



Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/ECW/2017/Technical Paper.6
18 October 2017
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Policy Brief on Arab Women's Economic Empowerment



**United Nations
Beirut**

17-00609

CONTENTS

Page

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB REGION	1
III. APPROACHES FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT	3
IV. ENGAGEMENT AT THREE ECONOMIC LEVELS	4
A. Engagement at the macrolevel.....	4
B. Engagement at the meso-level.....	4
C. Engagement at the microlevel	4
V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	4
D. Macrolevel.....	5
E. Meso-level.....	5
F. Microlevel.....	5

Women’s economic empowerment is a prerequisite for sustainable development and pro-poor growth. Achieving women’s economic empowerment requires sound public policies, a holistic approach and long-term commitment and gender-specific perspectives must be integrated at the design stage of policy and programming.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

I. INTRODUCTION

The economic empowerment of women requires strategies to advance their opportunities and rights, while ensuring their effective participation and contribution at all economic levels. Women’s economic empowerment can foster a more equitable society and contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹

Economic empowerment is defined as the “capacity of poor women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes on terms that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible for them to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth”.² It has two components: economic advancement, and power and agency. Women’s economic gains and successes promote their power and agency. Their participation in the economy enables them not only to control and share their resources, but also to make choices, which, in turn, leads to empowerment in different aspects of their lives.

In the Arab region, social, economic and political factors affect women’s ability to participate in the economy. They generally experience constrictive social and cultural norms; enjoy little personal autonomy and limited resources; and have limited access to education, training and health services.³ In addition, a large number of Arab women work outside of the formal economy.

II. WOMEN’S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB REGION

There are two significant challenges to women’s economic participation in the Arab region. One is of structural nature and is linked to wages and labour standards; the other is their labour force participation, which is the lowest in the world despite progress made in the past decades (table 1).

Women aged 15 and above participating in the labour force, 2000 and 2017 (percentage)

	2000	2017
World	51.2	48.7
Latin America and the Caribbean	46.6	51.5
East Asia and the Pacific	64.9	59.2
South Asia	32.3	28.5
Sub-Saharan Africa	60.9	62.9
North America	59.0	56.2
Europe and Central Asia	48.7	50.8
Arab region	19.7	20.9

Source: World Bank data (based on modelled International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates). Available from: <https://data.worldbank.org> (accessed January 2018).

¹ International frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 and the conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) also provide a foundation to realize gender equality and women’s economic empowerment.

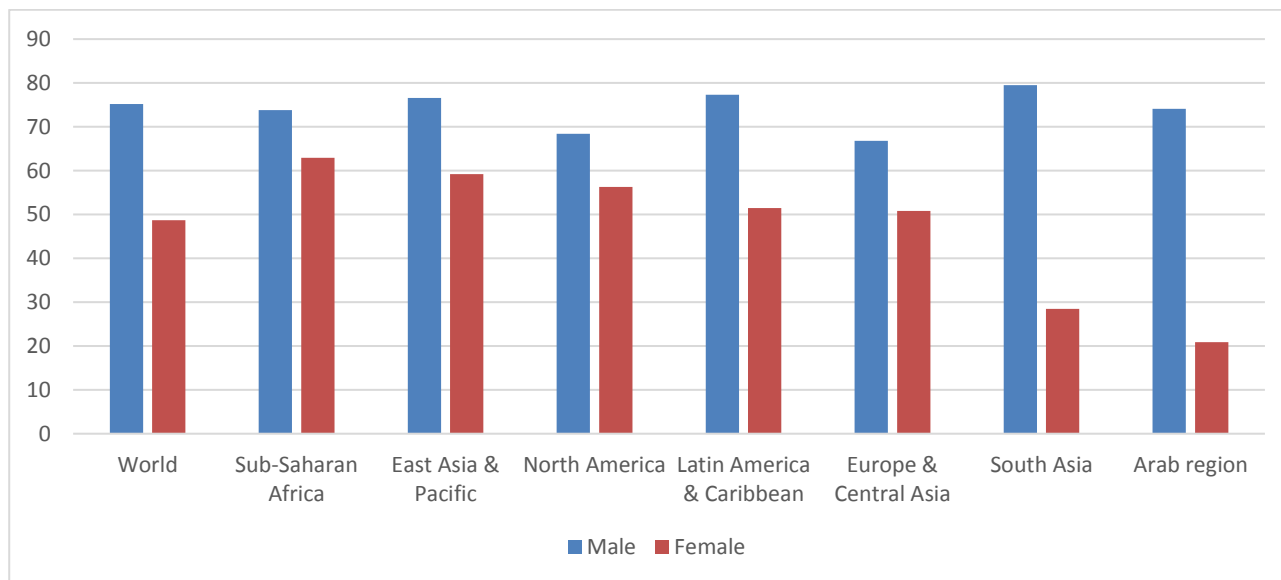
² Rosalind Eyben, Naila Kabeer and Andrea Cornwall, “Conceptualising empowerment and the implications for pro poor growth”, (Institute of Development Studies, September 2008). Available from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.405.957&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

³ Moghadam, V.M. and Senftove, Lucie, “Measuring women’s empowerment: participation and rights in civil, political, social, economic, and cultural domains”, *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 57, No. 2 (2005), pp. 389-412.

Although Arab countries are rich in human and natural capital, gender inequality persists: the region has the largest gender gap in vulnerable employment, as women make up the majority of informal labour market workers. In the past decades, the number of women working in agriculture has decreased everywhere in the world, except in the Arab region.

High unemployment rates are a feature of some Arab economies and young females experience unemployment up to four times more than their male counterparts. The former also exit the labour market at faster rates and partake more in unpaid employment in family businesses.

**Female and male labour force participation rates, 2017
(as a percentage of the population aged 15 and above)**



Source: World Bank data (based on modelled ILO estimates). Available from: <https://data.worldbank.org> (accessed January 2018).

A study on the correlation between education level and female labour force participation in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia⁴ found that less educated women were less likely than women with higher education to enter the labour force, and more at risk of entering the informal sector where they faced low wages and lack of social protection. However, women with high educational attainment also faced barriers, such as professional marginalization and high unemployment rates.

Many labour laws in the region still discriminate against women, prohibiting them from working in certain industries or partaking in night work. In instances where discriminatory laws have been amended, weak implementation has impeded tangible progress.⁵ Increasing religious conservatism combined with pre-existing patriarchal norms that discriminate against women are still perpetuating restrictions on their participation in the economy and civic life.

Gender discrimination in the economic sphere goes beyond inequalities in the labour market and is embodied in lack of planning for and promoting women's access to economic opportunities. There is a legal underpinning to the situation, as Arab States have all expressed reservations upon signing the Convention on

⁴ Niels Spierings, Jeroen Smits and Mieke Verloo, "Micro- and macrolevel determinants of women's employment in six Arab countries", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 72, No. 5, (October 2010), pp. 1391-1407.

⁵ Kinda Mohamadieh, "Women's economic empowerment in the Arab region: how chronic development challenges and the global crises triggered people's revolutions", Brief No. 11 (Toronto, Mexico City and Cape Town, Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2011), p. 9.

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), thus limiting their responsibility under international law.⁶

III. APPROACHES FOR WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

There is an intrinsic relationship between gender equality and economic growth: women's access to employment and education opportunities reduces household poverty. Studies have shown that women who acquire resources tend to invest in their families and communities.⁷

Thus, specific policies are required to facilitate women's access to labour markets, and increase investments in basic social services, social protection and infrastructure. Because "market inequalities are [a] manifestation of underlying inequalities of power",⁸ women who do not have assets or power will resort to selling labour and time without generating surplus to invest and increase their earnings. Development actors should also focus on women's domestic work and unpaid care work to support the move of women from the informal economy to an economy that values their work and contributions to society.

A viable strategy for women's participation in the region should tackle the multidimensional aspects of poverty that go beyond women's economic well-being and financial independence. Such a broad approach would also help to obliterate constraints that hinder women from exercising their full human rights.

Women's concerns are addressed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and throughout the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG-5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. Integrating the 2030 Agenda in the region's governance plans would greatly benefit women's economic empowerment. Governments can play a pivotal role by fostering mechanisms for systematic and continuous engagement, and by promoting effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships. National women's machineries can also benefit from the 2030 Agenda to conduct comprehensive national needs assessments, devise mechanisms for consultations with civil society on gender policies and enhance strategic alliances with the private and public sectors.

Partnerships with civil society organizations and governments legitimize and reinforce government plans and actions. Appropriate engagement of national institutions, including ministries, planning and development agencies, in implementing and reviewing gender equality policies would ensure that such policies are appropriately developed to benefit women and society as a whole.

In their 2016 Muscat Declaration: Towards the Achievement of Gender Justice in the Arab Region, member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) welcomed the adoption of the 2030 Agenda "as an integrated development plan driving progress, development, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the Arab region".⁹ The ESCWA secretariat is establishing a sub-committee on gender and the SDGs to raise awareness of gender-related targets in the 2030 Agenda and promote women's political and economic participation in the Arab region.

⁶ Nadia Hijab, "Regression or progress? Barriers to equality of economic opportunity and the Arab transitions", International Labour Organization, Background Paper (2013). Available from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@arabstates/@ro-beirut/documents/genericdocument/wcms_220911.pdf.

⁷ World Bank, *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, Washington, D.C., 2011).

⁸ Naila Kabeer, "Women's economic empowerment and inclusive growth: labour markets and enterprise development", SIG Working Paper 2012/1 (London, Department for International Development and International Development Research Centre, 2012).

⁹ Available from https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/events/files/report_7th_session_-_final_css_en.pdf.

IV. ENGAGEMENT AT THREE ECONOMIC LEVELS

Existing literature on women's economic empowerment highlights the importance of empowering women at three interdependent economic levels: the macrolevel, the meso-level and the microlevel.

A. ENGAGEMENT AT THE MACROLEVEL

Interventions at this level must seek to ensure that gender equality is adequately mainstreamed into policies, strategies, budgets and programmes. It is essential that sex-disaggregated data are available at the macroeconomic level to evaluate overall progress in women's economic empowerment.

Women's access to assets, resources such as land, water, technology and financial and other services should be facilitated in urban and rural settings. Focused rural and urban development strategies eventually increase women's economic and financial security.

Gender mainstreaming should be applied to national policies to foster an inclusive and enabling environment for women's economic participation. Policymakers' capacity should be built to achieve that goal.

Development actors, including States, donors and financial institutions, should enhance efforts to improve women's access to paid employment. Equally important is the recognition of women's unpaid domestic and care work as contributions to the economy.

B. ENGAGEMENT AT THE MESO-LEVEL

At the meso-level, increasing women's economic opportunities requires creating more and better jobs, ensuring a business climate that supports women and establishing a financial sector that gives them full access to services. Services should also be tailored for women living in rural areas and poverty zones to meet their specific needs. Vulnerable women, in particular, should be granted easier access to financial services such as credit or loans.

The private sector can play a key role in enhancing women's economic participation. In the agriculture sector, policies should be adopted to strengthen productivity, reduce hunger and promote infrastructure enhancement and economic growth. The rights of women working in the informal sector should be upheld.

C. ENGAGEMENT AT THE MICROLEVEL

At the microlevel, governments should invest in the development of leadership skills among women and give them access to leadership positions.

Education and training are paramount for women's economic empowerment in the Arab region. Without capacity-building, many women will struggle to achieve the levels of empowerment required to truly change their financial circumstances. Economic policies developed at the micro-level should identify the constraints in empowering women and focus on financial literacy and other types of economic trainings.

V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Innovative approaches to planning, budgeting and implementation should include increased dialogue among development actors and improved coordination among donors.

Other policy recommendations aimed at strengthening women's economic empowerment at the above-mentioned three levels are the following:

D. MACROLEVEL

- Enforce laws and regulations and promote social responsibility and accountability;
- Assess the impact of macrolevel economic decisions and adopt economic policies that foster inclusion and growth;
- Revisit the objectives and design of macroeconomic policy to include a gender dimension;
- Lift constraints on women's mobility to give them access to infrastructure, technology and services;
- Adopt gender-responsive budgets to ensure that resources are equitably allocated.

E. MESO-LEVEL

- Increase women's labour force participation to boost economic growth and tax revenues;
- Ensure adoption of gender-sensitive budgets and implementation of gender impact assessments for all policies and projects;
- Acknowledge and value the contribution of women's unpaid work in households and communities;
- Increase spending on public services and investments in social infrastructure, social housing and public transport;
- Address structural constraints on women's capacity to take up paid employment and labour market barriers to women's economic empowerment.

F. MICROLEVEL

- Adopt policies that facilitate women's access to training and capacity-building;
- Strengthen social protection for women to ensure that their rights are protected, especially in contexts of violence and poverty;
- Increase the provision of and access to health, education and labour services.