Transforming the Economic Conversation in the Arab Region

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Our knowledge, as well as our ignorance, at any time and on every issue, tends to be opportunistically conditioned, and thus brought to deviate from full truth.

Gunnar Myrdal (1989)

The Challenge to the Existing Conversation

The Arab uprisings have laid bare the abyss between the rhetoric and reality of the dominant development paradigm in the region. It is widely agreed that socioeconomic discontent was a major cause of the uprisings. An early slogan raised at the start of the uprising in Tunisia was "employment is a right, you gang of thieves". The slogan contrasted the denied universal right to employment with the actual accumulation of illicit privileges by a narrow minority. It thus depicted the complex nature of inequality, which encompassed the economic, political, legal, and other fields. The concept of 'regime' in the slogan that turned out to be the most popular across the Arab region, "the people want to bring down the regime", also highlighted the need for a multidimensional approach. The current article argues that transforming the world of work for gender equality in the region requires transforming the prevailing economic conversation, and outlines areas for research on economics to contribute to these transformations.

A call for changing the economic conversation presupposes the idea that economics is indeed "a conversation, or better, a bunch of conversations" (Klamer, 2007). Anyone who has listened to speakers at an economics conference, for instance on 'women and the economy', will be receptive to the idea that economics is argumentative. Sometimes the arguments of other economists are dismissed for reasons such as being ideologically biased, technically inappropriate, or irrelevant to the real world, and the dismissal itself is part of the economic conversation. Since arguments depend on "stories, metaphors, appeals to authority, context, interests, power" (Klamer et al., 2007, p. 6), the conception of an economic conversation rehumanizes economics and explicitly brings back human values in its realm.

The rhetoric of governments, national, and international organizations active in the region has played catching-up with the slogans raised by protesters in the streets, at least initially. References to social justice and democracy became recurrent in the official positions of international actors, including those that had long supported



and legitimized the old Arab order (Bond, 2011, p. 482). The rhetorical change may be construed as a welcome response to legitimate criticism, yet it may also serve as a cosmetic makeover that leaves unaddressed the popular concerns of women and men in the region (Mohamadieh, 2012). The extent to which the rhetorical change has been accompanied by or will lead to deeper transformation in the prevailing development paradigm remains under question. An early assessment has suggested that "[b]eyond the incongruous rhetoric embracing democracy and social justice, there appears to be very little difference in what is being advocated to Arab democrats today and what was advocated to Arab dictators yesterday" (Bond, 2011, p. 482).

The Importance of Words in the Existing Conversation

The economic conversation, not unlike the broader development conversation, features often-used words that may emerge in some context, become obsolete with time, or reappear with a different meaning. The words themselves and their meanings are thus prone to contestation and appropriation. The use of the slogans raised by the Arab uprisings against the aims of the protesters, as may indeed already be the case as suggested in the introduction, is therefore an unsurprising possibility. The language used by different actors in different contexts thus deserves serious scrutiny. The words in fashion or buzzwords are more than "passwords to funding and influence" or "mere specialist jargon": the qualities they confer may leave "much of what is actually done in their name unquestioned" (Cornwall, 2007, p. 471). The questioning typically gains importance when the prevalent order breaks down, as in the case of the current global economic crisis.

The elucidation of the question of "how it is that false illusions of the global financial system's operation and consequences were conferred with sufficient legitimacy to deafen alternative views and stymie real reform" (Deeg & O'Sullivan, 2009, p. 759) will benefit a great deal from an examination of the words characterizing the dominant economic conversation. The Arab uprisings emerged in the global crisis context, at a time when the mainstream consensus of economic analysts was that the region had been largely shielded from the crisis. The analysis of the economic conversation across the Arab region, and the various uses of specific terms, their determinants, and implications, would therefore provide important insights. Such an exercise would best be served through in-depth case studies to understand how terms such as human capital, social safety nets, or labor market flexibility are configured in the region. As the aim of this article is to encourage research in that direction, it will discuss two terms for illustrative purposes of the value of a gender equality and workers' rights perspective: economic growth and women migrant domestic workers. The first discussion will be more conceptual, the second more practical.

A Widely Used Term: Economic Growth

Not unlike other regions in the world, economic growth is the central concept underlying the economic conversation in the Arab region. It is typically accepted to be desirable in itself, as reflected in the large majority of academic, policy, and media publications related to the economics of the Arab region. When considered less uncritically, it is often juxtaposed with another term, as in the examples of 'inclusive growth' or 'shared growth' (International Labor Office and United Nations Development Programme, 2012). Economic growth should generate employment and income

opportunities, ideally for the more disadvantaged sections of society. Yet despite economic growth the Arab region joblessness has been widespread, and women's participation in the labor force has been limited in comparison with other regions. Various perspectives have been presented to understand the phenomenon, but they have not questioned the basis of the concept of economic growth.

The concept of economic growth refers to the growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is derived from the System of National Account (SNA) (European Commission et al., 2009). The SNA differentiates between productive activities which use inputs to produce outputs of goods or services, and non-productive activities, such as purely natural processes without any human involvement or direction. Basic human activities such as eating, drinking, sleeping, or exercising are considered non-productive, based on the third part criterion. To illustrate, if you pay someone to diet or exercise on your behalf, you will not reap the physical benefits. For that, you would need to do it yourself. The third party criterion includes a market criterion, which marginalizes unpaid work, typically undertaken by women in the household. In practice, it excludes unpaid 'personal' activities even when they have market equivalents, such as emotional care-taking, which can be provided by a therapist, or sex, which can be provided by a sex worker (Wood, 1997).

The SNA recognizes that unpaid household activities such as washing, preparing meals, and caring for children, the sick or the elderly are productive in an economic sense, but it excludes them from the SNA production boundary, and thus from GDP. The rationale is that these activities have a limited impact on the rest of the economy, the decision to produce them is not influenced by and does not influence economic policy, and there are no comparable market prices to value them (European Commission et al., 2009). The three arguments, however, rest on shaky foundations. First, in response to 'structural adjustment' policies that cut back formal social protection, women typically increase and intensify their unpaid care work, which in turn facilitates the implementation of such policies (Elson & Cagatay, 2000). Second, assigning a monetary value to unpaid care work can be done through a variety of approaches (Budlender, 2008). Third, the SNA does include the unpaid household activities of women in developing countries, but only if they are usually provided for pay in developed countries (Wood, 1997). Prominent examples include subsistence activities such as collecting firewood or gathering water. This, in turn, further excludes other activities such as cooking or childcare. The shaky conceptual foundations of the focus on economic growth from a gender perspective are summarized in Arthur Cecil Pigou's remark that if a man marries his 'maid', GDP shrinks.

A Less Used Term: Women Migrant Domestic Workers

'Maids' in the Arab region are largely migrants, whether from rural areas or more frequently from other countries. The phrase 'women migrant domestic workers' is not widely used in the region but it has been gaining ground in recent years. Yet it was not always the case, and each of the words in the phrase serves a purpose as part of the struggle for gender equality and workers' rights. First, the word 'women' is used instead of 'female', to highlight the difference between gender and sex. Being a woman is a socially constructed identity, whereas being female is a biological characteristic. The choice of occupation as well as its terms and conditions is a social matter. It is



not fatalistically determined by nature. Therefore it can be changed, and should be changed in the interest of gender equality and workers' rights.

Second, the word migrant, although important given the great number of non-nationals in the region, is often avoided by policy-makers in the region. As already discussed, the choice of terminology is a powerful tool in the hands of those who use it. A rare occasion where the divergence of interests regarding a specific term came to the open was at the Arab Employment Forum of 2009, which was jointly organized by the International Labor Office and the Arab Labor Organization. After days of discussion between representatives of various social interests in the region, no agreement was reached on the issue of migrant workers. The relevant section in the conclusions of the forum referred to forwarding the summary of the related session to the technical follow-up committee (Arab Employment Forum, 2009). There were a number of differences in how workers', employers', and governments' representatives approached the issue, which could not be resolved within the set time.

The multiple differences came to the fore in the terminology to be used in the drafting of the conclusions. During the negotiations, it became clear that a group of governments' and employers' representatives wanted to ensure that migrant workers were not referred to as 'migrant workers', preferring instead terms such as 'temporary guest workers'. Workers' representatives refused the terminological change. Although the difference may appear to be minor, it carried in reality important implications. Explicit reference to 'migrant workers' directed the discussion towards the concrete steps needed to apply the relevant international labor and human rights standards protecting migrant workers. Alternative terminology would cast the discussion away from universal rights, and the absence of normative basis would allow for a maintenance of the status quo, given the large power differentials that migrant workers typically face.

Third, only recently has (paid) domestic work been recognized as work at the international level, in the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). That recognition has provided a needed boost to efforts of activists defending the rights of domestic workers around the world, by providing the international legitimacy and normative framework. Despite the recognition, other terms such as 'maids' and 'servants' are still used widely to refer to domestic workers in the Arab region, including in national legislation, which largely discriminates against them (Esim & Kerbage, 2011). The term 'servant' is reminiscent of a master-servant relationship of domination, and denies the domestic workers their fundamental principles and rights at work. The undervaluation and invisibility of paid domestic work is related to the undervaluation and invisibility of unpaid domestic work. While daily discussions and the media often depict women migrants and women nationals as having conflicting interests, in reality they have a common interest in redressing gender equality and workers' rights, notably in the recognition and revaluation of their work (Esim & Omeira, 2011). This redressing will need to be done in the various dimensions of the economic conversation.

3. A Research Agenda on the Conversation: Economic Thought, Policy, and Community

The argument developed in this article is that effective responses to the popular aspirations of women and men in the Arab region, particularly the youth, need a transformation of

the prevalent economic conversations. Such transformation can take place in the various dimensions of economics, bringing to light issues such as power, conflict, ideology, interests, and institutions. These issues are typically ignored or concealed in the prevailing economic conversation around the region, which has contributed to widening the gap between economic rhetoric and reality. Three dimensions of economics are discussed briefly for illustrative purposes: economics as body of thought, as policy outlook, and as community. Each of the three dimensions opens up promising research leads in the context of the Arab region, and together they contribute to a research agenda enabling the transformation of the world of work for gender equality and workers' rights.

Economics as Body of Thought

The emergence of the Arab uprisings has revealed the inadequacy of the typical separation between the economic and the non-economic, such as the social or the political (Moore, 2013). Far from being a minor issue, this separation lies at the core of the dominant school of economic thought, and its rejection therefore directly challenges that school of thought. The first lesson of the typical (neoclassical) economics textbook teaches students to distinguish between positive economics and normative economics. "Positive economics describes the facts of an economy", they are told, "while normative economics involves value judgments" (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2010, p. 7). The distinction, which is meant to separate the descriptive from the prescriptive and what is from what ought to be, is untenable (Putnam & Walsh, 2011). Yet it remains dominant in economics textbooks and among economists. The separation of positive and normative economics is also related to the separation of the social and the economic, which is detrimental to gender equality and workers' rights issues (Nelson, 1998). The separation allows the teaching of neoclassical economics as the science of economics, which "violates various conceptions of morality to which most people claim to adhere" (Parvin, 1992).

Neoclassical microeconomics presents students with a set of tools and models including equilibrium, utility-and profit-maximization, and the marginal productivity theory of distribution (Lee & Keen, 2004). It also provides the basis for the microfoundations of the macroeconomics project, which continues to be supported despite its failure (Hodgson, 2012). The global economic crisis has laid bare the failure of neoclassical economics and its deficient methodological basis and empirical performance (Colander et al., 2009). The crisis has also rekindled interest in the numerous theoretical alternatives, such as "Post Keynesian-Sraffian, Marxist-radical, institutional-evolutionary, social, feminist, and ecological economics", which are often grouped together under the label of 'heterodox economics' (Lee, 2012). Heterodox economics takes as its starting point the social provisioning process, which it seeks to understand and improve. It promotes the value of pluralism, in the dual sense of intellectual tolerance and engagement with a range of theoretical views (Lee, 2012). The uprisings have made heterodox economics more relevant than ever for understanding the Arab region, as they came in response to a situation exacerbated by the prescriptions derived from neoclassical economics, which in effect became a meta-ideology justifying a broader ideology: neoliberalism (Bresser-Pereira, 2010).

Economics as Policy Outlook

The development paradigm that has dominated the Arab region in recent decades needs to be considered within the broader trend towards neoliberalism around the

world (Amin, 2011). In modern market societies, a major responsibility of governments is to develop the institutions that decrease the uncertainty and instability inherent in markets, while promoting economic security (Minsky, 1996). Instead of the promotion of economic security, precariousness and informalization have been fomented during the neoliberal era under the guise of labor flexibility policies (Standing, 2011). The pursuit of the total market, referred to as globalization, has replaced the pursuit of social justice, thus undermining the institutional bases of the existence of markets (Supiot, 2010). Financialization, including the expansion of debt in the various spheres of economic life, has been endemic to, and can even be considered as synonymous with, neoliberalism (Fine, 2012).

The interrelated phenomena of financialization, informalization, and globalization have been manifested in growing economic inequality along national, gender, ethnicity/racial, and class lines, as exhibited in the context of wars (Peterson, 2008). In particular, three gender biases have characterized neoliberal policies around the world (Elson & Cagatay, 2000): a commodification bias giving priority to markets at the expense of non-market provision; a deflationary bias promoting high interest rates and tight monetary and fiscal policy; and a male breadwinner bias assuming a traditional division of labor and permanent full-time (male) employment. The three biases are interlinked and together contribute to gender inequality in the world of work, particularly in increasing the unpaid work burden of women at home. Relegating women to the household is thus a shared outcome of both neoliberal and political Islamist agendas. As highlighted in the continuity of post-uprising economic policy, investigating the linkages and overlap between the two agendas is a promising area of research. To elaborate an alternative development paradigm, a useful starting point is the critical review of neoliberal policies through the lens of gender equality and workers' rights (Berik et al., 2012). Practical tools such as gender sensitive budget initiatives can help governmental and non-governmental organizations assess the extent to which revenues and expenditures are aligned with those aims (Esim, 2000). The Moroccan experience can provide valuable lessons in this regard (Johnson et al., 2009). The recognition that alternative policies are available begs the question of who will elaborate them.

Economics as Community

A deeper understanding of the community of economists can help uncover seldom discussed aspects of the production of economic knowledge in the Arab region. Joan Robinson's quip that the point of studying economics is to avoid being fooled by economists is a call for the democratization of economic knowledge. Such democratization requires knowledge of economics as body of thought and as policy outlook, as well as knowledge of economics as community. The analytical tools of economists and other social scientists have been used on the economists themselves, with research areas such as the economics, history, and sociology of economics shedding light on the economics community around the world (Coats, 1997; Lee, 2009; Fourcade, 2009). Studies shed light on the socialization of economists into the profession and the institutional dynamics that they deal with, as well as their gender inequitable characteristics (Ginther & Kahn, 2004). Such factors have an often significant influence on the theories, methodologies, and policy prescriptions that economists use. The global dissemination of the US-based neoclassical model



of economics education, from the undergraduate to the PhD level, has played an important role in shaping the community of economists.

Longstanding recognition of the misaligned incentives underlying the neoclassical model have not slowed its spread nor undermined its legitimacy. In a breakthrough article published more than 15 years ago, Arjo Klamer and David Colander (1987) asked graduate students at six top-ranked US economics departments about what was needed for success in the economics profession. About two-thirds of the respondents considered that "being smart in the sense of being good at problem-solving", in the sense of formal modeling, was very important. Meanwhile, only three percent found that "having a thorough knowledge of the economy" was very important (Klamer & Colander, p. 100). Further studies using a comparative analysis have identified the international commonalities and differences regarding economics, yet the Arab region has yet to be the subject of such systematic analysis. Interesting research questions abound: Who are the economists working in or on the region? How are they socialized in the profession? How is their research financed? Who are their preferred audiences? Which conversations do they participate in? How do they address gender equality and workers' rights issues? Research would inquire into the changing nature of educational systems in the region as well as their gender responsiveness (Omeira, 2010). The evolving relationship between economic thought, policy, and practice in Egypt, and the central role of the state in this evolution, has been outlined by Galal Amin (2001). The uprisings have unmasked the complex nature of the economics profession beyond the scientific facade, as illustrated in the case of the Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (Grimaldi & O'Harrow Jr, 2011). At the regional level, an interesting case study would be the Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries, Iran, and Turkey, which is the regional hub of the Global Development Network (Plehwe, 2007).

Towards a New Conversation

The transformation of the economic conversation in the Arab region towards greater alignment with the values of gender equality and workers' rights should ideally be the initiative of the economists themselves. The efforts of individual economists in this direction would benefit from further coordination through the creation of interest groups within existing scholarly associations, or through the establishment of new associations. The promotion of a broadly pluralist approach to economics, as well as interdisciplinary and interregional exchanges, would help avoid the biases that are typical of the dominant paradigm. Yet the good intentions of the persons involved may not suffice to stir the economics boat beyond the mainstream, given the prevailing incentive systems. Governments and funding institutions can help secure the transformation if they consider it in their interest. Yet as illustrated in the experience of state feminism (Al-Ali, 2012), the backlash could make the situation worse in the absence of organized social groups that are committed to heterodox economics. Membership-based organizations have an intrinsic advantage in resisting the imposition of an economic conversation that is detrimental to gender equality and workers' rights. The prominent role played by organized women in the uprisings has contributed to breaking gender stereotypes, yet this change has been challenged by the rise of conservative forces in the unfolding political process. The leading contribution to the popular mobilization by independent trade unions, some of which have emerged during the uprisings, has contributed to transforming the world of work, as well as the

economic rhetoric. The rhetoric needs to be consolidated through support for economic research, teaching, and grassroots organizing as part of the efforts to generate an alternative development paradigm. Ultimately the transformation of the economic conversation will hinge on the relative influence of different groups in the academic, policy, and social dialogue processes. Accordingly, broad alliances will need to be developed to reshape the existing structures of thought and action. Given the dual role of teachers as workers and educators, and the significant presence of women among their ranks, teachers' unions are ideally placed to play a strategic role in the transformation of both the world of work and the economic conversation. The struggle of teachers for such issues as organizing, wage increases, pay equity, non-discrimination, and social security have already achieved breakthroughs across the region.

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