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Women in the value chain

Kaity Saliba

Abstract

Women's low participation rates in the labor force is a global issue. In Lebanon, women's labor force participation rates are low. However, women play a critical role in several important value chains in the country. To explore this role, this paper examines women's labor force rates in three value chains in Lebanon: agricultural, handicrafts, and construction. It examines the broad barriers to women's labor force participation and the specific barriers that exist in each of these value chains. Following this analysis, the paper concludes with several recommendations that can help increase the number of women in the labor force.

"Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development, and building good governance."

(Kofi Annan Foundation, 2021)

Introduction

One of the most basic human rights is gender equality. Despite all the efforts made by international and local organizations, women still suffer from gender discrimination, especially in the workforce. According to UN Women (2018), 48.5% of women participate in the global labor force. This participation is 26.5% below that of men. Moreover, certain legal restrictions have prevented nearly 2.7 billion women from having the same choice of profession as men. These laws, which exist across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, exclude women from certain jobs that are deemed "inappropriate" for women, including jobs that involve overnight shifts. To understand the low labor force participation rates of women, this paper will analyze women's participation in different value chains. This analysis will focus on women's role in informal labor

and value chains, and the root causes behind the unequal role that men and women play in the value chain, its consequences, and potential solutions.

A value chain is the sequence behind the production and delivery of services to customers (Tardi, 2020). To make sure that a value chain is using the most competitive prices, each stage needs to be evaluated. Some of the parties involved in this chain include workers who build the separate parts of a certain product, the workers who put these parts together, and the workers who deliver the finalized product to customers.

Women's participation in value chains is often restricted to informal and home-based work. In other words, women's work is often concentrated in the least valuable parts of the value chain. Because informal work is not included under the Lebanese Labor Law, it consequently denies women workers protection from harassment. For example, informal work denies women access to medical insurance and maternity leave, among other labor force protections. These issues are exacerbated for women working at the least "valuable" stages of the value chain. For example, in the agricultural value chain, women are often engaged in harvesting and planting, which are considered the least valued by consumers (Antoun et al., 2020). As the least valued workers in the least valued part of the value chain, women are unable to support themselves. Without financial independence, women workers are then forced to depend on others, often male family members or a spouse, to support them. This can often reinforce normative gender stereotypes, which maintain that men should be the breadwinners, while women should stay at home (IWRAP Asia Pacific, 2015).

Women's Participation in Value Chains in Lebanon

Discriminatory laws in Lebanon broadly explain the low participation of women in the economy. These laws help to reinforce the patriarchal and cultural systems that prevent women's equal access to the labor force (Antoun et al., 2020). For example, the Personal Status Laws limit the

inheritance of women, restrict women's ability to seek equitable divorces, control child custody, and generally limit women's bodily autonomy.

Cleaning the house, preparing food, and taking care of the children are all part of a woman's duties according to normative gender roles in Lebanon. As a result, women on average spend about five hours a day doing unpaid care work (Ferrant et al., 2014). The demands of this unpaid care work make it very difficult, if not impossible for women to enter the labor force. If they are able to leave the household in order to work, the demands of unpaid care work generally push them into the informal labor force, where flexible work schedules allow them to fulfill their household duties. Women also face specific barriers to their work in different sectors. These barriers will be discussed below.

Agriculture Value Chain

In Lebanon, the agricultural value chain contributes to 25% of all known value chains (Antoun et al., 2020). Although women contribute 35% to this chain, their roles are limited to sowing and harvesting, while men have diverse roles ranging from harvesting to packaging, to marketing and sales (Antoun et al., 2020). In addition, restricting women's roles to harvesting and sowing ties them primarily to seasonal work, which leaves her unemployed during much of the year. Further, the informality of harvesting and sowing is susceptible to work disruptions, which can result in a decrease in her income and exposes her to higher risks of poverty.

Women in the agricultural value chain also lack access to marketing, technology, finance, and land. In terms of marketing, some consider that women have weak negotiation skills which makes them weak in the field of marketing and sales. Further, only 3% of women have access to technology and equipment, whereas men have access to new technologies and equipment (ILO, 2018). This means that women harvest the old-fashioned way, using traditional manual techniques, while men use the Combine Harvester and other updated technology. Finally, women's access to land is low, if not totally absent, which prevents them from becoming agricultural entrepreneurs.

Civil society and international organizations such as Fair Trade Lebanon (FTL), Mada Foundation, and the Rene Moawad Foundation, with the support of international experts and funding, have worked to overhaul the agricultural sector in Lebanon, especially in Akkar and Bekaa, as well as to enhance the role of women in agriculture. For example, FTL organized activities and trainings for workers in this sector to regulate farming and selling. Consequently, this organization managed to train approximately 129 women in Akkar (Expertise France, 2017). According to the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is still working to improve and empower women in the agricultural value chain through the training-based “Stimulating Markets and Rural Transformation” (SMART) project. This project aims to provide employment and income opportunities for a number of Lebanese rural women by building food manufacturing centers and farms (Lebanon YMCA, 2006).

Another initiative that has helped empower women in the agricultural value chain is led by Kamal Mouzawak, founder of the first Lebanese farmers market “Souk El Tayeb.” Souk El Tayeb has supported women agricultural workers to sell their products in this market. This continuous source of revenue has helped these women sustain their livelihoods during the off-season (Souk El Tayeb, 2021).

Handicrafts Value Chain

In some other value chains such as handicrafts, where women make up the majority of workers, many barriers prevent women from expanding their businesses. In this value chain, women run various activities ranging from production to marketing. Moreover, many women have established a name for themselves and have been able to enter international markets (Antoun et al., 2020). One example is the Lebanese designer Nada Debs, who is well-known for her interdisciplinary design concepts as well as her creative output, which is filled with emotional resonance (Nada Debs, 2021).

Yet, women continue to face several obstacles in this value chain. Foremost among these obstacles are the competitive imports which are sold at much lower prices than those produced in local markets. The fact that locally bought, high quality raw materials are exorbitant in price, especially considering the severe economic crisis in the country, it is very difficult for women to compete with the low cost of imported goods (Antoun et al., 2020). Although many women in villages work in handicrafts and seek support to expand and enhance their work in this field, cultural and social norms prevent women from advancing, which often forces them to engage in this sector as a hobby instead of a career.

To support women in the handicrafts value chain, the USAID has implemented the Lebanon Industrial Value Chain Development (LIVCD) project. This project aims to empower women in crafts by holding training courses in several regions of Lebanon, including Batroun and Koura (Rustom, 2014). Furthermore, the LIVCD committee provided women with financial support (up to \$150 worth) to work on their craft items (Rustom, 2014).

Construction Value Chain

In other value chains, for example, the construction value chain, the presence of women is almost nonexistent (Antoun et al., 2020). Women, when present in such chains, primarily occupy administrative positions. These chains are dominated by men because of the social and cultural beliefs that still dominate our societies, such as the gender division of labor. One of the primary causes for the difficulties women face in becoming part of these value chains is the tough working conditions that they are faced with (Antoun et al., 2020). In several countries across the Arab States region, laws are in place that prevent women from entering the construction sector because gender norms portray women as “weak” and unable to do the same labor-intensive work as men. However, in 2020, Saudi Arabia repealed such laws and abolished all limitations on women’s employment in industrial professions (World Bank, 2021). In addition, the long working hours, travelling, and mobility that some jobs and positions may require constitute other obstacles to women’s participation in this field. To empower women in the value chain of construction in

Lebanon, Warchée, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), attempts to integrate women in different positions in the construction field, and to empower them to gain financial independence (Warch(ée), n.d.).

Empowering Women in the Labor Force

Removing laws that limit women's economic freedom can help ensure equal opportunities for women in the labor force. It will also allow innovation to flourish instead of being limited to a handful of individuals. In Lebanon, for example, this solution would mean removing Article 27 of the Labor Law that prohibits women from entering specific industries (LEADERS, 2019).

If a country wants to improve the abilities and knowledge of the next generation of workers, it must give every individual the same opportunity. Providing everyone with the same education and having the same expectations of all regardless of gender will make every individual a potential successful employee/entrepreneur (i.e., everyone is potentially the breadwinner). This change must happen in homes, schools, and universities to make sure children acknowledge a person's value and potential regardless of gender. The next generation must be taught to notice signs of discrimination and stand up against them. For example, the U.S. Department of State Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) aims to spread gender awareness for university students by shedding light on various forms of gender discrimination. The program also teaches students how to face gender-based discrimination in their lives. In addition, the Tomorrow's Leaders Gender Scholars Program (TLS), a MEPI program, works to enhance leadership skills of all students irrespective of gender. Such programs inform students about the different types of discrimination that they may face in their work and strengthens them in the face of any kind of discrimination such as offers of informal jobs or less valued positions than men (U.S. MEPI, 2021).

Companies should also incentivize men to play an equal role in taking care of children and home duties. This change could be achieved through paid paternity and maternity leave. This can also decrease the burden of women's unpaid care work, which will give women more flexibility that in

turn will allow them to enter the formal labor force. Influential voices can also play a tremendous role in shaping the perceptions of working women. For example, media personnel can spread the message of gender equality and can showcase women workers in a positive light. This will undoubtedly influence the minds of the viewers, especially the upcoming generation.

To support the progress of women in the workforce, organizations and various groups dedicated to boosting women's newly found success stories should highlight these events so that these women can serve as role models for other women. For example, organizations that work to empower women in the economy, such as Women's Empowerment and The Global Banking Alliance of Women, should spread awareness of the importance of integrating women into all value chains and demonstrate the benefits of integrating women into non-traditional roles in different chains. This can be done through social media platforms or through the various workshops and conferences that these organizations can undertake (Pluess and Pruzan-Jorgensen, 2016).

State-backed banks can also help women access finance and loans without high collateral (Antoun et al., 2020). Banks can also conduct feasibility studies of the projects that women entrepreneurs propose without allowing prejudice against women to dominate their financial studies. Moreover, women must be subjected to equal training sessions as men for technologies, equipment, and machines. This must be done by every organization to have women participate in non-traditional employment opportunities.

Stakeholders (private and public)	Roles They Can Play
Government	Change discriminatory laws
Private sector	Help develop women's skills in a suitable workplace through trainings
Society	Change the perception over what is expected of women
Organizations	Raise awareness about gender equality

Table 1 Key Stakeholders, Women's Economic Empowerment

Conclusion

Women's equal rights as workers in the value chain is something that has not been achieved. In Lebanon, women face many barriers as workers in the agricultural, handicrafts, and construction value chains. These barriers translate into fewer opportunities and resources for women. Potential solutions include dismantling discriminatory laws, raising awareness about the importance of gender equality, and incentivizing men and boys to support women in the household to overturn the gender division of labor. Promoting and protecting gender equality, and supporting women workers, is necessary to strengthen the economy and will not only benefit women and their families, but will also benefit their communities and society.

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