

Measurement of Women's Economic Activity (Cairo, 25 - 27 Nov. 1983)

This report is an attempt to summarize the issues and questions raised at a regional workshop sponsored by the Population Council and the Ford Foundation on "The Problem of Measuring Female Participation in the Labour Force in the Arab World".⁽¹⁾ The workshop, held in Cairo from November 25-27, 1983, joined together delegates from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, North-Yemen, Sudan and Tunisia. The Participants came from different fields and specialities: Statistics, Economics, Sociology and Anthropology, which gave a holistic approach to the problem.

Present also were Dr. Frederic Shorter the regional representative of the Population Council's Office for West Asia and North Africa; Dr. Barbara Ibrahim of the Ford Foundation and Dr. Huda Zurayk of the Faculty of Health Science at the American University of Beirut who both organized and co-chaired the meetings. Dr. Catalina Wainerman an Argentinian Sociologist from the Centro de Estudios de Poblacion (CENEP) in Buenos Aires and a foremost expert in the field of female labour in Latin America was also there.



From left: Dr. Huda Zurayk and Dr. Barbara Ibrahim, co-chairpersons.

"Do you work?"

Ask this question to a random group of Arab women and most of them will probably answer

"No, I'm a housewife."

•But go to their villages and populated cities, visit them in their houses and fields, observe how they spend their days from dawn to dusk, and you will be astonished to see how much they work. Besides child care and cooking, the average Arab woman is a very productive being: from tending crops, sewing, reaping and fetching water, to grazing and tending the animals, to housework (such as sewing, canning and food preservation) to selling home-made products and foods. These are only

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- (1) In 1979, The Population Council jointly with the Faculty of Health Sciences of A.U.B., sponsored a Study Group which also discussed the measurement of women's economic participation. The report of this Study was published by the Population Council as a Regional Paper No. 12, and can be obtained from the Council's Bureau (P.O.Box: 115 - Dokki - Giza - A.R.E.). Its title is: "The Measurement of Women's Economic Participation. Report of Study Group." Beirut, 12-13 October 1979.



Some of the participants at the workshop.

some of the many activities she does which, translated into economic terms, yield an impressive rate of economic participation.

And yet, if we go back once again to our official censuses and labor surveys, we are struck by the stunningly low rate of economic participation of our Arab women. Why is this so?

First, to be sure, the problem is not only that of the Arab region but one faced by most developing countries. Women in these countries have always worked, but their work has largely gone unmeasured. One reason for this is the fact that the mode of economic activity — particularly female activity in developing countries is different from that in industrialized countries. Females in the Third World work mainly in unpaid family and domestic production, activities that fall outside the official definition of economic productivity used in censuses and labor surveys. But at the same time, activities such as these translated into monetary terms, are a considerable economic contribution to the household income since if not provided by the females of the family, they would have to be bought from outside sources.

Recently, efforts have been made to correct some of the misconceptualizations of economic activity. Two types of problems face Arab census bureaus and researchers alike: (1) How to measure economic activity of women like agricultural work and part time work, which is usually missed because of cultural reasons and problems in interviewing techniques, although it falls within the official definition of economic activity. (2) How to expand the definition of economic activity to include non-market activities such as housework and others. This problem is relatively more complicated than the former.

A question might be raised as to why it is necessary to measure women's economic participation. It is surely going to make the task of

the census bureaus more complicated. The question becomes: is it worth all the trouble? What good will it do to the national economies of developing countries, and will it improve women's economic participation in these countries? Also will it have any influence on women's status and their perception of themselves?

The answer is definitely yes. Needless to say how important census information on population and manpower is to any government, accurate information on female economic participation is just as important. It is the job of policy makers and planners to use this information in order to intervene and direct the course of social change for the well being of society. If the economic productivity of women in the Arab World is to be improved, it is important to know what types of activities women are presently engaged in and what activities best fit their cultural settings and life styles. As to their status and self image there will definitely be a positive change once the value of female work is officially recognized and respected.

A related problem is the need to study the patterns and directions of change in the economic participation of women in the Arab World. Developing countries in general and the Arab world in particular are passing through a stage of rapid change which is eroding the traditional bases of their economies. Large scale, industrial and market economies are rapidly replacing the traditional household and agricultural modes of production — the same modes of production that are the domain of females in these countries. How has this change affected female labor and what will happen in the future? Will development increase female participation or decrease it? Does the rural migration encourage Arab women to join in the modern labor force or are cultural factors working against it?

These are only some of the questions which must be answered if any improvement in the economic participation of females in the Arab world is to be made. Furthermore, the answers cannot be found unless full and accurate information is gathered. It is a responsibility which governmental census and labor bureaus as well as academicians and social scientists must jointly carry out.

Below are excerpts of some studies that were presented at the workshop.

EGYPT (2)

In an attempt to uncover the under representation of women in national labor surveys a study was undertaken by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization And Statistics (CAPMAS) in the area of Greater Cairo

In this study, a selected sample of women interviewed by CAPMAS in an earlier survey (May 1983) was selected to be reinterviewed (October 1983) but with greater indepth questioning and probing about their economic activities. Special attention was paid to the questions asked, to the interviewing techniques and to the training of the interviewers. The interviewers chosen were all females as opposed to the earlier surveys which used mostly males. It was believed that males entering traditional homes and talking to females or asking questions about them would bias the answers and give less accurate and incomplete information about those females.

Results of this study showed that a large percentage of the economically active females of the sample had been overlooked by the May survey and had been labelled as housewives. Most of these were single, young and did home type jobs such as selling eggs, manufacturing and selling home made cheese, sewing and selling dresses, and helping husbands and fathers at their farms. Many of them worked more than 15 hours a week (the minimum working time set by government standards to consider someone as economically active).

On the basis of these results, CAPMAS took

several steps towards improving its surveys and refining their measuring instruments in order to become more sensitive to women's activities.

1. The probing method was implemented. This means that when a woman claims that she does not work, the interviewer instead of labelling her as a housewife, directly asks her a series of follow up questions to uncover any other paid or unpaid house activities.
2. The number of female interviewers was increased from 7% to 28%. This number, however, remains very low and should be increased.
3. The number of households to be interviewed by each interviewer was decreased from 15 to 10 each. This means more time spent by each interviewer with his interviewees and hence, better care when asking questions and writing down answers.

SUDAN (3)

In Sudan there is little or no information on the female labor force. The only two population censuses on which we can rely for some figures on women's economic participation are the 1955 and the 1973 censuses.

However, there appears to be a large discrepancy between those census rates and those reported by anthropological and sociological observations of Sudanese woemn especially rural women.

For example , in the 1955/56 census, less than 10% of the Sudanese female population was reported to be economically active. In the 1973 census this figure improved remarkably with some rural areas having as much as 56.3% active women and others only 2.5%. However, these rates are believed to be much lower than what anthropologists and sociologists have consistently observed in rural Sudan.

A study conducted by the social welfare department in cooperation with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, resulted in some fascinating figures about the economic activity of the Sudanese woman particularly in the

(2) The case of Egypt was presented by:

— Dr. Sarah Loza of the Social Planning and Administration Consultants, (SPAAC), Cairo.
 — Dr. Barbara Ibrahim of the Ford Foundation, Cairo.
 — Mr. Mohammed A. Abdel Karim and Mr. Kamal Ali Fauag of the Central Agency for Public Mobilization And Statistics (CAPMAS).

(3) The case of Sudan was presented by:

— Dr. Ahmed Hamad of the Department of Econometrics at the University of Khartoum and
 — Ms. Alia Shams El Dien of the Information and Research Department.

Darfur region of Western Sudan ⁽⁴⁾. For example, in pastoral households, females (women and girls) alone are responsible for seed grinding, food preparation, housebuilding, tending big animals, raising poultry, and selling home made products. Males help, and only to some degree, in water and fuel fetching and in sheep grazing.

In agricultural households, females do more than 50% of the agricultural chores such as land preparation, sowing, weeding, reaping, food storage, and horticultural production. Only in plowing does male participation exceed the female's, and even then they only participate in 54% of the plowing. Females do the rest. However, when it comes to selling the agricultural produce and spending the revenue, males have an upper hand: 69% of the marketing and 76% of the spending is a male responsibility. **These figures show the discrepancy between the Sudanese women's economic participation level and her social status. They also show the discrepancy between her real participation rate and the rates that official censuses project.**

NORTH YEMEN ⁽⁵⁾

The conditions of the North Yemeni women are no better than those of her sisters in the rest of the Arab world. The most recent population census of 1975 showed a low 8.5% economic participation rate for women. How much of this is a reflection of the real situation and how much of it is due to information gathering problems is yet to be found.

In 1983 the North Yemeni government cooperated with the Ford Foundation in planning and carrying out a large scale labor survey of women in rural North Yemen. The goals of the survey were primarily to find out the extend of female participation in all economic activities, paid as well as unpaid ones. Field work started in November 1983, results have not appeared yet.

A large sample of 2327 rural households was randomly picked. Twenty female interviewers were carefully chosen and trained in the field. Besides demographic information such as age, marital status and educational level, data were collected on



From left: the Yemeni, Lebanese and Egyptian delegates

the economic activity of the females of the households with emphasis on both primary and secondary activities.

This survey, with its refined data collection techniques, is the first of its kind in Yemen and one of the most developed surveys done so far on the female labor force in the Arab world. It is hoped that the results would reveal a more accurate and complete image of the North Yemeni woman's economic activity conditions.

LEBANON ⁽⁶⁾

The latest and only labor survey conducted in Lebanon was in 1971. Since then no national figures on the Lebanese labor force emerged and it is impossible at this time to conduct any national surveys or censuses to update the figures available.

In 1971, and according to official survey figures, the Lebanese woman had the highest economic activity rate amongst her Arab sisters (17.5%) ⁽⁷⁾ The largest number of active Lebanese women was found to be in agriculture (22.5%) But according to the report, these figures could have

6. The case of Lebanon was presented by Ms. Dolly Feghaly of the National Employment Institute and Ms. Nada Khuri of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World.

(7) The National census and labor force studies in the Middle East adopt the definition of economic activity as "any activity which is devoted to the production of goods or services which is measureable in economic terms and in which, generally speaking, people are gainfully employed." (UN F-18, P. 100).

(4) Study available at The Information and Research Department, Council of Ministers, Khartoum, Sudan.

(5) The case of North Yemen was presented by Ms. Bilqis Al-Dabbi and Ms. Lattifa Al-Thawr of the Central Planning Organization in Sana'a.

been an underestimation of reality since many of the active rural women when interviewed usually would not admit that they worked and just labeled themselves as housewives. An improved and refined survey, as the ones conducted recently in Egypt, Jordan and North Yemen, should show higher figures for the Lebanese women's economic activity today. This, however, remains only a speculation until a national labor force survey can be conducted and its results published.

A study conducted in 1982 by I. Lorfing and M. Khalaf ⁽⁸⁾ attempted, for the first time in Lebanon, to transform the non-monetary economic contribution of women into monetary value and consequently to measure their actual contribution to the total household income. The study, done in two villages in the Western Beqa' region, aimed at finding the basic determinants of this economic contribution and its impact on family dynamics and decision making patterns.

To do this the two researchers considered as income generating activities; "those activities that result either in cash" (earned)" or would have entailed reimbursement of money had it not been provided by household members" (imputed). A list of activities performed by each member of the household and the time spent on each was noted. Imputed economic activities were quantified according to what they would have cost had they been bought from outside.

Results showed that in the majority of households surveyed (53%), women contributed between 5% and 25% to the total household income. This contribution was essentially determined by 3 factors: 1) **Their life cycle:** women with all their children below 15 years contributed least, and women with their children over and below 15 years contributed most; 2) **The income level of the household:** as the total household income increased, women's relative contribution decreased. 3) **The size of land cultivated:** as the cultivated land increased in size and income women's relative contribution

As to the impact of female contribution on family dynamics, the study showed that in general there is little or no impact and that a democratic pattern of decision making between husband and wife existed, especially in matters related to allocation of family resources.

In sum, the study shows the possibility of redefining the concept of economic activity and remeasuring it accordingly, with more accuracy. It is also hoped that such studies can be of benefit to labor officials and statisticians to help them refine and improve the measurements of the Lebanese woman's economic participation.

CONCLUSION:

From the above, one can conclude that the picture which census bureaus and labor surveys present on female economic participation in the Arab World is far from accurate. The image of the Arab woman as an unproductive being who is economically dependant on males of her society is not true. **The perpetuation of this image will neither improve her status nor her economic productivity.** Therefore, there is an urgent need for more studies on this subject coupled with an equally urgent need to spread awareness of the problem among all those interested in female economic participation. The Cairo Workshop was one occasion where Arab experts involved in the measurement of female economic activity shared their experiences and points of view. It is hoped that such meetings and workshops would sensitize researchers and statisticians to the problem and its complexities and that it would encourage them to take practical steps to improve the measurement of Arab women's economic participation.

Nada Khuri

N.B. An enlarged and completely revised edition of Regional Paper No. 12, (see ref. 1) has been recently published in November 1983, by the Population Council of West Asia and North Africa. Its author is Dr. Huda Zurayk and it is entitled "Women's Economic Participation". It contains a section on profiles of women's work, another on the census as a measurement tool and how to improve it. The last part deals with expanding the meaning of economic activity in addition to references.

(8) "The Economic Contribution of Women and its Effects on the Basic Dynamics of the Family in Two Lebanese Villages." Unpublished.