, tourism, or waterways), it accrues vast wealth without needing to rely on income taxes. The implications are both economic, in that diversification is forestalled, and political, in that the state is less accountable to its citizenry. The oil economy plays a key role in determining women's employment in at least three ways. First, the oil sector is male-intensive and capital-intensive. It

³For details on such policies in the Maghreb, see Moghadam 2010; see also Moghadam 2013.

⁴The following list is by no means complete, but it is representative of the WID-GAD and sociology-of-gender perspective, which puts a premium on women's integration into the paid labor force of the formal economy: Blumberg 1995; Chafetz 1984; Joeke 1987; Tiano 1987; Tinker 1990; Moghadam 1996b; Charles 2011. See also various contributions in Visvanathan 2011.

⁵I have discussed this scholarship in some detail in Moghadam 2013, ch. 1.

⁶The early writings were the following: Mahdavi 1972; Katouzian 1981; Beblawi and Luciano 1987. U.S. political scientist Michael Ross followed with a series of papers; see Ross 2001 and 2008.

employs relatively few workers overall, but they are traditionally male. Second, a state's receipt of oil revenues from export softens the incentive to diversify the economy and open it up to labor-intensive, export-led manufacturing that favors female employment (of the kind that has been characteristic of East and Southeast Asian economies). Third, oil revenues enable high wages for male workers; at the household level, that reality attenuates the need for women to seek employment.

The next section applies the framework sketched above to address the questions and issues raised in the introductory section.

Women, Work and Family in MENA

In MENA, oil wealth financed economic development (including infrastructural development and state-owned industries), but in a lopsided fashion that also distorted the labor force (Katouzian 1981; Karshenas 1990, 1995; Richards and Waterbury 1990). Apart from the small Gulf countries, most of the large countries pursued import-substitution industrialization (ISI), where machinery was imported to run local industries producing consumer goods. This strategy was associated with an economic system characterized by central planning and a large public sector. State expansion, economic development, oil wealth, and the region's increased integration within the world system combined to create educational and employment opportunities for women in the Middle East.

For relatively well-educated women, jobs in teaching, health, and welfare offered the greatest possibilities. During the period of rapid growth (1960s-1980s), governments instituted social security programs, and protective legislation for working mothers—such as paid maternity leave and workplace nurseries—was in place in all MENA countries. This was part of the social contract between the government and the governed, or what some scholars have called the authoritarian bargain. That is, at a time when civil and political rights were limited, the state did provide social rights, at least for those employed in the state sector and their families (Karshenas and Moghadam 2006, esp. pp. 1-30).

Those countries rich in oil and poor in other resources chose an industrial strategy based on petroleum products and petrochemicals. The industrialization of other countries followed a typical pattern of ISI, although Algeria and Iraq remained dependent on oil revenues for foreign exchange and to finance imports and development projects. MENA lagged behind southeast Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and east Asia in terms of the transition from ISI to manufacturing for export. Oil revenues certainly were used for domestic investment purposes, as Karshenas (1990, 1995) has argued, and an industrial labor force in the manufacturing sector was also created. But investment in iron and steel plants, petrochemicals, car assembly plants, and similar industries turned out to be costly and inefficient, especially when the price of oil declined while the price of manufactured imports did not.

What is more, and as I have argued since the early 1990s, a strategy that relied on oil, gas, and imports of manufactures was heavily capital-intensive, minimized the use of labor, and was not especially conducive to increased female employment. Thus in my early research, I contrasted Iran and Algeria with Tunisia and Morocco, showing how the countries in the region with the largest oil sectors or highest oil revenues had a far smaller female share of paid employment (whether professional or manufacturing) than the non-oil economies. The oil-rich Gulf countries, in particular, imported women workers from the Philippines and elsewhere for work in hospitals, restaurants, hotels, and shops.⁷ It seemed fair to conclude, as I did in my early writings, that across MENA, one effect of the oil economy in the period 1960s-1990s was that women had been “locked into” a patriarchal family unit.

⁷The argument was initially made in the first edition (1993) of my book *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Moghadam 2013), and subsequently in the following publications: Moghadam 1995; 1998, esp. chap. 2; 2005a; 2005b. In 2008, Michael Ross made a similar argument, using quantitative methods.

If oil-based growth and capital-intensive production did not lead to a significant demand for female labor, another factor in the relatively low levels of female employment during the oil-boom era pertained to the high wages that male workers in the region earned. An analysis of wage trends by economist Massoud Karshenas showed that workers' wages were higher in most of the MENA countries than they were in Asian countries such as Indonesia, Korea, and Malaysia (Karshenas and Moghadam 2001). Higher wages earned by men served to limit the supply of job-seeking women during the oil-boom years.

In sum, the oil economy and the ISI strategy reinforced what I have called the patriarchal gender contract—the implicit, and often explicit, agreement that men are the breadwinners and are responsible for financially maintaining wives, children, and elderly parents, and that women are wives, homemakers, mothers, and caregivers (Moghadam 1998, Ch. 1). The patriarchal gender contract also justified men's domination within the public sphere of markets and the state and women's concentration in the private sphere of the family.⁸

But what of non-oil economies? Why is the level of female paid employment low in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria? I offer two explanations. First, the concept of a regional oil economy is a salient one, as formulated by a number of scholars. For although there are differences among MENA countries in terms of economic structure and natural resource endowments, the labor and capital flows across the region—especially during the 1970s—constituted a more or less integrated regional oil economy. High wages were earned by male workers in non-oil economies, in part due to their ability to migrate to the oil-rich countries for employment and send back remittances.

The second reason for the difference between MENA and other regions is non-economic, and may be summarized as a set of social institutions and norms that act as barriers to female labor supply and demand. The patriarchal gender contract—the social norm of men as breadwinners and women as wives and mothers—is inscribed in Muslim family law (MFL), which I identify as a distinctive institutional obstacle to female labor supply and demand and to women's mobility (see also Jutting et al., 2006). Provisions regarding obedience, maintenance, and inheritance imply that wives are economic dependents. Although much research has uncovered the gap between the law and the lived reality, there does seem to be a connection between the prevalence of MFL and the historically low rates of female labor force participation and involvement in paid employment in MENA.

As in other parts of the world, Arab women's formal rights of citizenship are based on two pillars: (a) international treaties and norms and (b) national legislation, including constitutions, family laws, and labor laws. As Table 3 makes clear, governments have signed a number of key international contracts pertaining to women's participation and rights. However, such instruments are often weakly enforced, or they are rendered moot by virtue of their conflict with some national legislation or interpretation of Sharia. Similarly, the labor laws that signify women as workers with certain rights are contradicted by family laws that place women under the authority of male kin and deny women equal access to family wealth. As was noted above, the sociologist and theorist T. H. Marshall identified the "right to work at an occupation of one's choice" as a key civil right, won by workers in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Later, historian Alice Kessler-Harris (2001) underscored this right as central to American women's search for equity and economic citizenship. Yet, even though the right to an occupation of one's choice is enshrined in the ICESCR, it is not present in all MENA countries. In Saudi Arabia, for example, national legal frameworks do not give women the unqualified right to work, women require the written permission of a spouse or male kin to travel, and they do not have the right to drive.

⁸It should be noted that the patriarchal gender contract prevailed in Western countries, too, but it was superseded by the imperatives of capitalist industrialization as well as the aspirations of women's movements, which led to legal changes and policy reforms to counter discrimination and encourage women's labor force participation.

Table 3. International Conventions Signed by Selected MENA Countries, Year of Ratification

Convention	Algeria	Morocco	Tunisia	Egypt	Jordan
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979 (with or without reservations)	1996	1993	1985		
Optional Protocol, 1999	1996		1996	1981	1992
Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995	Adopted ^a				
International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 1966	1989 ^a	1979	1969	1982	1975
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966	1989	1979	1969	1982	1975
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and Their Families, 1990	2005	2003	—	1993	—
UNESCO Convention: Discrimination in education, 1960	1968	1968	1969	1962	1976
ILO Convention 111: Discrimination in employment/occupation, 1958	1969	1963	1959	1960	1963
ILO Convention 100: Equal remuneration for men and women for equal work, 1951	1962	1979	1968	1960	1966
ILO Conventions 87 & 98: Freedom of association and right to organize, 1948	1962	—	1957	1957, 1954	1968
ILO Convention 182: Worst forms of child labor	2001	2001	2000	2002	2000
ILO Convention 183: Maternity protection, 2000	—	—	—	—	—
ILO Convention 156: Workers with Families Responsibilities, 1981	—	—	—	—	—

Note: a. Made general and interpretative statements or expressed reservations.

**Compiled from “A Summary of United Nations Agreements on Human Rights”,
<http://www.hrweb.org/legal/undocs.html> and the International Labour Organization
 NORMLEX Information System on International Labour Standards
<http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11001:0::NO::> (accessed December 2012)**

In her historical study of states, women's rights, and kin-based solidarities in post-independence Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, Mounira Charrad (2001) explained that patriarchal family law reflected very real social and political conditions: it was founded on the strength of kin-based relations. In most MENA countries today, however, social structures have changed such that the extended family unit is less prevalent than the nuclear family. This renders MFL anachronistic, given the growth of modern middle classes, along with an expanding population of urban, educated, and employed women who are increasingly responsible for family welfare. It is this population that has produced women's rights groups calling for family law reform and its transformation from patriarchal to egalitarian (see, e.g., Collectif 2003). As a result, several countries, most notably Morocco in 2003-04, have reformed their family laws, establishing equal rights and responsibilities within the family and releasing women for activities outside the home. However, in some countries or among certain social groups, a cultural lag remains, and conservative social norms continue to prevent women from seeking paid work outside the home.

To summarize the discussion thus far, during most of the 20th century and into the present century, Arab women's civil, political, and social rights of citizenship were limited by law and by tradition (Joseph 2000; Moghadam 2003; Karshenas and Moghadam 2006; UNDP 2006).

Challenges to the social contract (or authoritarian bargain) and the patriarchal gender contract began to emerge in the late 20th century. The challenges came in the form of the structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the privatization of many social rights; the emergence of women's rights movements critical of women's secondary citizenship; and broad globalization processes that undermined state authority and encouraged civil society growth. As many studies have documented, rights and privileges, such as guaranteed public-sector employment for graduates, were withdrawn in the 1990s. Other social rights were adversely affected. School and university enrollment rates went up, but the quality of education deteriorated significantly. The cost of living rose, unemployment skyrocketed (especially among young, new college graduates), and real wages stagnated. These are the socio-economic factors causally related to the Arab Spring protests.

Characteristics of the Female Labor Force

Women's entry into the labor force in the MENA region, while limited, was facilitated by state-sponsored education and job opportunities in the expanding government sector and public services. Formal/modern-sector employment—especially opportunities in the civil service—became an important source of status and livelihood for women and their families. In this regard, the Middle East is not so different from other countries, for around the world the public sector and government employment have provided women with jobs, benefits, and security that may elude them in the private sphere. As Fatima Mernissi (1984: xx) once remarked, “The North African woman of today usually dreams of having a steady, wage-paying job, with social security and health and retirement benefits, at a State institution; these women don't look to a man any longer for their survival, but to the State. While perhaps not ideal, this is nevertheless a breakthrough, an erosion of tradition. It also partly explains the Moroccan women's active participation in the urbanization process: they are leaving rural areas in numbers equaling men's migrations, for a ‘better life’ in the cities—and in European cities, as well.” Since Mernissi wrote these prescient words, more socio-demographic changes have taken place, especially in the areas of tertiary enrollments, age at first marriage, contraception prevalence, and fertility rates (see Table 4).

Table 4. Gendered Socio-Demographic Features, MENA, circa 2010

Country	Female tertiary enrollments, 2011	Proportion female teaching staff at tertiary level, 2011	Age at first marriage, 2010		Contraceptive prevalence, % married women aged 15-49, 2005-09	Total Fertility Rate 2005-2010
			Male	Female		
Algeria	34	38	33	29	61	2.4
Bahrain	n.a.	33	30	26	62	2.7
Egypt	32	n.a.	n.a.	23	60	2.9
Iran	49	19	26	24	79	1.8
Iraq	n.a.	n.a.	28	25	50	4.9
Israel	62	n.a.	29	26	n.a.	2.9
Jordan	38	24	29	25	59	3.3
Kuwait	n.a.	27	30	25	52	2.3
Lebanon	58	38	31	27	58	1.9
Libya	n.a.	n.a.	32	29	45	2.7
Morocco	13	17	31	26	63	2.4
Oman	29	30	26	22	32	2.5
Qatar	32	38	28	26	43	2.4
Saudi Arabia	37	35	27	25	24	3.0

Syria	n.a.	n.a.	29	25	58	3.1
Tunisia	34	42	30	27	60	2.0
Turkey	34	40	n.a.	23	73	2.2
UAE	n.a.	31	26	23	28	1.9
West Bank and Gaza	51	n.a.	27	23	50	4.7
Yemen	n.a.	17	25	22	28	5.5

Notes: n.a. means data not available.

Sources: Tertiary enrollment female: World Development Indicators <http://data.worldbank.org/topic>

Proportion women instructors in higher education, World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2011, <http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2011>; Mean age at marriage: "Statistical Indicators on Men and Women," United Nations, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/indwm/tab2b.htm>.

Contraception prevalence and TFR: UNDP, Human Development Report 2011, tab.4.

The socio-demographic changes differ across the countries, and as seen in Table 5, the Arab countries also are at different levels of human development. While some countries are at very high or high levels of human development, this status does not necessarily correlate with high levels of female employment. In this section, the main features of Arab women's labor force participation and employment patterns that are emphasized are: (1) low participation rates and female labor force shares; (2) occupational distribution; (3) administrative and managerial presence; (4) age, marital, and household headship status; and (5) high rates of unemployment. I then examine the special case of the countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Table 5. Political Economy and Human Development in Arab MENA, 2012

	Very High Human Development	High Human Development	Medium Human Development	Low Human Development
Oil economies	Bahrain, Qatar, UAE	Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia	Libya	—
Mixed oil economies—		Tunisia	Algeria, Iraq, Egypt, Syria	—
Non-oil economies		Lebanon	Jordan, Morocco, Palestinian Territories	Yemen

Source: Level of human development is based on each country's ranking in the UNDP's 2012 Human Development Report. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

As we saw in Table 1, MENA women's labor force participation rates are low by international standards. The average rate of female participation grew from 22 percent in 1980–1985 to about 28 percent in 2005–2010, but that was still low compared to other regions of the developing world, where women's economic activity rates ranged from 45 to 62 percent.⁹ There were variations across the region, as well as in sub-regions. For example, Algerian women's labor force participation was about half the rate of Tunisian and Moroccan women until after 2000. MENA countries that reported higher participation rates than the regional average in 2000 were Tunisia at 37 percent and Morocco at 41 percent.¹⁰ Data from the ILO's Global Employment Trends for Women 2012 show that the female employment-to-population ratio was much smaller in the Middle East (15.3%) and North Africa (19.7%) than for the world (47.8). Even South Asia had a

⁹Data from ILO 1990, table 1, p. 60, as well as from the ILO's Yearbook of Labour Statistics 1981, 1985, 1991, table 1. Figures for the 1990s are from the ILO's Key Indicators of the Labour Market (ILO 1999). On Lebanon, see Al-Raida 15, no. 82 (Summer 1998): 16, a special issue on women in the labor force, which reported that women's share of employment was 20 percent. See also Moghadam 1995.

¹⁰United Nations 2000, chart 5.2, p. 110; UNDP 2002, table 25. See also CAWTAR 2001, table A/27.

higher figure for women (30.4%).¹¹ If we turn our attention to the female share of the total labor force, Table 6 shows that female labor force shares rose between 1990 and 2010 in most MENA countries but they declined in Egypt, Kuwait, and Qatar. (While errors in defining or measuring women's work may be at play in the figures presented, the stark difference between the female participation rates in the MENA region and other parts of the world—as was seen in Table 1—goes beyond what can be explained by measurement errors.)

Table 6. Female Share of Total Labor Force in MENA Countries, in percent), 1990, 2010

	1990	2010
Algeria	11.9	16.9
Bahrain	17.0	19.3
Egypt	26.5	24.2
Iraq	14.2	17.5
Jordan	14.0	18.0
Kuwait	26.9	23.9
Lebanon	21.1	25.5
Libya	17.7	28.0
Morocco	25.3	27.1
Oman	12.9	17.9
Qatar	14.4	12.4
Saudi Arabia	10.7	14.8
Syria	18.4	15.2
Tunisia	21.6	26.9
United Arab Emirates	9.7	14.5
West Bank and Gaza	12.5	17.8
Yemen	18.9	25.8

**Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators (Washington, DC: World Bank).
<http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do?Step=3&id=4>**

Another feature pertains to occupational distribution. Employed women in MENA tend to be concentrated in professional occupations, mainly in what are known as community, social, and public services. Although the majority of the economically active female population comes from the lower-income groups, those with access to paid employment tend to be educated women from the middle classes. In the 1990s, a growing proportion of public sector jobs came to be held by women: 35–39 percent in Kuwait and 27–31 percent in Syria and Morocco (Alachkar 1996; Standing 1999). In the new century, these proportions increased. Indeed, the data show a clear positive relationship between educational attainment and involvement in paid jobs. Women with a university education are disproportionately represented in the labor force, given that the university-educated population is small compared to the total adult population. Such large proportions of employed women with higher education attainment are found in the West Bank and Gaza (a whopping 44.2 percent), Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran (roughly 30 percent). Many of these women are employed as teachers, and in some countries, they have come to constitute high proportions of the teaching staff at universities. According to data from the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2011, high percentages of female instructors at the tertiary level are found in Tunisia (42 percent), as well as in Algeria and Qatar (38 percent).

At the same time, women have been conspicuously absent from certain occupations, notably in private sales and services and in the sectors of hotels, restaurants, and wholesale and retail

¹¹ILO 2012, Table 2, p. 12.

trade, at least according to official statistics for wage employment. Lebanon may be an exception to this rule, given its traditionally large private sector and small public sector.¹² Apparently, women do not wish to enter sales work and service occupations in the private sector. Ghazy Mujahid (1985:115) explained women's avoidance of such jobs in terms of cultural norms: these occupations have the highest likelihood of indiscriminate contact with outsiders. It is also true that the merchant class has been typically male, and the traditional urban markets—bazaars and souks—have been the province of men. Clerical work, while common among women in Egypt and growing in other MENA countries, is still not dominated by women as it tends to be in the West and in Latin America. Nursing has not been considered an appropriate occupation for women in the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, and these countries have imported nurses from abroad. Across the MENA region, it is uncommon for women to work in factories, with the exception of Tunisia and Morocco in the 1990s. According to Laetitia Cairoli (1999, 2010), who studied the garment industry in Fez in the 1990s, the industry was overwhelmingly female, although it attracted mainly young, unmarried women.

A third feature is minimal female participation in administrative and managerial sectors of the economy. In the late 1990s the percentages ranged from a low of under 6 percent, in Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, and Syria, to 10–13 percent in Egypt and Tunisia; Morocco, interestingly but inexplicably, reported a far higher female share of administrative and managerial positions. In 2010, Bahrain reported the highest percentage (22 percent), followed distantly by Kuwait, Morocco, Egypt, Syria, and the UAE (10–14 percent); elsewhere in the region, the proportions were 5–9 percent, with Yemen trailing behind with a mere 2 percent female share of total legislators, senior officials, and managers, according to the 2011 Global Gender Gap Report.¹³

A fourth feature pertains to the age, marital status, and household headship of women in the workforce. A number of studies have examined factors such as marriage and young children in relation to women and work, concluding that these factors play significant roles in preventing women from participating in the labor market (Etemad Moghadam and Naguib 2012). Young, unmarried women tend to dominate the workforce in Syria and Jordan, although in Egypt a higher proportion of married women can be found. This social reality seems to align with the patriarchal gender contract, as discussed above. The dual-income household characteristic of Western countries and China is rarely found in MENA.

A fifth feature is high and persistent unemployment rates among women since the mid-1990s, which I have referred to as the feminization of unemployment. Table 7 shows unemployment rates for the female labor force as a whole and for university-educated women, averaged over 2000–2010. As can be seen, with the notable exception of Kuwait, the unemployment rates for women are very high, especially among women with university education, who also tend to predominate in the paid labor force. The likelihood of being unemployed is considerably higher among women with university education than among those with lower educational attainments. Unemployment among college-educated women seems to be greater because their economic activity rate is higher than that of women with secondary or primary education.

¹²See, for example, Al-Raida 15, no. 82 (Summer 1998), a special issue on Lebanese women in the labor force. See also Doctor and Khoury 1991, p. 28; and Anker 1998, p. 166.

¹³World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2011, on-line version. The 1990s figures are from UNDP, Human Development Report 1998, table 3, p. 134.

Table 7. Average Female Unemployment Rates—Total and for University Graduates—in Selected MENA Countries, Average 2000–2010

	Total	University
Algeria	19.5	29.6
Kuwait	1.8	1.5
Lebanon	8.9	-
Libya	4.2	-
Morocco	11.2	33.3
Syria	20.2	31.2
Tunisia	16.7	26.6
UAE	7.2	9.7
West Bank/Gaza	20.6	34.7

Source: Based on World Bank, World Development Indicators (Washington, DC: World Bank)

The relationship between education and employment has been widely discussed in the literature. For example, Niels Spierings and Jeroen Smits (2007) show that a positive correlation exists between higher education and female labor force participation in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia (although they identify other contextual factors that shape female labor supply as well). Less-educated women, in MENA at least, are less likely than women with higher education to enter the labor force. At the same time, women with higher education attainment appear to face obstacles and barriers in the workforce that their educated male counterparts do not, such as a marginal position in some professions and high unemployment rates. Class and gender issues are visible and salient in the data and information on MENA women's labor force participation, employment, and unemployment.

The Case of the Oil-Rich Gulf Countries

In the GCC countries, a common pattern is that almost the entire female labor force is concentrated in the public sector. Female labor force participation data show relatively high rates for some GCC countries: 43–50 percent in Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE. (Saudi Arabia is much lower, at 22 percent.) That may be because non-nationals are counted or because of the conflation of the female activity rate and the female share of public sector and civil service employment.¹⁴

Female employment in the state sector—typically in education and healthcare—ranges widely, from just under 50 percent in Kuwait and Bahrain to just over 30 percent in Qatar and Oman to a low of 16 percent in Saudi Arabia. Assuming that female nationals in Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain form a larger proportion of the native-born workforce than is the case in other MENA countries (46 percent, 36 percent, and 33 percent, respectively), what might explain the variation? Higher-education enrollment and attainment might account for part of it (51 percent gross female enrollment at the university level in Bahrain, though far less in Kuwait and Qatar), but the high wages and excellent work conditions in the public sector—coupled with the presence of migrant workers to care for the household, children, and the elderly—may be the incentives that draw the female nationals to the employment sector. Indeed, Nora Ann Colton (2011) has stated that in Kuwait, on average, there are two domestic workers per home.¹⁵ The Gulf region has a very high presence of women migrant domestic workers, but so do Jordan and Lebanon (Esim

¹⁴Confirmed in a personal communication with Dr. George Kossaifi, formerly of ESCWA, at the conference on Democratic Transition and Development in the Arab World, Stanford University, April 26–27, 2012. For example, according to another source, although Qatari women make up at least 33 percent of government employment, they are only 14 percent of the total labor force. See Kelly and Breslin 2010, p. 412.

¹⁵Haya al-Mughni (in Kelly and Breslin 2010, p. 232) notes that Kuwait's Labour Law, which specifies that a working day should be restricted to eight hours, does not apply to domestic workers, the majority of whom are women working long hours at low wages. Kuwaitis remain highly dependent on foreign labor—mostly from South and Southeast Asia—for domestic work.

and Smith 2004; ILO 2005). It should be noted, though, that the presence of household help is not a luxury enjoyed by all professional women across MENA.

In recent years, GCC governments have sought to disaggregate nationals and non-nationals. Because migrants take jobs in the private sector, which hires much more labor than the public sector, they make up a larger share of the labor force than nationals. (The public sector is reserved for citizens.) Data for 2008, for example, reveal that in Bahrain, migrants constituted nearly 77 percent of the total labor force, whereas 23 percent of workers were native-born. In Oman, the figures were 74.6 percent and 26 percent, respectively; in Qatar, fully 94 percent versus 6 percent; and in Saudi Arabia, 50.6 percent and 49.4 percent. In those countries, the vast majority of labor migrants are men, and their labor-force shares are higher than those of native men everywhere but Saudi Arabia. With respect to women, however, female nationals outnumber female labor migrants. In Kuwait in 2008, female nationals constituted 46 percent of the native-born labor force, whereas female migrants comprised just 23 percent of the total migrant labor force; in Bahrain the figures were 33 percent female share of the native-born labor force and 17 percent female labor migrant share of the total foreign labor force; and in Qatar the respective figures were 36 percent female nationals versus 8 percent female migrants. Only in Saudi Arabia were the figures for native-born and migrant women workers relatively close, as well as low: 16 percent and 14 percent, respectively (Baldwin-Edwards 2011, table 2, p. 9).

At the same time, GCC countries follow the pattern I identified earlier as the feminization of unemployment. In 2010–2011, female unemployment rates in Saudi Arabia and Qatar were four to six times as high as those for males. They were highest in Bahrain: according to the World Bank, 34 percent of women could not find jobs, compared to 7 percent of men. Martin Baldwin-Edwards calculated the unemployment rate of Saudi women at nearly 27 percent in 2008. Youth unemployment rates were especially striking. Even though the total unemployment rate for Saudi nationals was only 10 percent, for males aged 20 to 24 it was considerably higher, at nearly 30 percent. For women of the same age group, unemployment was a whopping 72 percent, and for women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine, fully 41.6 percent. There is anecdotal evidence of unemployment among nursing graduates in Saudi Arabia.¹⁶ Thus, in at least three of the GCC countries—Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain—it is typical to find high unemployment of female graduates. Only in Kuwait are unemployment rates low (under 5 percent, according to the World Bank), but women's unemployment is still higher than men's.

How do the GCC countries compare with other Arab countries on ratification of international treaties pertaining to social and economic rights? And in light of the huge proportion of migrant labor in their economies, have the GCC countries signed on to the UN's convention on the protection of migrant workers and their families? Table 8 provides the information. In short, the record is less than impressive.

¹⁶Presentation by Dr. Hatoon Ajwad al-Fassi, King Saud University, at the conference on Democratic Transition and Development in the Arab World, Stanford University, April 27, 2012 (my notes). See also Baldwin-Edwards 2011. His figure for Saudi women's unemployment rate is higher than that reported in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2011, which estimates adult female unemployment at 16 percent. See also World Bank 2010, figure 7, p. 7, where the Saudi female unemployment rate (total, not age-specific) is about 12 percent.

Table 8. Ratification of Women's Rights, Labor Rights, and UN Human Rights Conventions by GCC Countries, Year of Ratification, circa 2012

Convention	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979 (with or without reservations)	6/2002	9/1994	2/2006	4/2009	9/2000	10/2004
Optional Protocol, 1999						
Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995	9/1995		9/1995	9/1995		9/1995
International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, 1966	9/2007	5/1996				
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966	9/2006	5/1996				
International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and Their Families, 1990						
UNESCO Convention: Discrimination in education, 1960		1/1963			8/1973	
ILO Convention 111: Discrimination in employment/occupation, 1958	9/2000	12/1966		8/1976	6/1978	6/2001
ILO Convention 100: Equal remuneration for men and women for equal work, 1951					6/1978	2/1997
ILO Conventions 87 & 98: Freedom of association and right to organize, 1948		9/1961				
ILO Convention 182: Worst forms of child labor	3/2001	8/2000	6/2001	5/2000	10/2001	6/2001
ILO Convention 156: Workers with Family Responsibilities, 1981						
ILO Convention 183: Maternity protection, 2000						
ILO Convention 189: Domestic Workers, 2011						

Note: a. Made general and interpretative statements or expressed reservations. Empty cells mean not ratified.

Compiled from "A Summary of United Nations Agreements on Human Rights", <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/undocs.html> and the International Labour Organization NORMLEX Information System on International Labour Standards <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11001:0::NO::> (accessed December 2012) <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/govstatements.html> (accessed May 2013)

Care Work, the Family, and Women's Employment

While this paper has emphasized the importance of paid work for women, employment must consist in what the ILO calls "decent work" and should be accompanied by social and economic rights that recognize women's double duty within the home as well as the workplace. In particular, care work—whether for children or for the elderly—should be regarded as socially useful labor that requires forms of support. Scholars have argued that "the costs of producing

future workers, developing their skills, maintaining their health, and providing for them in old age should be construed as part of the costs of producing human capital” (Folbre 2012: 282). Here we consider employed women who engage in such reproductive labor that is socially useful and a contribution to human capital formation. What might support for that combination of productive and reproductive work look like?

First, it is necessary to distinguish the different combinations of employment and care that exist. Scholars have identified five categories of households with different earner-carer arrangements that have been supported by the state, the market, or family relations (Pfau-Effinger 1999; see also Crompton 2006):

- Male breadwinner/female carer
- Male breadwinner/female part-time earner
- Dual earner/state carer
- Dual earner/marketized carer
- Dual earner/dual carer

In the Arab region, where the social category of dual earner is not yet widespread and where gender relations do not yet reflect the dual carer model, the first category (male breadwinner/female homemaker) is probably the most prevalent, although many lower-income households in which the wife/mother is involved in informal labor may be identified as the second category (male breadwinner/female part-time earner). For the Gulf countries, with their prevalence of domestic help drawn from migrant labor, another category might be introduced between categories 2 and 3 above: “male breadwinner/marketized carer.”¹⁷ Each of these categories would require a different set of support mechanisms, whether from the state or the market, as seen in Table 9.

Table 9. Women, Work and Family Arrangements: Market and State Mechanisms

Form of Employment and Gender/Class Relationship	Support Mechanisms from the Market	Support Mechanisms from the State
Male breadwinner/female carer	Employer-provided social security extended to wife/ mother	Family allowance; tax credit
Male breadwinner/ female part-time earner	Employer-provided social security extended to wife/ mother	Family allowance; social insurance; subsidized child care & pre-school centers
Male breadwinner/ marketized carer	Employer-provided social security extended to wife/ mother	Social support/labor rights extended to domestic worker
Dual earner/state carer	Employer-provided social security to both earners (if not self-employed)	Family allowance; social insurance; paid maternity leave; subsidized child care & pre-school centers; elder care provision;
Dual earner/marketized carer	Employer-provided social security to both earners (if not self-employed); paid maternity leave	Family allowance; tax credit
Dual earner/dual carer	Employer-provided social security to both earners; paid maternity/ paternity/family leave	Family allowance; social insurance; subsidized child care & pre-school centers; elder care provision; tax credit

Source: Author, based on Pfau-Effinger (1999) and Crompton (2006).

Across the region, maternity leaves are in place, but they are not especially generous, and for

¹⁷If the categories were arrayed on a continuum, they would represent the range of gender relations from traditional to egalitarian. See also Crompton (2006), Figure 10.1, p. 205.

working-class women, they are not sufficient incentive to join the labor force. As seen in Table 10, the length of paid maternity leave in 2011 ranged from a low of 7-8 weeks or two months in Lebanon and Tunisia to 120 days or four months in Syria. No leave for fathers of newborns is provided, except in the UAE, which provides three days of paternity leave.¹⁸ In contrast, Norway provides nearly a year of fully paid maternity leave, with an additional 12 weeks provided for the father, if he chooses to take it, at full pay. MENA's maternity leave policies are not substantially different from other countries in the table, such as Argentina, China, Japan, and South Korea, but it should be noted that in those countries, female labor force participation is considerably higher than in MENA, and both Argentina and South Korea also provide subsidized childcare facilities.

Arguments for work-family balance fall under at least two categories: those that make a case for recognizing care work as socially useful labor that also contributes to human capital formation, economic growth, or social development; and those premised on issues of ethics, justice, or equality. The failure to treat children as a public good—by failing to provide mothers with paid maternity leaves, quality and affordable childcare, family allowances, and so on—are under-investments in the family that could stall societal progress (Dau-Schmidt and Brun 2006; Folbre 2008). Arguments for “human capabilities,” “an ethic of care” and “gender justice,” constitute an appeal for a world “where the daily caring of people for each other is a valued premise of human existence” and for the establishment of institutions to reflect that value (Tronto 1994:178; see also Nussbaum 2000). A related argument is that women require institutional supports for work-family balance in order to attain full citizenship (Lister 2003). The concept of economic citizenship, or the social rights of citizenship, bridges the two approaches in that it recognizes both the economic and the ethical aspects of rights.

Social provisioning, whether through the market or the state, should support the viability of households and families, the capacity of women to seek employment and enjoy family life, and the rights of citizen-workers and migrant workers alike.¹⁹ Shorter working days for parents of small children, and paid maternity leaves of at least six months in duration with additional leave for fathers, would be policies to recognize care work as a social good, a way to ensure parent-child bonding, a means to enable women's labor force attachment, and a pathway to gender equality. Parental leaves could be financed through a combination of government, employee, and worker contributions. Care for the elderly—who in the future will become a growing proportion of the population of some MENA countries—should be compensated through family allowances or the provision of subsidized home care through social insurance.²⁰ At the same time, the ethics of care, as well as the requirements of gender justice, call for the extension of labor rights, social insurance, and dignity for domestic workers who provide care for children, the elderly, and private households.

Social provision should not be limited to the major social insurance schemes and the safety net, but also encompass family allowances, maternity/paternity/ family leaves, and a wide range of services that enable families to survive and thrive and women to engage in both paid employment and family life. Some bold steps are required. For example, to address the needs and rights of lower-income women, to respond to the appeals of women's rights advocates for equality in the family, and to offer an alternative to the patriarchal gender contract, governments should consider allocating family allowances to mothers and not exclusively to fathers. Such policies would institutionalize social rights as theorized by Marshall, and enable women to acquire economic citizenship. A summary list of social rights for women's economic citizenship in the Arab region and beyond might look like the following:²¹

¹⁸ According to the World's Women 2010, Table 4.12 (p. 105), Algeria also offers 3 days of paid paternity leave.

¹⁹ In June 2011, the ILO – at its annual conference involving governments, employers' associations and trade unions, and some 70 years after the issue was first taken up – adopted Convention 189, which will regulate wages and working conditions of domestic workers. See http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_161104.pdf.

²⁰ Although the elderly population is still a fraction of the total population, it is expected to grow in line with lowered fertility rates. Care for the elderly is already a matter of social concern in Lebanon, although it remains largely the responsibility of women in the family. See Sugita, Esim, and Omeira 2009.

- The right to gainful employment without the need to obtain the consent of a husband or male relative;
- to own, acquire, manage, and retain property brought into marriage and to control one's own income from gainful employment;
- to obtain a passport and travel abroad without permission of husband or male relative;
- equality in family inheritance;
- to confer citizenship to children or a husband;
- to choose a residence/domicile;
- to participate in social, cultural, community, and union activities and decision-making;
- education and skills upgrading, including affordable adult education and vocational training;
- affordable healthcare and a healthy work environment;
- non-discrimination by employer, including equality in hiring and promotion, and equal pay for equal work;
- the right to be free from sexual harassment in the workplace;
- recognition and valorization of care work: paid maternity leave and paternity leave; subsidized and quality childcare; support for home-based elder care; decent wages and training for childcare and eldercare workers.

The recommended measures and policies are, admittedly, costly for some of the poorer countries in the region and controversial in some circles in all the countries. And yet, both developmental and ethical considerations should prevail as these policies are discussed in the legislatures and through social dialogues.

Conclusions

Female labor force participation in MENA is still low in relation to that of other regions of the world and, of course, in relation to male labor force participation. I have suggested an explanatory framework that rests on a set of economic and non-economic factors and forces: the oil economy and absence of diversification, and conservative social norms codified in the region's family laws. In addition, the state is not always favorable to the advancement of women and their economic empowerment—especially when it is constituted by men holding patriarchal attitudes concerning women, work, and family. And some states are held hostage to international financial forces, withholding the social/economic rights of citizens in the name of an imposed neoliberal policy agenda. Structural and institutional factors have impeded women's progress in salaried employment, entrepreneurship, and economic decision-making. In the wake of the Arab Spring and in the context of democratic transitions, the challenges of the new governments include the integration of an increasingly educated female population and women's claims for economic participation in the new policy frameworks. Across the region, new social and gender contracts premised on developmental, ethical, and equality goals should be on the agenda.

More research is needed on the household division of labor by sex. Thus far it appears that middle-class families in the Gulf countries, Lebanon and Jordan prefer reliance on foreign imported domestic servants to shared housework; in Morocco, households still use native-born maids. Elsewhere, families continue to exercise the traditional sexual division of labor, whereby the women in the family are responsible for domestic tasks, childcare and elder care. If current trends in female educational attainment, labor force participation, and advocacy continue, it is highly likely that in the years ahead, we will witness women's rights groups focusing their campaigns on women's double burden, family ethics, and social policies for work-family balance. In the meantime, it would behoove governments to take a closer look at the developmental and ethical imperatives of women's economic citizenship.

²¹For details, see Moghadam 2013, ch. 3.

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