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## Women's Livelihood and Entitlements in the Middle East: What Difference has the Neoliberal Policy Turn Made?

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## 1. Introduction

A large body of scholarship, including much of the feminist literature, has cast a critical eye on globalization's short-term and long-term social effects. It has been argued that the neoliberal philosophy of "free markets", on which the economic (and financial) aspect of globalization is based, is inimical to concepts of full employment, public goods, and social rights. Feminists argue further that many of the trade and financial agreements associated with neoliberal economic policies contravene the spirit and letter of international conventions on human rights, women's rights, and labour rights. In particular, the withering away of the welfarist, developmentalist state is regarded as detrimental to women's interests. Approaches to globalization remain polarized, and it is not my intention in this paper to review them.<sup>1</sup> Yet qualitative regional or country-case studies could elucidate the contradictory nature of the neoliberal policy turn and the complex and differentiated ways that it has affected states, employment patterns, and social policies, especially as far as women's rights are concerned.

In this paper I examine changes in patterns of women's employment and social policies pertaining to women in the Middle East and North Africa, and make comparisons between two periods: the oil-boom era of the 1960s-1980s, and the period of liberalization since the latter part of the 1980s and into the present decade. Like other areas in the world-economy, the region has undergone a shift from state-directed economic development with protected industries to a more open and liberalized economic policy environment. Economies within the region are more or less liberalized in terms of trade and financial markets, and the region as a whole has seen less foreign direct investment than have other regions. Some economists have explained this in terms of the less competitive nature of MENA industries, labour skills, and wages compared with other regions, largely the result of the region's earlier "competitive advantage" in oil (Karshenas, 2001; Hakimian, 2001). This is an argument that I consider in this paper.

Although the region is often studied as an integrated whole<sup>2</sup> and the term "regional oil economy" was coined to describe the extensive labour and capital flows that characterized the region during the oil boom era, there does exist sufficient differentiation across the countries to warrant a typology of economies. In his discussion of industrialization in the Middle East, Robert Mabro (1988) has offered the following classification:

- Oil economies poor in other resources, including population (Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE)
- Mixed oil economies (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Tunisia)
- Non-oil economies (Israel, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Turkey, Yemen)

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1. I discuss this and related issues in chapter 2 of Moghadam (2005a).

2 "Integrated whole" – like "integrated global economy" – may not be the most precise term, given that intra-regional trade links are weak and there are serious political divisions among the countries, including the Arab countries. Nonetheless, because of certain shared characteristics, including culture, religion, history, and the prevalence of oil economies, the MENA region is considered an appropriate site for regional analysis, not only by international organizations such as the World Bank but also by scholarly organizations such as the Middle East Studies Association.

Alan Richards and John Waterbury (1990) came up with a somewhat different taxonomy in their analysis of the political economy of the Middle East:

- The Coupon Clippers: Libya, Kuwait, Oman, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar. These states have much oil and little of anything else, including people. They have been and will continue to be almost entirely dependent upon oil and any money earned from overseas investments.
- The Oil Industrializers: Iraq, Iran, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia. The first three states share the main features of large oil exports, a substantial population, other natural resources, and a chance to create industrial and agricultural sectors that will be sustainable over the long run. Saudi Arabia lacks the non-oil resources of the first three countries.
- The Watchmakers: Israel, Jordan, Tunisia, and Syria. These four small countries have limited natural resources and must therefore concentrate on investing in human capital and exporting skill-intensive manufactures. In the early 1990s, manufactured goods accounted for 84 percent of Israeli, 52 percent of Jordanian, and 42 percent of Tunisian exports.
- The NICs: Turkey, Egypt, and Morocco. These countries have relatively large populations, relatively good agricultural land or potential, and a long experience with industrial production.
- The Agro-Poor: Sudan and Yemen. These are the poorest countries of the region and ones where the agricultural-development-led strategy of industrial growth seems to offer the best hope.

The two classifications differ somewhat, and one can raise questions about the second typology's definition of Egypt and Morocco as NICs. (Richards and Waterbury did not include this classification in the second, 1996, edition of their book.) In this paper, I combine aspects of the two typologies and focus on female labour, social policy, and the changing political economy. I discuss the issues in a regional perspective but with an emphasis on Iran (an example of an oil economy), Jordan (a non-oil economy), and Tunisia (a mixed oil economy). I make the following arguments. First, all three countries were affected by the oil boom in such a way as to keep the supply of and demand for female labour – and a supply of educated and skilled women workers – limited. Second, non-economic factors such as the role and nature of the state and cultural understandings about male-female roles reinforced a “patriarchal gender contract”. This has been especially strong in Jordan, and in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. Third, when countries were compelled to open their markets they found themselves in an uncompetitive position, mainly due to a less educated and skilled labour force, especially among women. In this respect, however, Tunisia has fared better than Iran and Jordan, because the state has welcomed FDI in sectors that draw on female employment; moreover, Tunisia has a longer and more consistent tradition of women's rights and it began liberalization earlier than did either Iran or Jordan. Fourth, the employment effects of the changing political economy and of globalization appear mixed. Women seem to be losing jobs in some areas but gaining them in others. There has been an informalization of work, but in some cases women's access to salaried work may be increasing, and involvement in NGOs is increasing. In addition, social policies pertaining to women seem to be changing to conform to international norms. On the other hand, unemployment rates are high, inequalities have been increasing, and new poverty groups have emerged,

although there is insufficient data to draw conclusions on any feminization of poverty.<sup>3</sup>

The discussion that follows analyses patterns and trends in MENA women's employment, unemployment, and welfare in the two periods, and ends with some recommendations to enhance women's economic participation (public and private sectors) and their social rights. Sources of data are the ILO, ICFTU, World Bank, UNDP, ESCWA, CAWTAR, national statistical yearbooks and other documents, publications by women's organizations, relevant secondary sources, and the author's fieldwork. This paper also addresses some methodological issues and discusses the enumeration problems and data inconsistencies and inadequacies in connection with women's economic activities in the region. Because of the importance of this matter, we begin with a discussion of data and methods.

## **2. Women's Employment in MENA: A Methodological and Conceptual Note**

A number of researchers have discussed the problems entailed in studying women's economic activities in the Middle East (Anker 1995; Assaad 1999; Doctor and Khoury 1991; Moghadam 2002, 2003). First, the region suffers from a paucity of data on women's productive activities and economic contributions. A major problem has involved definitions and understandings of work and employment, especially in the rural and urban informal sectors. As in other parts of the world, much of what women perform in the urban informal sector or household is not recognized as a contribution to the national income or to development but is rather perceived to be a private service to the family. Women's agricultural work also has tended to be underreported in national accounts. This non-recognition lies not only with statisticians and policymakers but also with ordinary men and women, who may be motivated by prevailing attitudes and modesty codes to refrain from providing an accurate description of women's productive activities, or who wish to avoid the notice of the tax authorities. As a result, census data in many countries have frequently reported an extremely small economically active female population.

A second, related problem lies with the informal sector. Small workshops (such as textile enterprises) that rely on female labour may avoid taxation through non-registration. Not only does this result in a further underestimation of women's industrial participation, but it also entails more exploitative work conditions. Most of our understanding of the urban informal sector, and especially of women's roles in it, comes from ethnographic studies (e.g., Lobban and contributors 1998; Poya 1999). There have been few systematic studies of the informal sector in MENA countries. Jacques Charmes has tried to measure its size and growth, and concluded that there has been no significant growth of female informal sector activity in the Arab countries. (See his contribution in the CAWTAR Report 2001.) Egypt's 1989 Labour Force Sample Survey included an expanded definition of economic activity to capture women's participation in agriculture, the urban informal sector (wholesale and retail trade/sales work), and the unemployed population. As a result, there were significant differences between the results of the 1986 census and the 1989 LFSS; the former reported a 10% female share of the labour force, while the latter concluded that

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<sup>3</sup> This does underscore the need to understand better the class dimensions of neoliberalism's impact, and the divergent ways that middle-class and working-class women may experience globalization. This important issue, however, is outside the scope of the present study.

women were 28 percent of the labour force (Moghadam, 1998, ch. 5). In 1998, another LFSS was conducted using the same methodology as the 1989 LFSS to capture changes over the previous ten years; on the basis of the expanded definition of economic activity, it concluded that Egyptian women's labour force participation rate was nearly 42 percent (Assaad 1999). On the other hand, a study of Jordanian women's informal sector activity found no significant increase in female labour force participation (Flynn 1999). To my knowledge, there has been no systematic study of the informal sector in Iran.

Whether counted or not, workers in the informal sector typically have no access to social insurance programs, although they may be beneficiaries of assistance for the poor, whether these take the form of government-sponsored clinics and subsidies on food and fuel, as in Iran and Tunisia in the 1960s and 1970s, or more targeted transfers for poor households or low-income divorced women, as in Tunisia since the 1990s.

A third problem: inconsistency in data collection across time and across government agencies. Some countries (or surveys) count persons over the age of fifteen as part of the labour force, other countries count persons aged ten and above, still others (such as Iranian surveys) have included persons aged six and over. Iran's first two census reports, for example, show high rates of female involvement in manufacturing (see Table 1). The proportion declines somewhat in 1976 and rather drastically after the Islamic revolution. Does this discrepancy suggest differences in enumeration techniques, or real changes in female economic participation? Census data sometimes over-count workers (as with female manufacturing workers in Iran and Tunisia – see Table 1) and sometimes undercount them. In Iran since at least 1976, the census bureau reports a very small female agricultural work force, but the agricultural census will account for women more properly and indicate a much larger female work force. There has been inconsistency in data collection across countries (the result of new methods of enumeration with labour force sample surveys, as in the Egyptian case mentioned above), making comparisons difficult.

A fourth problem is that labour force data in international sources do not always agree – sometimes not with each other and other times not with national-level data. For example, when in the early 1990s Iranian sources were reporting a female labour force share of 11 percent, the UNDP's *Human Development Report* was reporting a larger proportion. In more recent years, this problem of inconsistency across data sets has been resolved to a certain extent, as most sources now rely on the ILO for labour-force data. Still, some data sets still disagree – for example, the World Bank's GenderStats figures on the female labour force may be higher than those of ESCWA or national-level reports (e.g., see figures for Jordan and Iran). Moreover, there remain many gaps in coverage for MENA countries, and Saudi Arabia appears not to provide data to the international agencies (including ESCWA), especially on employment.

Finally, it is difficult to determine women's access to earned income or the gender-based wage gap because of a lack of gender-disaggregated income data. This can be discerned from an examination of country-level annual statistical yearbooks (which are based on census data) and of international data sets, such as those of the UN. This is true of many developing countries and not just MENA, and within

MENA, Turkey stands out for the availability of such data. For example, Turkey's State Institute for Statistics carries out gender-disaggregated surveys, which have been used by researchers in numerous publications (see, e.g., Moghadam 1998, ch. 4). The national Human Development Report 2001 for Turkey includes data on earned income that is differentiated by gender and also by region. Other countries, however, do not report wages. As a result, in order to calculate its measure of "Estimated Earned Income" by sex, the UNDP's annual *Human Development Report* makes estimates of female and male earned income on the basis of GDP per capita (PPP US\$), female and male shares of the economically active population, and the assumption that women earn 75% of male earnings.<sup>4</sup>

Some countries in the region provide fairly comprehensive quantitative information on women's economic activity and employment. In addition to Turkey, which already has been mentioned, Tunisia should be noted. The women's research and documentation center CREDIF was formed in the early 1990s to assist the government in its women and development planning and to provide studies on various aspects of women's lives. CREDIF publications on women's economic activities are a valuable source of information, and are referenced in this study.

Because of gaps in coverage and enumeration inconsistencies – which make time-series and comparative analyses difficult – care must be exercised in reviewing and interpreting available data. However, this paper is concerned principally with examining women's access to the formal sector of the economy and to salaried employment, where the data presented are more reliable. Women's employment data in public services and large-scale industry are virtually free from gaps in coverage. Moreover, the formal sector is covered by social insurance policies and labour law.

A final methodological – and conceptual – note is in order. Because of certain shared characteristics – the Islamic religion and some cultural practices, the colonial encounter, geopolitics, the prevalence of oil and rentier states, the predominance of MENA countries in OPEC – the countries of the Middle East and North Africa conventionally constitute a unit of analysis for international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Labour Office (see, for example, *Key Indicators of the Labour Market*) as well as for scholarly associations such as the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) and the Association for Middle East Women's Studies (AMEWS). And yet the region is also divided into sub-units, which form the basis for many analyses. For example, the publications of UN's regional commission for the region, ESCWA, provide data and analysis only for the Arab countries of West Asia; this excludes North Africa, which are members of the ECA, while Iran is part of ESCAP and Turkey is part of the ECE. When the UNDP's *Human Development Report* provides aggregate data for regions, it groups all the Arab countries; Iran is excluded from this ranking. The UN study, *The World's Women 2000: Trends and Statistics* has provided data separately for "West Asia" (including Iran and Turkey) and "North Africa". The Tunis-based Center for Arab Women's Training and Research (CAWTAR) produces policy-related studies for all the Arab countries. Within MESA, there are specialists on the Maghrib, and principally Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, due to that sub-region's shared experience with French

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<sup>4</sup> UNIDO provides country-level data on manufacturing wages, but these are not disaggregated by gender. There are, of course, national-level household and labour-force surveys which provide such data, but accessing them was outside the scope of the present study.

colonialism and the French language. Iranian studies, Turkish studies, and Yemeni studies similarly constitute distinct scholarly associations within MESA.

These classifications for scholarship and policy analysis provide for rich regional, sub-regional, and country studies, and feminist scholarship has tended to follow these classifications (along with a relatively new one, the study of Muslim women). There are good arguments for studying Arab countries alone, or Maghrib countries separately, especially for studies that focus on, or are informed by, culture or politics. In a political economy approach, however, the conceptual entry point lies in resource endowments and economic organization, as we saw with the classifications by Mabro and by Richards and Waterbury, along with issues of distribution. In the feminist political economy approach taken here, attention is drawn to the gendered outcomes of the use of natural resources and systems of distribution, the way that female labour is deployed in economic processes, and state policies pertaining to women's participation. The latter is especially important given that a key feature of MENA countries has been strong and centralized state systems – rentier, authoritarian, and, for the most part, culturally conservative – and this has had distinct implications for economic development, political processes, and gender relations. Such an approach helps us to understand similarities and differences across countries in the region and between the MENA region and other regions by utilizing economic and non-economic variables. For example, economic differences among the countries of the region (e.g., oil and non-oil) explain to a large extent different patterns and rates of female economic activity (e.g., higher female employment in Tunisia compared to Iran or Algeria). However, non-economic factors must be mobilized to explain why Tunisian women had lower educational attainment than Vietnamese women as recently as 1990, why Iranian women's economic participation declined and fertility rose in the 1980s, why the region as a whole has lower educational attainment than does Latin America as a whole, or why the region has lower female labour force participation than East and Southeast Asia. Clearly, an explanatory framework must take into account political economy, cultural understandings about male and female roles, and state policies.

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