

Transforming the World of Work for Gender Equality in the Arab Region

Simel Esim

The theme of the current issue of *Al-Raida* is “Transforming the World of Work for Gender Equality in the Arab Region”. The call for papers came out at a time of critical changes as uprisings started unfolding across the region. The uprisings have signaled the need to reconsider some of the long held thoughts and practices on gender equality issues.

For long, the prevalence of deterministic perspectives regarding social questions in the Arab region has led to static social, economic, and political conditions. Complex issues such as gender roles in the public and private spheres have often been explained as the necessary outcome of cultural specificity or natural resource endowments. Such explanations undermine the universality of rights-based perspectives on gender equality issues. Yet, the rhetorical power of the rights discourse is often used to maintain the status quo and embellish existing practices.

Women in the Arab region continue to have the poorest outcomes in the world of work, whether in comparison with men or in comparison with women in other regions. The insufficient employment generation and the poor quality of created jobs, along with deficiencies in the national frameworks for gender equality contribute to women’s limited participation. Women have limited participation in paid employment, in the ownership of enterprises, and in the leadership of government, workers’, and employers’ organizations. Where they participate, they are often in lower positions, are paid less, or face multiple forms of discrimination. Stories of success typically remain limited and do not achieve scale.

There is a slow but growing tendency by the labor market institutions of the region, be it governments, workers’, or employers’ associations, to engage in key gender equality issues such as underpayment of jobs with a high concentration of women or high levels of unemployment among educated youth, especially young women. Momentum from rights groups to eliminate de jure and de facto discrimination in the world of work based on gender has been also building up.

As political transformations continue to take place across the region, their socioeconomic implications remain uncertain. The need for policy-relevant and action-oriented research based on the existing and emerging realities on the ground that

advance understanding on a range of gender equality issues in the world of work in the Arab region remains pressing. And it will be critical to keep gender equality and social justice on the transitional agendas in follow up to the Arab people's uprisings.

The collection of papers in this issue brings into focus changing gender norms in the world of work in the region. They address critical gaps in programming responses to self-employment, explore linkages between ideology, research, and policy regarding gender equality and workers' rights, and shed light on fundamental problems of significant scale from gender stereotyping and gender-based discrimination to gender pay gap and work and life balance.

Mansour Omeira, in his 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. He notes that in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings the rhetoric of governments, national, and international organizations was playing catch-up with the reality on the ground. Such rhetorical change, while welcome, needs to move beyond cosmetic makeover that leaves unaddressed the popular concerns of women and men in the region. He notes that the transformation of the economic conversation in the Arab region towards greater alignment with the values of gender equality and workers' rights will hinge on the relative influence of different groups in the academic, policy, and social dialogue processes. Accordingly, he argues that broad alliances will need to be developed to reshape the existing structures of thought and action.

In her article on Political Islam and Support for Women's Political Participation in Morocco, Lindsay Benstead focuses on the barriers to labor force participation in the Arab world, including discriminatory social attitudes. She notes that while cultural and structural explanations are part of the causal story, they do not put sufficient emphasis on human agency and contextual circumstances in shaping attitudes. Her findings, gathered using constituent surveys, highlight how Muslim opinion on women's role in politics varies across a broad category of religiously-oriented parties. She notes that as the Arab spring unfolds, easing controls on Islamist participation in elections, and diversity among Islamist movements on issues such as gender relations may become more evident. She also suggests that norms and values may change as a result of women's leadership in Islamist parties. Her findings, taken together with other surveys, indicate that ordinary citizens are much more accepting of women's participation in formal politics than conventional wisdom about the region would suggest.

In her article on changing gender norms in the world of work in Saudi Arabia, Amélie Le Renard shows how gender and nationality are critical to understanding the clothing choices facing Saudi professional women in today's world. Based on interviews and ethnographic observations spanning between 2005 and 2010 mainly in Riyadh, Le Renard notes that the constraining dress norms and injunctions for Saudi women are more related to a prevailing image of what defines a "modern", "professional" femininity versus what constitutes "respectability". She observes that women often have to negotiate a place trying to cope with these conflicting expectations without losing the trust of their families by adopting special clothing practices, particularly in terms of veiling and unveiling. These dilemmas concerning dress code in the

workplace, she concludes, are a reminder of how being able to exercise one's profession does not necessarily signify emancipation from power relations, but rather exercising agency in contributing to their transformation.

In his article on women's entrepreneurship development programs in Lebanon, Nabil Abdo takes a critical look at how many income-generating projects targeting low-income women largely operate on the basis of a market approach in spite of claiming and appropriating the goals of an empowerment approach. These projects do not encourage the establishment of productive women-owned businesses with growth potentials. Women are often oriented towards traditional home-making occupations that generate little income and entrap them in survivalist activities that do not take them out of the terms and conditions of vulnerable employment that they suffer from. In his conclusion, he argues that these forms of entrepreneurship promotion need to include collective forms of entrepreneurship through business groups and cooperatives among the options which can provide them with benefits in terms of pooling of knowledge, resources, sharing of risks as well as responsibilities, including care. These collective business models, he notes, can also be democratic spaces that allow for voice, agency, and ownership for women entrepreneurs.

The next article in this issue is a policy brief from the ILO on pay equity in Jordan prepared in collaboration with the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW). The findings of the policy brief included in this issue suggest that Jordanian women continue to face gender-based pay discrimination at work. Women employees in Jordan are paid less than men in the same skill category. There is a considerable gender pay gap for employees at all skill levels. Importantly, almost half of the employed women in Jordan are professionals and earn considerably less than men professionals.



"Ceramic Painters", by Helen Zughuib, gouache on board, 15x20, 2004.

The average hourly wage for women professionals is 33 percent less than that of men professionals. The recommendations from the policy brief have been discussed in national fora and resulted in the formation of a National Steering Committee on Pay Equity that has been working through a number of subcommittees to advance the cause through legal change, research and advocacy (<http://www.jordanpayequity.org/>).

The six stories of women workers as told by Carole Kerbage and Omar Said spread across a wide range of experiences from the world of work in Lebanon. They shed light on significant widespread problems of gender stereotyping, worker-life balance, gender wage gap, gender based discrimination, and overlapping discriminations of gender and disability. These stories, originally prepared for a Sub-Regional Initiative of the ILO on Promoting Gender Equality in the World of Work in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, demonstrate the chasm that exists between the rights as set out in labor legislation and their actual realization and fulfillment.

Farah Kobaissy's article sheds light on the role of women workers in the labor movement in Egypt. It provides an analysis of the prominent role women leaders played in the strikes and protests in factories and assembly lines since 2006 and during the street protests of 2011. It was the women textile workers who sparked the initial wave of the strikes. They initiated and led many of the protests, and had a great deal of impact on the realization of their demands. They were also present in the first public sector strike and the formation of the first independent trade union, the Real Estate Tax Authority Union. Kobaissy provides a dynamic gender analysis of the participation of women workers in the strikes and public protests and points out that the growing participation of women in various movements in Egypt has been building for some time. While she mentions the most recent rise of right-wing groups and parties hostile to women's participation in public life in the country, she ends on a hopeful note pointing out that for the first time in the history of Egypt, a popular organized feminist movement is possible as there are collectives of women ready to integrate into the struggle.

Azza Charara Baydoun's article on honor killings in Lebanon is based on an earlier paper she presented in a one-day expert group meeting called for by Rashida Manjoo, the UN special rapporteur on violence against women that was convened in New York in October 2011. She reflects on the nature and extent of family violence in Lebanon and the efforts around combatting violence against women by women's organizations. She makes the connection between the struggle on protection of women from family violence and the increased visibility of women in the public space during the Arab people's uprisings. She notes that the increased occurrence of media stories on family violence against women, provides activists with a platform for awareness-raising, despite the sensationalist nature of the coverage. She concludes by mentioning the need to exercise caution with respect to forces that are working to reverse the few gains achieved regarding advancing of women's rights in the region.

This issue of *Al-Raida* concludes with two winning papers of the Mary Turner Lane Award, a student paper competition established in honor of the late Mary Turner Lane, who founded the women's studies program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The winning graduate student paper by Patil Yessayan, Sawsan Khanafer, and Marie Murray looks at the issue of why women have limited leadership and representative roles in Lebanese politics, and why so few actually run for parliament. The authors focus on an analysis of the opinions of women politicians and political science students in Lebanon regarding what they see as the greatest obstacle that women face in pursuing political careers. They find that contrary to what many believe, the main obstacle to women's political participation may not be the patriarchal or family-based culture itself, but rather the political culture, the state structure, and the sectarian divides inherent in it. In their conclusions they suggest that the parties should start with leadership training among women early on, and eliminate the special committees for women to reduce the segregation of men and women in politics.

The winning undergraduate essay by Leanne Abou Hassan analyses a short story that highlights the cultural contrast and clash of generations between the present day and those of our grandparents, showing how traditions and ways of life have evolved. It emphasizes differences in the roles women occupied then and now and the greater freedom that women today enjoy as compared to the earlier generations. It is written to understand and highlight women's expectations from a grandmother's point of view one who has suffered from the burdens of rigid traditions.

Times of transition open up new realms of opportunities as they bring with them the challenges and contradictions of innovating ideas and ways of working. As this issue goes to print in the fall of 2013, the deepening convergence of economic, social, and political crises in the region calls attention to the need for development of institutions that bring out the best in humans. We hope that this period of transition will have transformative outcomes for gender equality and social justice in the region.

Simel Esim is a Turkish American political economist who has worked in social and economic development for 25 years. She has worked on gender equality in the world of work for over 20 years. From January 2004 to March 2012 she was based in Beirut in the International Labour Organization's Regional Office for Arab States as Senior Regional Gender Specialist. Since April 2012 she has been working in the ILO's Cooperatives Unit (www.ilo.org/coop) in Geneva as its manager.
Email: esim@ilo.org