



CENTER for MEDITERRANEAN
INTEGRATION | CENTRE pour
l'INTÉGRATION en MÉDITERRANÉE
مركز التكامل المتوسطي

ROUND 2

COVID-19 MED POLICY BRIEFS

COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

COVID-19 and Women Employment in Mediterranean Countries: Impact and Policies for Reducing Gender Inequality in Work

Med Brief No14 - March 2021





CENTER for MEDITERRANEAN
INTEGRATION | CENTRE pour
l'INTÉGRATION en MÉDITERRANÉE
مركز التكامل المتوسطي

ROUND 2

COVID-19 MED POLICY BRIEFS

COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN



Author: Hussein Suleiman

Hussein Suleiman is a researcher at the economic department of Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, in Egypt. He holds a Master's degree in political economy from King's College London. His research interests are political economy, public finance, trade, and governance.

Mr. Suleiman's work focuses on Egypt, the Middle East, and North Africa, and he has published in Egyptian, Middle Eastern, and European journals and platforms.

Peer Reviewers: **Blanca Moreno-Dodson, Constantin Tsakas, Maryse Louis**

Keywords: Gender Inequalities, Women Employment, Regional Cooperation

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the global lockdown that was put in place to control it, have resulted in the harshest economic crisis since the great depression. The crisis has caused drastic decline in employment and wages worldwide, and threatens to increase the number of people living in poverty for the first time in years. Such effects hit some groups harder than others, and among the most affected by the crisis are women, who suffered more loss in employment than their men counterparts.

This policy brief examines the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on women employment in selected South Mediterranean countries, mainly in North Africa, focusing on the three oil importers in the region, according to the International Monetary Fund's classification, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, which have more similar economic structures than the oil exporters, Libya and Algeria. The brief highlights how the crisis is affecting women employment globally, then examines its impact on women employment in the South Mediterranean countries of interest, an impact that might seem mild or even positive at first glance, but proves otherwise through detailed examination. The brief concludes with discussing the implications of decreasing women employment and providing policy recommendations, both during the current recession, and on the long run, on how to support women employment in the South Mediterranean, which already lagged behind the world long before the pandemic. It also provides possible axes to empower women and reduce gender inequalities through regional cooperation.

1. COVID-19 and Women Employment: The Global Context and the Uniqueness of the Current Recession

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the global lockdown that was put in place to control it, have resulted in the harshest economic crisis since the great depression. The crisis has resulted in working-hour losses equivalent to hundreds of millions of fulltime jobs throughout the year 2020, which have translated into a **3.5 trillion US dollars loss in labour income globally**, in the first three quarters of the year.ⁱ Such loss of employment and income, threatens to push nearly **150 million people into extreme poverty in 2020 and 2021.**ⁱⁱ

The crisis has not affected everyone equally. Some groups were severely impacted compared to others. Informal labour,ⁱⁱⁱ employees with temporary contracts^{iv} and the less educated,^v have all been hit harder by the lockdown measures and recession, as they were less capable of adapting to changes in work needs and technologies' requirements.

Such inequality effects of COVID-19 are further exacerbated by their impact on gender inequality. Women employment, which intersects with the abovementioned vulnerable groups, has been more affected than men employment globally. In 2020, 39.6% of employed women worldwide were working in sectors of high risk to the COVID-19 impact. This would reflect in terms of job losses and decline in working hours, with an additional 9.5% of total women employment working in medium risk services sectors, which means that almost half of all working women were at work-related risk due to the COVID-19 crisis. For men, 36.6% were at high risk sectors, and only 3.8% were at medium risk ones, with a total of 40.4% facing some sort of risk. High risk sectors include accommodation and food services, retail, real estate, business and administrative activities, and manufacturing, while medium risk ones include other services.^{vi}

Preliminary estimates of global unemployment in 2020 show that women unemployment increased, compared to 2019, twice as much as men unemployment, with an 0.038 percentage point increase for female unemployment, versus an 0.017 percentage point increase for men.^{vii} The gap varies from one country to another, for example in Japan and South Korea women employment fell by more than twice compared to the fall in men employment in the second quarter of 2020, while in the United states the fall was of -16.6% for women and -13.4% for men.^{viii}

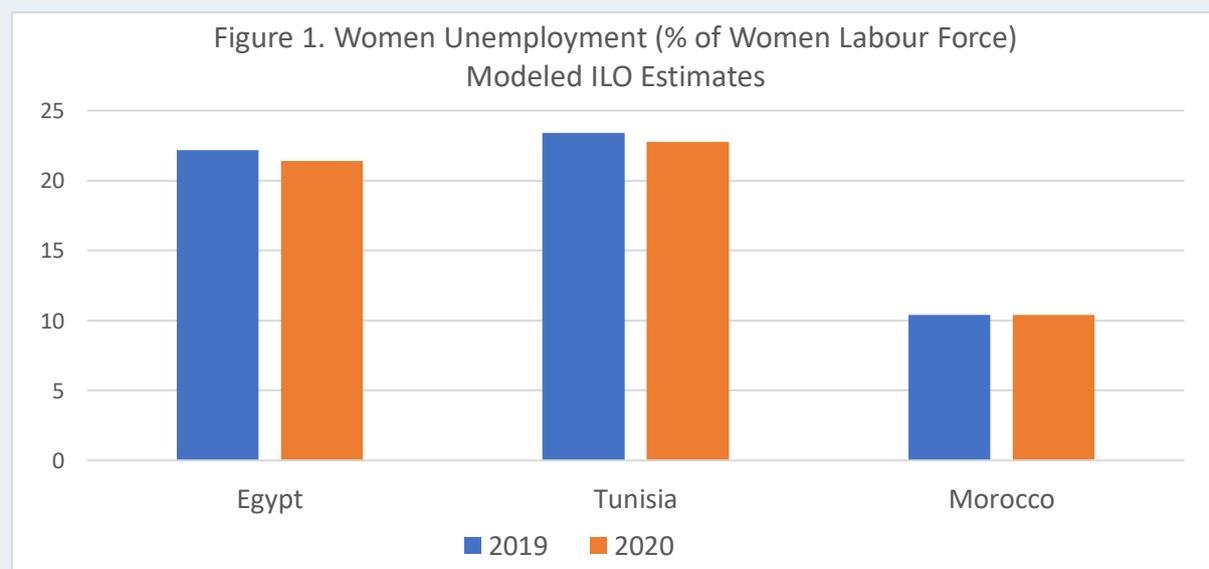
This gap in women and men employment demonstrates a uniqueness of the COVID-19 recession. Past recessions usually affected men employment more than women's as men tend to be concentrated in industries that are closely tied to economic cycles, including construction and manufacturing, while women work in sectors less affected by such cycles.^{ix}

The effect on women employment in the current crisis stems from how the lockdown measures, which are unprecedented in past recessions, have influenced women through various channels. One major reason is that the sectors most hit by the lockdowns, such as hospitality and retail, employ more women than men. In addition, the closure of childcare centers and schools during the lockdowns have forced more women to cut their working hours or to stop working altogether to take care of their children, a burden not shared equally with men.^x Furthermore, as people stayed home during the lockdowns, almost 72% of all domestic workers worldwide, who are predominantly women, lost their jobs, adding millions of women unemployed.^{xi}

The way the current recession is specifically affecting women employment, is not only problematic during the recession period itself, as its consequences will not quickly subside as the recovery begins. There is solid evidence that losing employment during recessions tends to have a lasting effect on future earnings, meaning that the gender pay gap might widen for years after the current crisis has ended, which will reverse the gains in gender equality in employment and pay that were obtained in recent years.^{xii}

2. Impact of COVID-19 on Women Employment in the South Mediterranean: Disproportionate Repercussions not Reflected in Unemployment Data

For the southern Mediterranean countries of interest to this brief, namely Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, preliminary estimates might show an opposite trend for women unemployment, compared to the global trend of 2020. As figure 1 demonstrates, estimates highlight a fall in women unemployment in Egypt and Tunisia in 2020, compared to 2019, while it remained almost constant in Morocco during the last two years. Such data could be perceived as an indication that the COVID-19 recession might not have affected women employment in the region negatively as it has done in the rest of the world.



Source: World Bank Data 2020. (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=EG-TN-MA>)

However, a closer look into disaggregated national data, actually shows that the COVID-19 recession has had a severe negative impact on women employment in the region, which in some cases exacerbated worrying trends that have been in place for years before the pandemic. It is estimated that 29% of total working women in these Mediterranean countries are in sectors of high risk of COVID-19 impact, with an additional 6.5% working in other medium risk services.^{xiii} The impact on these sectors was reflected in the women labour force, which has shrunk in the three countries as a result of the COVID-19 recession. **A large number of women stopped looking for jobs altogether, which automatically excluded them from the unemployment rate, that artificially appeared to decline or stagnate**, even though the number of working women severely declined. Such decline in women participation in the labour force is a further step backwards for the region, where women participation was already far behind the global average of 47.1% in 2019^{xiv} in the pre-pandemic period.

Egypt

In Egypt, national official data shows a fall of women unemployment from 21.6% at the end of 2019, to only 16.2% during the peak lockdown in the second quarter of 2020. However, in absolute terms, the number of working women has declined from 4 million by the end of 2019 to 3.3 million women in the second quarter, which represents a loss of 700 thousand women jobs, 35% of all lost jobs during this period, despite women occupying only 15.3% of all jobs prior to the pandemic. Such disproportional loss of employment is not justified by the concentration of women in most hit sectors. The three sectors that lost the majority of jobs during the second quarter, namely retail, manufacturing, and food and hospitality^{xv}, employ 21.2% of all working women in Egypt, compared to 31.3% of all working men.^{xvi} **This implies that layoffs might have specifically targeted women, and/or that more women have chosen not to work, for reasons that might include rising irregularity/informality of work, a decline of earnings, and caring for children as childcare centers and schools had to close during the lockdown.**

By the end of the third quarter of 2020 and due to easing restrictions, the Egyptian labour market had recovered all the lost jobs during the lockdown. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of women jobs were still lost, and additional hundreds of thousands still failed to rejoin the labour force. The number of working women increased only to 3.8 million women, 200 thousand less than the pre-pandemic level. Furthermore, the total number of women active in the labour force has declined from 5.1 million by the end of 2019, to 4.5 million in the third quarter. Such decline brings down the women labour force participation rate to a mere 15%,¹ the lowest rate in decades.^{xvii}

The shrinkage of the women labour force during the COVID-19 recession is a continuation of a trend that started with the economic reform program that Egypt adopted from the end of

¹Assuming the number of working age women is 30 million by the third quarter of 2020, which is an increase by almost 400 thousand women from the latest data available at the end of 2019. This assumed increase is roughly equal to the average annual increase in the number of working age women in the last 5 years in Egypt, according to the Egyptian Central Bank data.

2016 to 2019 with the International Monetary Fund, and launched its second phase from mid-2020 to mid-2021. The program was praised for bringing down women unemployment from 24.3% in 2016 to 21.6% in 2019. However, during the same period, the number of working women declined from 5.3 to 4 million, with the total number of women in the labour force falling sharply from 7 million in 2016, to 5.1 million in 2019, and the women labour force participation rate from 24.2% in 2016, to 17.2% in 2019.^{xviii}

The main suggested reason for such trend, is that public sector employment has unprecedentedly declined during the program years, by 800 thousand jobs, a 13% decline, in just the first year of the program,^{xix} the only year where data is available. Public employment is favored by women in Egypt and the wider Mediterranean region for reasons related to security and quality of work environment; in the mid-1980s, 80% of educated female workers in Egypt obtained a public job as their first job, a proportion that has steadily declined to almost 40% for recent pre-reform figures, mainly since less public jobs became available, with similar trajectories in most of the region's countries.^{xx} Simultaneously during the recent reform years, informal private employment has increased as an alternative, from 51%^{xxi} to 55%^{xxii} of all employment, which is however largely avoided by women in Egypt as it lacks social and legal protection, and entails conditions that are deemed unacceptable by women and their families, especially after marriage.^{xxiii} As for private-sector formal jobs, they are also not an attractive alternative for women, especially married ones, due to high levels of gender inequality in wages, lack of job security, and long working hours.^{xxiv} Furthermore, at the supply side, 75% of all new jobs created in Egypt during the program's year were in the construction sector alone,^{xxv} which is dominated by male labour at 99.1% of its employees.^{xxvi}

Morocco

In Morocco, working women were also hit harder than men. The Moroccan economy lost 581 thousand jobs between the third quarter of 2019, and that of 2020, which concentrated in sectors where larger shares of women than men work. More than half of all lost jobs were in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors,^{xxvii} which employ almost two thirds of working women in Morocco, compared to 40% of working men. Meanwhile, the construction sector, which employs 13.3% of working men, and 0.5% of working women,^{xxviii} created more jobs during this period.

This gap was not properly reflected in unemployment data. Official national data shows that women unemployment increased between the beginning of 2020 and the end of the third quarter by 2.3 percentage points, while men unemployment increased more by 2.9 percentage points.^{xxix} However, **labour force participation rates show that the COVID-19 recession has caused a larger share of women to altogether drop out of the labour force during the first three quarters of 2020.**^{xxx}

While men labour force participation rate declined during the first three quarters by only 0.6 percentage points, the labour force participation rate of women shrank during the same

period by 4.3 percentage points, to a mere 17.8% which is the lowest rate registered in decades by a large margin.^{xxxvi}

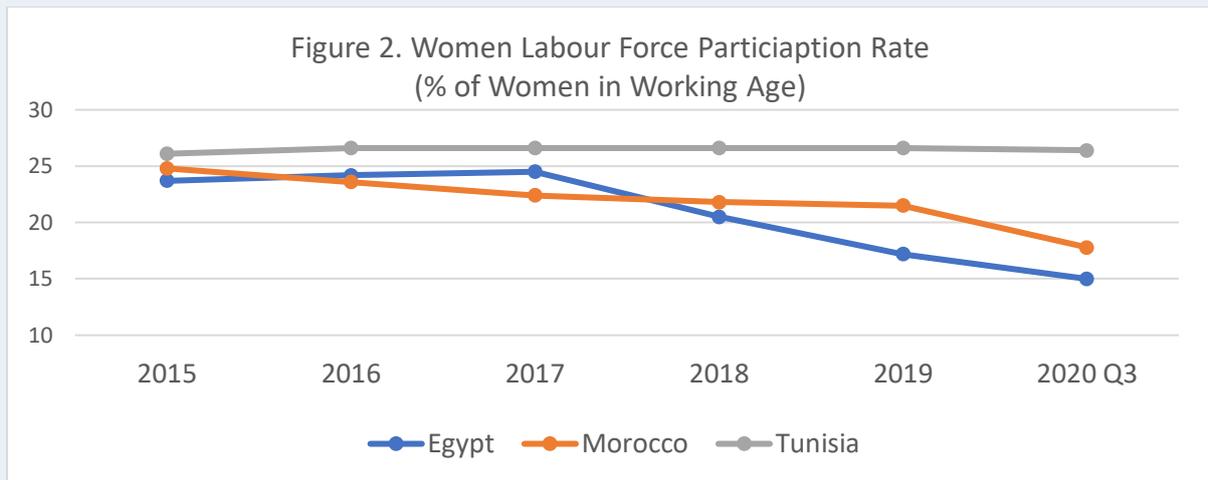
In Morocco, as the case in Egypt, such decline in an already low women labour force participation rate has been persistent for years, long before the COVID-19 recession, but was happening at a slower pace. Morocco, which by the late 1990s has been deemed as a leading successful Mediterranean example in the feminization of the labour force,^{xxxvii} has since then witnessed its women labour force participation rate fall from 30.4% in 1999 to 21.5% in 2019, though it still remains higher than in Egypt.^{xxxviii} Explanations involve several factors that, as in Egypt, include a preference towards public sector jobs that are declining, rising informality with unacceptable work conditions, increased family responsibilities,^{xxxix} and skills-jobs mismatches, especially at higher levels of education.^{xl}

Tunisia

In Tunisia, working women were also more affected than men. Most job losses occurred during the second quarter of 2020, during peak lockdown measures, before the labour market started recovering in the third quarter. The Tunisian economy lost 162 thousand jobs in the second quarter, compared to the beginning of 2020. Women jobs constituted 37.5% of lost jobs in the second quarter, despite the fact that women occupied only 26.7% of all jobs in Tunisia at the beginning of 2020.^{xli} Total loss of jobs is almost evenly distributed on services (especially hotels and restaurants, telecommunications and transport, and retail), manufacturing,^{xlii} which employs 43% of all working women,^{xliii} and construction, which is male dominated.

However, unlike Egypt and Morocco, the COVID-19 recession did not result in a significant shrinkage of women labour force, which remained almost unchanged from its constant level for the past six years, at nearly 26.6%, as figure 2 shows.^{xliiii} The impact of the recession was instead reflected in an increase by 3.7 percentage points in the women unemployment rate in the second quarter of 2020, compared to the beginning of 2020. The labour market recovered in the third quarter, bringing down the total increase in women unemployment to 1.1 percentage points.^{xliiii}

Despite the fact that the women labour force participation rate in Tunisia has not been falling significantly, during the COVID-19 recession, or even during the last few years, this rate is still relatively low and well below the global average. The reasons are nearly the same in Tunisia as in Egypt, Morocco, and most Mediterranean countries. Women tend to work in public sector jobs that are increasingly declining, while the formal private sector is not providing adequate conditions in terms of working hours, benefits, and protection, especially in case of marriage and rising domestic work burden; simultaneously, the growing informal employment is deemed mostly unacceptable for a majority of women, as its characteristics are below what could be referred to as reservation working conditions.^{xliiii}



Source: Egypt – Calculated from data from multiple publications of the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) and the monthly statistical bulletin of the Central Bank of Egypt.

Morocco – High Commission for Planning (HCP)

Tunisia – calculated from data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS)

Note: For Tunisia, the Q3 2020 rate was calculated after estimating the missing women working-age population, through exponential smoothing, and using available quarterly data from Q1 2015 to Q4 2019.

3. Recommendations: What Policies to Boost Women Employment in the Mediterranean ?

Low levels of women employment and labour force participation in the South Mediterranean is not only an issue of equality and upholding values. It also has serious economic implications that are witnessed all over the region, which hold back the economic prospects of its countries. Low levels of women employment contribute to higher population growth rates, as working women tend to have lower fertility rates, since they tend to marry later and have fewer children in order to pursue their careers.^{xlii} Falling women employment and participation in the labour force have already contributed to the rise in the fertility rate in Mediterranean countries in the 2000s, especially in Egypt,^{xliii} after it had declined for decades. Boosting women employment is also associated with higher competition in the labour market which enhances productivity.^{xliv} It brings higher aggregate saving rates^{xlv} and more investment in children's nutrition, education, and health, especially for girls,^{xlvi} which in turn improves human capital and contributes to economic growth.

Thus, increasing women employment and labour force participation in the region should be a top policy priority, both for achieving equality as a value, but also because it brings economic benefits. To achieve this, governments in the region should address, on the short run, the impact of the COVID-19 recession on women employment, while also formulating policies to address the long falling or stagnant women employment and labour force participation in the region.

Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, have dedicated some relief measures to vulnerable groups during the pandemic, including for example informal labour which is men-dominated, but have not recognized working women in specific as more affected by the recession even though they deserve targeted measures. Thus, on the short run, **governments in the region should introduce relief packages, including cash transfers, emergency unemployment**

benefits, and child benefits for women who lost their jobs or had their income fall during the current recession.^{xlvii} Examples of countries that introduced such packages include India, which announced emergency cash transfers to targeted vulnerable women, that benefited from past programs as a part of its national COVID-19 relief package^{xlviii}. Other countries have collaborated with the United Nations Women to provide similar measures, as in Lebanon and Senegal.^{xlix} Such measures might have not been sufficient in these countries, but they represent a step forward in recognizing the unequal impact of the crisis on women, which is still lacking worldwide. There should also be targeted support for businesses that have women as a large share of their employees, and for small and micro businesses that are women-owned, in the form of tax breaks or subsidies and loans, to prevent more women layoffs, that seem to be higher in the region than what is suggested. An example for stimulus packages dedicated to women-owned businesses is the Bangladeshi government support to women entrepreneurs, who received 5% of the total stimulus package allocated to cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises (CMSMEs). This initiative might be deemed insufficient as well, nevertheless, it is encouraging for governments to start targeting women entrepreneurs in specific, to minimize the burden of the crisis on them.^l

Governments in the region should also dedicate more efforts to decreasing women's burden of childcare to free more women supply in the labour force. This is both a short and long-term policy that is related to the impact of the pandemic's lockdown, and long beyond it. Governments should guarantee the availability of affordable childcare centers and services for all women to help them reconcile work and family responsibilities, and encourage them to join the labour force. There is an obvious shortage in pre-school childcare centers in the countries of interest. In Egypt, official data show that there are only 14 thousand authorized daycare centers for children at the age of 0-4 years old,^{li} these centers have the capacity to serve only 8% of all children at this age group, who exceed 12 million child^{lii}. In Tunisia as well, only 32.3% of pre-school age children are enrolled in daycare centers,^{liii} while in Morocco, 55% of pre-school children are in enrolled in the available centers.^{liv} Therefore, boosting the availability, quality and affordability of child care services could help increasing the supply of women labour in the region.

As for long run policies, that aim to increase the chronic low women employment and labour force participation in the region, which was mainly affected by falling public employment, **governments should seek to increase the attractiveness of the private sector to women**, by offering them fair remuneration and more attractive conditions, to avoid having to rebuild a bloated public sector in order to boost women employment. An example of relevant and recent successful reform in the region, is the introduction of maternity insurance scheme in Jordan during the past decade, which gave insured women in the private sector the right to a paid maternity leave of 100% of their earnings for 10 weeks, and is financed through an 0.75% payroll contribution by the employer, paid on behalf of **both** male and female employees, so that employers will not avoid hiring women due to cost of maternity leaves. This reform is estimated to have contributed to a rise in the number of women of childbearing age working in the formal private sector in Jordan by 30%.^{lv}

Governments in the region should legally increase and monitor minimum wages paid by the private sector, at least, to match that in public employment, or in the case of Egypt introduce minimum wage in the private sector, which exists only in the public sector, with a significant gap in average wages between the two, in favor of public employees. There should also be legal reforms regarding labour rights in the private sector, especially regarding job security, contracts, insurance, encouraging unionization and collective bargaining, and gender discrimination in pay and employment. Governments should also intervene legally to guarantee benefits for women with children in the private sector, including paid leaves, flexible hours, protected part-time work, shorter working days, and health benefits, which are main attractive characteristics for women employment. In fact, legal reforms related to women labour rights should be implemented in both private and public employment in the region. In Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, laws still restrict women's ability to work in some industries, unlike men. Laws also restrict women's ability to work in jobs deemed dangerous in both Egypt and Morocco, and there are also legal restrictions in Egypt on women's ability to work at night in the same way as men.^{lvi} Furthermore, labour laws exclude domestic workers from their scope in some of the region's countries, thus depriving them from legal protection. In addition, laws that prohibit discrimination against women in recruitment, promotion, or payment of wages are combined with very weak sanctions for violation of such articles, which encourages non-compliance, especially in Egypt.^{lvii} Moreover, laws in the three countries do not provide full protection to working mothers; paid leaves are often shorter in the private sector than in the public one, leaves are not covering 100% of earnings, or laws are not completely prohibiting the dismissal of pregnant workers.^{lviii}

In addition to legal reforms, **Mediterranean governments should provide more support to women entrepreneurs, and self-employed women in small and micro businesses, through microfinance schemes**, in order to encourage women employment aside from wage-earning work. Availability of microfinance programmes targeted to women has proven successful in Bangladesh for example, it contributed to an increase in female labour force participation through home-based employment, mainly in livestock and poultry rearing. Greater availability of microfinance, that enabled home-based market-oriented activity in Bangladesh, is considered a main reason why female economic activity was much higher in Bangladesh than in comparable West Bengal.^{lix}

Governments could also boost women employment by enacting quotas in government projects, programs, and public procurement contracts, targeting women-owned business, or ones that employ large share of women in their workforce. Public procurement, which comprises 10 to 15 percent of GDP in developed countries, and as much as 30 to 40 percent of GDP in developing countries, is already being used in several countries worldwide as a tool to boost women economic activity. In the United States for example, the US Small Business Act establishes that small businesses owned and controlled by women should participate in not less than 5 percent of the value of all prime and subcontracts awarded each fiscal year.^{lx} Chile as well has managed to achieve an increase in women's economic participation, in part thanks to its action plan that brought women-owned businesses into

public procurement processes, leading to a surge in the share of women in public procurement to almost 37% in 2016.^{lxi}

On a macro level, there should be more support to sectors that employ larger share of women. Governments should provide more incentives to manufacturing sectors, especially garments and electronics, that usually create more women jobs. Trade openness and encouragement of export-oriented manufacturing could be a powerful tool for this purpose. In addition, more investment in public (non-market) services, especially healthcare and education could as well create more jobs for women, who do occupy larger shares of jobs in these sectors, which would also have significant spillovers on improving human capital.^{lxii}

Supporting market services sectors as well could be a significant step forward to help women employment south the Mediterranean, since such sectors are proving to be attractive and accessible to working women. Services sectors already employ more than 50% of all working women in Egypt, Tunisia, and all southern Mediterranean countries, except for Morocco, where a larger share of working women are still in agriculture, they also employ a significantly larger share of working women than working men in the region. However, in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and in most southern Mediterranean countries, there is still a room for growth in services, especially since the majority of services employment and value added is concentrated in low productivity services, mainly tourism, while high productivity services, including ICT, financial, and professional services are lagging behind. Governments in the region could help boosting services sectors, especially high productivity ones, to encourage women employment and boost economic growth, by liberalizing the heavily restricted services sectors and trade in the region, increasing investments in ICT infrastructure, committing to institutional reforms, providing incentives for companies in the targeted sectors, and investing in high-skills education and training.^{lxiii}

There should also be more focus on reforming business environments in the region, to facilitate establishing and running businesses, simplify taxing procedures, and fight corruption, in order to encourage more formalization of the private sector, which could boost women employment in the private sector, as they tend to avoid private informal employment.

Furthermore, governments in the region should be more active in guaranteeing the safety of women in workplace, transport, and public spaces. There should be more investment in public transport, CCTV, well-lit streets, and women police, in order to provide easier and safer movement for women to workplaces. Such investments in safety and mobility of women, through increasing surfaced road lengths, bus frequency, and street lighting, were found to have created a difference between Indian states for example, in female labour force participation; similar investments were also found influential in Bangladesh in boosting women's access to employment.^{lxiv} This is especially true for rural women. They are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, violence, and other obstacles when reaching the workplace. Offering rural women access to credit and investment possibilities through an improvement of connectivity and public transportation would also help close the gap between urban and rural women. Lastly, there should also be more protection, both de jure and de facto, for women in the workplace against harassment and exploitation.^{lxv}

All in all, national strategies need to create conditions that allow women to fulfill their potential in all sectors of the economy, society and in the sphere of politics. A holistic vision is key.

4. Regional Cooperation: Potential Axes to Empower Women and Reduce Gender Inequalities

Cooperation will be a key factor for development in post-Covid societies, including in going towards gender equality.

As Mediterranean countries share similar conditions with regards to women employment, it will be useful to encourage regional dialogue on best practices on how to tackle the different challenges. These include providing support and raising awareness with regards to existing regional women networks and initiatives, and encouraging governments to listen to their recommendations and insights.

Secondly, **the potentialities of the digital sector are considerable and exponentially rising since the pandemic**. Yet, despite a growing demand for digital specialists worldwide, few women follow studies for a career in the digital sector . At the same time, in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and in fact most of the countries south the Mediterranean and in the broader Middle East, women are doing well in studies related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Women represent more than half of all STEM students in most of the region's countries, and in most of STEMs's specialities, outperforming males in the region, and far ahead women in the United States and most of Europe, who represent smaller percentage of STEM students in their countries. For example, Tunisian Women represent almost 75% of all university graduates in fields of natural science, maths, statistics, health and welfare, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and veterinary, and 55% of graduates in information and communication technology, and are only less than 50% of all graduates in engineering, manufacturing, and construction.^{lxvi} However, despite such gains in women education in the region, there is a significant gap in women employment in STEM fields in the region, reflected in less women than men working in these fields, as many of the women STEM graduates end up outside of the labour force altogether.^{lxvii} Thus, cooperation among countries of the region to encourage women to engage in digital jobs and job market training can be an element of evening-out the economic opportunities accessible to women and raising their employability, and utilizing their potentials and skills in modern high-demand fields.

Thirdly, **there is potential for regional cooperation to allow strengthening the collaborative (or sharing) economy** which is also linked to going-digital^{lxviii}. This type of economy refers to business models that create an open marketplace for access to goods and services thanks to the use of modern technology. It covers a variety of sectors and provides new opportunities for nationals who are able to get what they need from each other instead of going to large organizations/businesses, which is particularly useful in a post-COVID era. Sharing and digital economic activities and mediums could be good solutions to overcome different challenges (practical and socio-cultural) faced by women in

the Mediterranean. A regional dialogue on collaborative economy and social entrepreneurship best-practices for women empowerment could be extremely helpful. However, such solutions are not in themselves a panacea; governments should still work hard towards achieving high rates of female labour force participation regardless of how popular digitalization and/or sharing economy in their country is.

Fourthly, another area for regional cooperation revolves around sharing and collecting appropriate **data on the status of women**. The lack of data on gender issues impedes on the creation of adequate policies. Improving policy-making with regards to gender issues requires being able to quantify the impact of programs and monitoring them. Public-private partnerships are essential in the region to enable efficient data collection and the creation of reliable databases and indicators that facilitate the understanding of the needs of women in the region.^{lxix}

Notes

i International Labour Organization (2020), 'ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. Sixth Edition – Updated Estimates and Analysis'.

ii World Bank (2020), 'Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune'.

iii International Labour Organization (2020), 'Impact of Lockdown Measures on the Informal Economy', ILO Brief.

iv Adams-Prassi, A. & Boneva, T. & Golin, M. & Rauh, C. (2020), 'Inequality in the Impact of Coronavirus Shock: Evidence from Real Time Surveys', Journal of Public Economics.

v Fasih, T. & Patrinos, H. & Shafiq, M. (2020), 'The Impact of Covid-19 on Labor Market Outcomes: Lessons from Past Economic Crises', World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/impact-covid-19-labor-market-outcomes-lessons-past-economic-crises>

vi International Labour Organization (2020), 'Policy Brief: A Gender-Responsive Employment Recovery: Building Back Fairer', ILO Brief.

vii World Bank (2020), 'World Bank Open Data'. <https://data.worldbank.org/>

viii International Labour Organization (2020), 'Policy Brief', Op. Cit.

ix International Labour Organization (2020), 'The COVID-19 Response: Getting Gender Equality Right for A Better Future for Women at Work', ILO Brief.

x Alon, T. & Doepke, M. & Olmstead-Rumsey, J. & Tertilt, M. (2020), 'This Time It's Different: The Role of Women's Employment in A Pandemic Recession', NBER Working Paper Series, Working Paper 27660.

xi UN Women (2020), 'From Insights to Action: Gender Equality in The Wake of COVID-19', COVID-19 Response.

xii Davis, S. & Wachter, T. (2020), 'Recessions and the Costs of Job Loss'. Brookings Papers on Economic Activity.

xiii International Labour Organization (2020), 'Policy Brief', Op. Cit.

xiv World Bank (2020), 'World Bank Open Data'.

xv Calculated from: CAPMAS (2020) 'Quarterly Labour Force Bulletin Q2 2020', and CAPMAS (2020), 'Annual Labour Force Bulletin 2019'.

xvi CAPMAS (2020), 'Statistical Glance 2020 – Labour'.

xvii Calculated from: CAPMAS (2020), 'Quarterly Labour Force Bulletin Q3 2020', and CAPMAS (2020) 'Annual Labour Force Bulletin 2019'.

xviii Calculated From: CAPMAS, 'Annual Statistical Book' (Years 2016 to 2019), CAPMAS (2020), 'Annual Labour Force Bulletin 2019', and Central Bank of Egypt (2020), 'Monthly Statistical Bulletin, October 2020'.

xix CAPMAS (2019), 'Annual Statistical Book 2019 – Labour'.

xx Assaad, R. & HENDY, R. & Lassassi, M. & Yassin, S. (2020), 'Explaining the MENA Paradox: Rising Educational Attainment Yet Stagnant Female Labor Force Participation', Demographic Research, Vo. 43, Article 28, pp. 817-850.

xxi CAPMAS (2017), 'Annual Labour Force Bulletin 2016'.

xxii CAPMAS (2020), 'Press Release on the Occasion of International Labour Day'.

-
- xxiii Assaad, R. (2017), 'Why is Female Labour-Force Participation So Stagnant in Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia Despite Rapid Increases in Educational Attainment?', Female Employment & Dynamics of Inequality Research Network, Country Briefing Paper No: 06.17.5.
- xxiv Kaber, N. & Deshpande, A. & Assaad, R. (2020), 'Women's Access to Market Opportunities in South Asia and The Middle East & North Africa', LSE Middle East Centre.
- xxv Calculated From: CAPMAS, 'Annual Statistical Book' (Years 2016 to 2019), and CAPMAS (2020), 'Statistical Glance 2020 – Labour'.
- xxvi CAPMAS (2020), 'Statistical Glance 2020 – Labour'.
- xxvii High Commission for Planning (2020), 'The Labour Market Situation in The Third Quarter of 2020', Information Notes.
- xxviii High Commission of Planning (2020), 'Annual Statistical Bulletin of Morocco 2019'.
- xxix High Commission for Planning (2020), 'Indicators – Unemployment'.
https://www.hcp.ma/Taux-de-Chomage-selon-le-sexe_a256.html
- xxx High Commission for Planning (2020), 'Indicators – Activity Rate'.
https://www.hcp.ma/Taux-d-activite-selon-le-sexe_a360.html
- xxxi Ibid.
- xxxii Assaad, R. (2004), 'Why Did Economic Liberalization Lead to Feminization of The Labor Force in Morocco and De-Feminization in Egypt?', The Center of Arab Women Training and Research.
- xxxiii High Commission for Planning (2020), 'Indicators – Activity Rate'.
- xxxiv Morikawa, Y. (2015), 'The Opportunities and Challenges for Female Labor Force Participation in Morocco', Brookings Global Economy & Development, Working Paper 86.
- xxxv Verme, P. & Barry, A. & Guennouni, J. (2016), 'Female Labor Participation in The Arab World: Evidence from Panel Data in Morocco', LABOUR, 30 (30) 258-282.
- xxxvi National Institute of Statistics (2020), 'Indicateurs de l'emploi et du chômage du deuxième trimestre 2020: Impact de la pandémie du Covid-19 sur le marché de l'emploi Tunisien', Press Release.
- xxxvii Ibid.
- xxxviii Moghadam, M. (2018), 'Gender Inequality and Economic Inclusion in Tunisia: Key Policy Issues', Baker Institute for Public Policy, Issue Brief.
- xxxix National Institute of Statistics (2020), 'Indicators – Active Population'.
<http://www.ins.tn/en/themes/emploi>
- xl National Institute of Statistics (2020), 'Indicators – Unemployment'.
<http://www.ins.tn/en/themes/emploi>
- xli Assaad, R. (2017), Op. Cit.
- xlvi Behrman, J. & Gonalons-Pons, P. (2020), 'Women's Employment and Fertility in a Global Perspective (1960-2015)', Demographic Research, Vol. 43.
- xlvi Krafft, C. (2020), 'Why is Fertility on The Rise in Egypt? The Role of Women's Employment Opportunities', Journal of Population Economics, 33:1173-1218.
- xliv Klasen, S. & Lamanna, F. (2009), 'The Impact of Gender Inequality in Education and Employment on Economic Growth: New Evidence for A Panel of Countries', Feminist Economics, 15 (3).
- xlvi Seguino, S. & Floro, M. (2003), 'Does Gender Have any Effect on Aggregate Saving? An Empirical Analysis', International Review of Applied Economics.
- xlvi Klasen, S. & Lamanna, F., Op. Cit.
- xlvi UN Women (2020), 'COVID-19 and It's Economic Toll on Women: The Story Behind The Numbers'.
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women>
- xlvi Tankha, R. (2020), 'Voices from the Field: Impact of Covid-19 on Women and Their Collectives in India', IWWAGE.
- xlvi UN Women (2020), 'UN Women Response to Covid-19', In Brief.
<https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/brief-un-womens-response-to-covid-19-en.pdf?la=en&vs=4846>
- l Khatun, F. (2020), 'Women's Access to Stimulus Packages and post Covid-19 Gender Equality', Center for Policy Dialogue.
<https://cpd.org.bd/womens-access-to-stimulus-packages-and-post-covid-19-gender-equality-fahmida-khatun/>
- li Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity (2020), "Supporting Equal Opportunities in Education".
<https://www.moss.gov.eg/ar-eg/Pages/news-details.aspx?nid=2035>
- lii Hisham, A. (2020), "Ministry Plan to grant Temporary Licenses for Unauthorized Childcare Centers", Al-Ahram Newspaper, 27 October 2020.
<http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2520275.aspx>
- liii Tunisian Ministry of Women Family and Children (2020), "Children Institutions".
http://www.femmes.gov.tn/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Fiches-finales_Sandouk_toufoulati-version-AR-1.pdf

Iv Pouparet, I. (2019), 'Developing Early Childhood in Morocco is a Commitment to the Future', World Bank Blogs.
<https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/developing-early-childhood-morocco-commitment-future>

Iv OECD/ILO/CAWTAR (2020), 'Changing Laws and Breaking Barriers for Women's Economic Empowerment in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia', Competitiveness and Private Sector Development, OECD Publishing, Paris.
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-abisjan/---sro-cairo/documents/publication/wcms_760505.pdf

Ivi World Bank (2021), 'Women Business and the Law Database'.
<https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>

Ivii UNDP (2018), 'Egypt: Gender Justice & The Law'.
<file:///C:/Users/SMSUNG/Downloads/Egypt%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English-min.pdf>

Iviii World Bank (2021), Op. Cit.

Iix Kabeer, N. & Deshpande, A. & Assaad, R. Op. Cit.

Ix UN Women (2017), 'The Power of Procurement: How to Source from Women-Owned Businesses. Corporate Guide to Gender-Responsive Procurement'.
<https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2017/the-power-of-procurement-how-to-source-from-women-owned-businesses-en.pdf?la=en&vs=237>

Ixi International Trade Center (2020), 'Making Public Procurement Work for Women'.
https://www.intracen.org/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Publications/ITCGuide%20WOB%20PP_20201106_web.pdf

Ixii Kabeer, N. & Deshpande, A. & Assaad, R. Op. Cit.

Ixiii Suleiman, H. (2021), 'Trade in Services in the Southern Neighbourhood Countries: Potential, Complications, and the Covid-19 Crisis', in Sidlo, K., Mostafa Kamel, E., Suleiman, H. & Van der Loo, G. (forthcoming). 'Post Covid-19 EU-Southern Neighbourhood Trade Relations'. EuroMeSCo Joint Study.

Ixiv Kabeer, N. & Deshpande, A. & Assaad, R. Op. Cit.

Ixv Ibid.

Ixvi Islam, S. (2019), 'Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM): Liberating Women in the Middle East', World Journal of Education.

Ixvii Ommundse, K. & Kteily, K. (2018), 'How Women are Transforming the Arab World's Start-Up Scene', World Economic Forum.
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/start-up-middle-east-arab-women-transforming-entrepreneurship/>

Ixviii Sidlo, K. (2018), 'Boosting female labour market participation rates in the MENA region : Can collaborative economy be of help?', FEMISE Med Brief no8, May.

Ixix Tsakas C. & Moukaddem K. (2020), 'Les femmes peuvent être la clé du développement durable au Moyen-Orient et en Afrique du Nord', TheConversation, January 24th.

FEMISE
CMCI
2, rue Henri Barbusse
13241 Marseille Cedex 01
Téléphone : (33) 04 91 31 51 95
Fax : (33) 04 91 31 50 38
www.femise.org
Twitter: @femisenetwork

**Center for Mediterranean
Integration (CMI)**
2bis Boulevard Euroméditerranée
Quai d'Arenc, 13002
Marseille
Téléphone : (33) 04 91 99 24 89
www.cmimarseille.org
Twitter: @cmimarseille

This Policy Brief is produced as part of the series of Policy Briefs on « Responding to the Challenges of COVID-19 in the Mediterranean » that is undertaken in partnership between FEMISE and the Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI).

The views expressed in this Brief are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of CMI or FEMISE. The contents have not been subjected to verification by CMI or FEMISE and their publication does not reflect ownership by CMI or FEMISE.