

Arab Women, Family, and Labor Market Participation

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The Arab region is currently witnessing more social transformation at all levels of society than ever before, due to the demographic growth, expanded ethnic and sectarian conflicts, accelerated urbanization, global economy, and education, together with changing modes of information and communication. Despite continuous efforts by the state, public institutions, civil society, and private actors, social justice remains a challenge and social policies are not fully responding to the social transformations of the region. Re-thinking the role of the state in social development in the Arab region in the double crisis of neo-liberalism and global finance world-wide and specifically in the context of the Arab region is a challenging task. It entails questioning the relationship between citizens and the state; nationals and non-nationals as a result of migration and displacement; women and men; human rights; the poor and the wealthy in the context of social transformation.

The role, capacity, and cultural identity of the family need to be questioned when societies are increasingly affected by demographic changes, mobility and migration, economic and labor market conditions and by tensions created around such issues as youth frustration, aging, and evolving gender relations. Despite these social changes, there has not been any significant strengthening of society's awareness of or relative change in society's attitude towards women's labor participation. Women's labor market participation is low compared to their achievement in education. What is then the expected role of the state in breaking through two barriers which women's labor market participation confronts: the persistence of a gender ideology that has associated women with family roles and the growth of precarious employment?

The papers in this issue of *al-Raida* address the challenges and opportunities for Arab women's labor market participation in the greater context of globalization and social transformations and examine the issue from a number of complementary vantage points and policy implications. The papers were either originally prepared for the regional gender programme of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 2007 and/or were presented at the regional research meeting on "The Role of the State in Social Development in the Arab Region" (Beirut, October 2009) organized by UNESCO Beirut in cooperation with the Arab Sociological Association and with the support of the Doha International Institute of Family Studies and Social Development.

Mansour Omeira's article on "Schooling and Women's Employability in the Arab States Region" reassesses the term "employability" in the context of the Arab region by taking into account both the labor supply and demand. The school to work transition for many young people is not easy but young women are more sanctioned by institutional difficulties related to labor markets, especially linked to the gender responsiveness of schooling.

Yusuf Sidani examines, in his article entitled "Young Female Entrepreneurial Activity in the Arab Region: Issues and Prospects in the Case of the United Arab Emirates", the social and cultural barriers faced by the young female entrepreneurs in UAE. He wonders if public institutions are providing adequate support to women to foster this new trend in the region.

Lara Uhlenhaut examines in her article on "Technical Education and Vocational Training for Women - A Case Study of Yemen" the systems of technical education and vocation training (TEVT) and school-to-work transition for young people in Yemen. She shows that the school-to-work transition is more difficult for young women than for their male peers, due to the cultural barriers associated with gender stereotypes in Yemen.

Seiko Sugita in her article on "Social Care and Women's Labor Participation in Lebanon" investigates the perceptions and practices of paid and unpaid care, and questions how the gender division of labor in the household is affecting the chances for women's labor market participation in Lebanon. Moreover, social care is explored as a growing employment market.

Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous in his personal essay titled "Is a 'Father Friendly Workplace' Possible in the Middle East?" views the challenges of the society to achieve work-life balance for both working fathers and mothers.

The article entitled "Woman's Work in the Field of Care and Rehabilitation in Jordan" sheds light on the role of women in care institutions. The care is a growing sector in number but as a work environment for women, it needs to be more structured and regulated. The gaps between the laws and their application need to be addressed to improve the working condition of many women.

How do ongoing social transformations and family change affect chances and conditions of women's labor market participation in the Arab societies? How can labor, in addition to social and education policies address the existing gaps and persisting challenges? This issue of *al-Raida* is part of an on-going effort by regional and international researchers and experts of social development to understand the gender implication of social transformations in the Arab societies, but one that is very crucial as it challenges cultural norms and values related to the family and the role of the State on this very sensitive issue.

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