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Catalyst for Empowering Women and Boosting Gender Equality in South Mediterranean Countries: The case of Egypt

by Prof. Doaa Salman and Dr. Mohga Bassim *in collaboration with*



1. Summary

This policy brief proposes and recommends further policies to urgently, strengthen the current quest for empowering women and for reducing inequality in the Mediterranean countries and specifically in Egypt. It seeks to provide a policy-mix for additional policies that also contribute in achieving sustainable development.

2. Introduction

Studies have shown that women participation in the economy contributes to economic development. Policies for mainstreaming women's issues to achieve sustainable development, and their participation in the economy were recommended by the Egypt National Council for Women (Salam et al. 2019, NCW 2017 and Bassim, 2010).

Countries in the South Mediterranean and in the MENA region in general persistently register lower female participation in the labour force and a high gender gap, which can be attributed to cultural norms that drive the traditional gender roles and relations, as well as to discrimination and institutional factors. Access of women to employment remains significantly limited; the occupational structure of employment remains generally gendered and female earnings remain significantly inferior to those of males (Salman, 2019).

Some progress has been made by governments to reduce the gender gap in the South Mediterranean Countries. However, if the current rates were to be maintained, the gender gap would close in 150 years (World Economic Forum, The Global Gender Gap Report, 2018).

In Jordan, the government continues its efforts to eliminate barriers to women's participation in the labor market or to establish their own businesses through offering benefits and incentives. Also, some privileges are provided such as maternity leaves. But, these policies are still not enough since the application of these regulations may solve the demand side of the problem while

the supply side problem still exists. Despite the government efforts, the cultural and the traditions are believed to still prohibit the full women participation in the economy.

Egypt, which has the largest population of all South Mediterranean Countries, historically had equal status for both genders and women were great rulers and courageous army leaders. However, the position of women progressively worsened, and in 2017, Egypt was ranked 101st out of 189 countries on the Gender Inequality Index reported by the Human Development Report. It also ranked 135th out of 149 Countries in the Global Gender Gap Index, despite Egypt's continued efforts to improve the status of women in the past few decades. The Egyptian Constitution of 2014, embracing the values of justice and equal opportunities, includes several provisions for equal opportunities for women, prevention of discrimination, and ensuring their protection. In this policy brief we focus on the case of Egypt in order to **provide guidance to the design of the recently announced "National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030"**, setting the vision and pillars for women empowerment. The Egypt National Council for Women initiative was issued in 2017, in line with achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Approaches and results

Gender inequality in the labour market take different forms reflecting in the access to employment and labour force participation, to inequalities in pay (gender wage gap) and in the way different workforce characteristics are rewarded in the job market (wage penalties), to differences in the occupational structure of employment (occupational shorting) and in career trajectories (glass ceilings and sticky floors). These aspects often interact with each other, resulting in multiple and complex patterns of exclusion and inequality.

To examine these issues good-quality micro-data are available (through the Labor Market Panel Surveys of Egypt – ELMPS). **The analysis adds a series of 'non-marketable' characteristics** such as gender, marital status, etc., which may affect an individual's wage for no obvious labour market reason. According to the human capital theory, systematic wage differentials linked to such variables – most importantly, gender – represent a disequilibrium condition which may reflect, at least in part, some degree of discrimination in the labour market.

Egypt female labour force participation is very low, at about 25% in Egypt, female rates of unemployment are twice as high as those for males; while also significantly higher is the incidence of informal employment for females. Findings have important implications for policy.

Access of females to employment remains significantly limited; the occupational structure of employment remains generally gendered; and female earnings remain significantly inferior to those of males. The drivers of these, however, have to do more with **the position of women in the societies of the two countries (e.g., as captured by the selection effect) than with the actual workings of their labour markets (e.g., returns to education)**. Both countries have recently implemented specific policies aiming at addressing the inferior position of women in the labour market.

4. Conclusions

Following the results of our analysis, we believe that adopting the following policies can provide solutions to strengthen the current quest for empowering women and for reducing inequality.

Establishing a Ministry for Women's Affairs: Initiatives, elaborate conferences on women and written recommendations are necessary but insufficient. A robust executive body at a high level is necessary to reduce the 150 years mentioned above, to achieve equality and development. The recommended Ministry for Wo-

men's Affairs could be mandated to create short and long-term vision and strategies to change the current culture. Also it could change legislations and services to promote gender-related issues, including equality, participation in economy and political life, well-being, happiness, expanding their capability, freedom, respect and enhancing the lives for the Egyptian girls, mothers and elderly women, with the objective of strengthening and developing the family and society structure.

The Ministry could set and provide specific guidance from within the government at the highest executive offices level. It could work closely in collaboration with Ministries of Education, Health, Trade and Industry, finance, Justice, Social Affairs, and others. It could improve the general understanding that there is no difference between both genders. This requires changes in people's perception through the media, schools, worship places, conference, and social, other events.

Solutions for increasing women participation and reducing the payment gaps where appropriate would be expected to include increased and diverse training for women entrepreneurs and new entrants to the labour market, improving their access to financial institutions and facilities, supporting women in the informal sector, part-time, self-employed and women are working from home. Also, providing solutions for social and family issues resulting from the work of women would be expected, as well as improving women's health for all age groups. The Ministry would also work towards increased participation of women in managerial positions and ensure that gender issues are included in the national development framework and the micro and macroeconomic policies of the country.

Establishing a Women's Federation: Such non-governmental body will have more flexibility in moving and serving members and prospective members. The federation should be setting a flexible membership condition to include women participating in all sectors in the economy and others, including women from different social classes, working and non-working. The federation should be working to improve the standing, well-being and promoting gender equality and women protection, of members and nonmembers. It would be a source for women to share different life experiences and create a network with civil societies. In addition, it would be responsible for covering political, legal, social and economic aspects. Furthermore, it could provide policymakers with suggestions regarding solving women's problems in different aspects.

Enforcement of laws for women Protection: Women movements in Egypt started in 1919. By the 1950s, laws were enacted to give women the right to vote and a first woman minister took office in 1962. Several laws were enacted since, to protect women at home and work and remove inequality between women and men.

Government and public sector works in general, do not violate the rights of working women; however; this is not always reflected in private sector employment. **Law enforcement needs a cultural change as well as continuous monitoring and strengthening the government offices enforcing the law.**

Enact a "Preferential Treatment" Policy for Women-Owned business: Preferential treatment policies towards women-owned business and women employment similar to the policies adopted in the USA to increase the participation of women in the economy (Bassim, 2010). These supportive policies that increase the participation of women in the economy, have been applied with success, and have led to a growth of women-owned businesses at a faster rate in the USA.

Focusing on Capacity building: Education and training are an essential part for developing women capabilities to participate in the economy. These should include and be amplified by a continuous process of capacity building and development to improve and retain the skills to do their jobs competently. This can be one of the tasks of the Women Federation suggested above.

Encourage female Participation in Growing Service Sectors: Women have been participating in all economic sectors for decades, from farming to manufacturing and medicine, engineering, banking and research. **The Services Sector** appears to be the growing sector with opportunities for future expansions. Financial and banking services, communication and IT, tourism, education and Medical services attracted many male and female professional workers at all levels. The services sector is expected to expand in the future, and due to the competitive cost and quality of services presented in Egypt, it could become one of the main sources of national income. **Stimulating investments in women-owned businesses in the services sector can lead to better female participation in the economy.**

Implementing the National and Women Development Strategies: The Egyptian Government vision 2030 is based on the 2014 Constitution, which embraces the values of justice and equal opportunities and includes several provisions for equal opportunities for women. It also supports the UN 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) for gender equality. In addition, the 2017 "National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030", sets the vision and pillars for women empowerment.

These visions and strategies are long-term objectives to be achieved. Implementation plans with details of milestones resource requirements and time-bounded short-term SMART objectives must be developed, monitored, and corrective measures implemented to achieve the targets of the strategy.

Poverty and Economic Empowerment: Elimination of poverty is a fundamental development objective and root development issue particularly for women development and empowerment. The country should set clear strategic targets for sustainable development together with detailed working plans for long and short-term development. Combating, reducing and eliminating of poverty should be on the top of priorities of that strategy and its detailed plans. Combating the deep-seated women's poverty in particular should be a priority.

Also, the government has to ensure that it is representing the needs of women suffering from poverty, and should introduce a "Gender Support Fund". This fund, which should be part of the government's budget, could be used to support women particularly those supporting families.

The government is urged to focus on helping and facilitating women's access to loans and finance, especially in rural areas. In addition, environmental protection for women in deprived areas should be addressed in Egyptian law and its enforcement bodies. Many women are working in deplorable working conditions, especially in the informal sector, and they are not receiving adequate protection. Finally, the government should take the initiative to improve public awareness regarding women economic participation and empowerment.

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FEMISE is coordinated by the Economic Research Forum (Cairo, Egypt) and the Institut de la Méditerranée (Marseille, France) and gathers more than 100 members of economic research institutes, representing the 37 partners of the Barcelona Process.

Its main objectives are:

- to contribute to the reinforcement of dialogue on economic and financial issues in the Euro- Mediterranean partnership, within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean,*
- to improve the understanding of priority stakes in the economic and social spheres, and their repercussions on Mediterranean partners in the framework of implementation of EU Association Agreements and Action Plans,*
- to consolidate the partners of the network of research institutes capable of North-South and South-South interactions, while it sets into motion a transfer of know-how and knowledge between members.*

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