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ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY & CITIZENSHIP
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة

CARE WORK IN THE MENA REGION: GLOBAL TRENDS, REGIONAL DYNAMICS, & POLICY INSIGHTS

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1 We acknowledge that order of authorship is a publishing norm that often denies acknowledgment of the vast labor (past and present) that generates knowledge. It is a norm that we continue to challenge and engage with while being acutely mindful that it is critical for career advancement, especially for early career scholars and researchers. Thus, for this paper, the authors are listed in alphabetical order.

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INTRODUCTION

Women globally undertake most unpaid care work, totaling roughly 76% of total hours of unpaid care work, impacting their economic opportunities, political participation, as well as overall well-being[2]. This gendered division of labor is exacerbated by poverty, social norms, and intersecting marginalizations, leading to time poverty and limited access to quality paid work.

The undervaluation of paid and unpaid care work reflects broader societal inequalities and contributes to income and leadership gaps. The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other environmental crises like earthquakes, economic recessions, political uprisings, and structural adjustment programs that rest on neoliberal policies disincentivizing social sectors like education, healthcare, and social protection[3] have intensified such challenges.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, gender inequalities are stark. One example is the gender gap in labor force participation, especially when it comes to the distribution of unpaid care work, where women, mainly married women, shoulder most of the burden.

Women in the region also face barriers to accessing paid employment amid the rise of unemployment rates. Gender-discriminatory laws, patriarchal norms, traditional gender roles and norms, and limited access to social protection exacerbate these challenges, leading the region to have one of the lowest female labor force participation (FLFP) rates in the world (20.4% compared to a global average of 53.4%)[4]. Despite some progress and rising feminist movements, structural inequalities continue to hinder gender equality in the region.

These aforementioned challenges highlight the urgent need for policy interventions and grassroots movements that advocate for fairer labor conditions and acknowledge the role of care work in society and the economy.

This report explores the dynamics of paid and unpaid care work in the MENA region. It begins by examining global trends and current international perspectives on paid and unpaid care work. The focus then shifts to the MENA region, highlighting regional similarities, differences, and issues related to care work. It dives into specific countries in the region to analyze public policies and policymaking approaches regarding care work, situating these within broader national and regional contexts.

For the purposes of this report, the following definitions have been adopted:

- Unpaid work: work not compensated by a wage, the vast majority of which – or 80% – comprises domestic chores[5].
- Care work: care of people, housework, and forms of voluntary and involuntary work that serve the greater community recognizing the coerced and violent nature of many such roles[6].
- Unpaid care work: all unpaid activities that provide services to address the basic physical and emotional needs of a person[7].

2 Addati, L., Cattaneo, U., Esquivel, V., & Valarino, I. (2024). Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work. International Labour Organization.
3 Antrobus, P. (1993). Structural adjustment: Cure or curse?. Gender & Development.
4 World Bank (2022). Gender Data Portal.
5 Alonso, C. (2019). Reducing and redistributing unpaid work: Stronger policies to support gender equality. International Monetary Fund.
6 Abou-Habib, L. (2020). Feminist perspectives on care work in the MENA region. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
7 Berger, E. (2022). Caring about care: How to address gender inequality in unpaid care work? The European Student Think Tank.

THE GLOBAL STATE OF AFFAIRS

Globally, women undertake roughly three times as much unpaid and domestic work as men[8]. Specifically, women are estimated to be responsible for approximately 72% of unpaid care work within households[9], about 75% of related unpaid work[10], and two-thirds of the paid care workforce[11]. These gender inequalities are exacerbated in contexts of poverty and intersecting marginalizations[12], in which unpaid care work responsibilities become more pronounced and public and private services are insufficient, such as comprehensive social protection programs or private care schemes.

The disproportionate allocation of time to unpaid work significantly contributes to global income and leadership gaps across industries[13]. While it is a key indicator of gender inequality, time alone does not capture the full extent of the issue. The volume and nature of unpaid care work also play critical roles in shaping time poverty and broader inequalities[14].

Research notes that unfair distributions of unpaid domestic work exclude women from being involved in paid work[15], quality and sustainable paid work and income[16], political participation, education[17], leadership positions, and self-care. Gendered distributions of unpaid care work also have important implications – relatedly but also independently of the above factors – on children's and girls' well-being[18].

Policymaking

The lack of recognition for care work often creates a lose-lose situation, particularly because excluding women from formal employment and unaccounted economic growth not only diminishes state tax revenues but also reduces state resources, which impacts public service delivery and the realization of rights[19]. Factors such as maternal health, fertility, childcare policies, and availability of labor-saving consumer goods are important in shaping women's participation in the labor market[20].

The current relevant policies and programs across the world rarely address unpaid care work[21]. On the contrary, neoliberal tendencies in the global political economy have seen countries increasing taxation on the poorest communities, reducing public spending, and disregarding social programs as well as inequalities[22]. Particular

8 UN Women Lebanon. (2022). The time to act for economic reforms is now – and gender equality is smart economics. Daraj Media.
9 Oxfam. (n.d). Valuing all women's work: Challenging the global inequalities that push people into poverty.
10 ActionAid. (2024). Unpaid care and domestic work.
11 Oxfam. (n.d.). Not all gaps are created equal: The true value of care work.
12 Coffey et al. (2020). Time to care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis. Oxfam International.
13 Asi, Y. & Williams, C. (2020). A woman's (unpaid) work: Global perspectives on gender, healthcare, and caregiving, in B.A. Fiedler (ed.) Three Facets of Public Health and Paths to Improvements. Academic Press, pp. 261–294.
14 Charmes, J. (2022). Variety and change of patterns in the gender balance between unpaid care-work, paid work and free time across the world and over time: A measure of wellbeing?', Wellbeing, Space and Society, 3, p. 100081.
15 Rodriguez, L. (2022). 6 facts you should know about the unpaid care work crisis. Global Citizen.
16 Samman, E., Melamed, C., Jones, N., & Bhatkal, T. (2016). Women's work: Mothers, children, and the global childcare crisis. Overseas Development Institute.
17 ActionAid. (2024). Unpaid care and domestic work.
18 UNICEF (2023). Gender norms and unpaid work.
19 The New Arab (2023). Unpaid care work behind Tunisia's 'feminisation' of poverty.
20 Ortiz-Ospina, E., Tzvetkova, S., & Roser, M. (2018). Women's employment. Our World in Data.
21 Da Silva, J. M. (2019). Why you should care about unpaid care work. OECD Development Matters.
22 Coffey et al. (2020). Time to care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis. Oxfam International.

sectors affected by policy-level marginalization include early childhood care and education (ECCE) sectors and social protection[23]. This was also pronounced in countries adopting austerity measures that directly affect social sectors that are a cornerstone for comprehensive social protection[24].

Despite being integral to socioeconomic systems and the ongoing functioning of society, care work is still unrecognized, with its main contributors remaining invisible, overlooked, and undervalued[25],[26]. This unrecognition is often reflected in the general absence of care work from official labor statistics[27]. Moreover, the non-recognition of care work is also attributed to the monetization of economies, categorizing any form of work that does not involve financial transactions as "unproductive,"[28], thus contributing to the understanding of capitalist structures[29].

Informality and Marginalized Groups

One of the significant factors contributing to the unrecognition of care work is that it is usually undertaken in informal settings. Women are disproportionately represented in the informal paid care sector, which is marked by low pay and status, poor working conditions, and limited social protections[30]. This issue may be connected to the broader trend of women being employed in informal settings[31], with variations across different sectors and fields, such as the agriculture field, where unrecognized work can lead to underestimations of gender differences. Many care workers lack sufficient protection, legal status, and the right to collective bargaining and unionization[32].

The status of precariousness and social protection within formal and informal, paid and unpaid care work contexts vary across social groups. Migrant domestic workers, for instance, undertake unpaid care work at home while also performing paid care work under low-income as well as precarious conditions. These paid roles are often in informal settings or involve modern-day slavery-like conditions, such as those imposed by the Kafala (sponsorship) system in some MENA countries[33]. Around eight billion USD, equating to 60% of due wages, is estimated to be stolen from domestic workers in forced labor globally[34]. Around 90% of domestic workers lack access to social protection, with 80% of the estimated 67 million domestic workers worldwide being women[35].

Care workers earn less than those in other sectors, despite being on the front lines of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic[36]. The paid care workforce is largely female, and because paid care work is often inadequately compensated, many workers are forced to take on multiple jobs to support themselves.

Social Norms

Social norms have a significant impact on the division of paid and unpaid care work globally, as discriminatory social institutions and stereotypes about care work usually exclude men from caregiving duties and impose a double burden on women[37]. In the literature, a correlation was found between less discrimination in social institutions and a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities. This shift opens up many opportunities for men to engage more in care work as well as helps address the

23 Samman, E., Melamed, C., Jones, N., & Bhatkal, T. (2016). Women's work: Mothers, children, and the global childcare crisis. Overseas Development Institute.
24 ActionAid (2022). The Care contradiction: The IMF, gender and austerity.
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26 Addati et al. (2018). Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work. International Labour Organization.
27 Ortiz-Ospina, E., Tzvetkova, S., & Roser, M. (2018). Women's employment. Our World in Data.
28 Berger, E. (2022). Caring about care: How to address gender inequality in unpaid care work?. The European Student Think Tank.
29 Antonopoulos, R. (2009). The unpaid care work - paid work connection. International Labour Organization.
30 International Labour Organization (2017). The gender gap in employment: What's holding women back?.
31 Ortiz-Ospina, E., Tzvetkova, S., & Roser, M. (2018). Women's employment. Our World in Data.
32 Gardner et al. (2022). Engendering informality statistics: gaps and opportunities. International Labour Organization
33 Abou-Habib, L. (2020). Feminist Perspectives on care work in the MENA region. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
34 de Cock, M. & Woode, M. (2014). Profits and poverty: the economics of forced labour'. International Labour Office.
35 Durán-Valverde, F., & Ortiz-Vindas, J. F. (2016). Social protection for domestic workers: Key policy trends and statistics. International Labour Office.
36 Stefanović, A. F. (2023). Caring in times of COVID-19: A global study on the impact of the pandemic on care work and gender equality. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.
37 Promundo (2018). Getting men to care: Social norms and men's participation in unpaid care work.

disproportionate workloads[38]. These norms affect not only the distribution of care work but also the quality of employment for women. Consequently, women often find themselves in informal, low-paid, and vulnerable positions while managing their unpaid domestic responsibilities.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated paid and unpaid care work dynamics across the world and the general inequalities that surround them. The closure of schools and childcare centers, government-imposed lockdowns, and limited access to healthcare services have increased unpaid and paid care work pressures on women and girls[39].

Although women and men both performed increased care work during the COVID-19 pandemic, this increase has been far greater for women[40]. Additionally, women and girls disproportionately took on child-centered, educational, and other caregiving activities within the household[41]. These pressures have had severe consequences on the health, economic security, and well-being of women, with increased reported rates of mental and physical illness amid the pandemic due to increased workloads[42].

Moreover, informal workers with little to no labor and social protections faced risks of falling into extreme poverty as a result of lockdown policies and additional care and domestic workloads. Care responsibilities also affected women's ability to participate in paid work, with women reporting an average of two fewer workdays per week compared to men[43].

Care Crises

The world is faced with a notable care crisis due to numerous factors, including but not limited to population aging, cuts in public spending on education, health, social services and social protection, and climate change[44]. As needs have increased, state support has diminished, leaving populations on the margins of policymaking vulnerable to sociopolitical as well as environmental instabilities.

Crises, such as climate change, are likely to reduce agricultural productivity and impact farmers and informal workers, a large portion of whom are women[45]. These have important implications for the ability to provide care and necessary items, such as food and water for households, as well as activities largely performed by women[46]. Climate change also significantly influences access to water and sanitation facilities in both direct and indirect fashions, such as through high rates of displacement[47].

The concept of the green transition has recently gained momentum in international policymaking as well as at the state level[48]. Addressing environmental issues through climate-friendly policies and discussions is closely tied to addressing inequalities that mainly impact key stakeholders, especially those with experience in environmentally sustainable sectors like agriculture and forest conservation, where women make up a significant portion of the workforce[49].

38 Ferrant, G. et al. (2014). Unpaid care work: The missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes. OECD Development Centre.
39 OECD (2021). Caregiving in crisis: Gender inequality in paid and unpaid work during COVID-19.
40 Rodriguez, L. (2022). 6 facts you should know about the unpaid care work crisis. Global Citizen.
41 Staab et al. (2020). COVID-19 and the care economy: Immediate action and structural transformation for a gender-responsive recovery', UN Women.
42 Bolis, M. et al. (2020). Care in the time of Coronavirus: Why care work needs to be at the centre of a post-COVID-19 feminist future.
43 WIEGO (2022). Long Economic COVID for Informal Workers.
44 Coffey, C. et al. (2020). Time to care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis. Oxfam International.
45 FAO (2023). The status of women in agrifood systems.
46 UN Women (2023). The climate-care nexus: Addressing the linkages between climate change and women's and girls' unpaid care, domestic and communal work.
47 Rocha, J. et al. (2022). Climate change and its impacts on health, environment and economy, One Health, pp. 253–279.
48 Tavares, M. (2022). A just green transition: Concepts and practice so far. United Nations.
49 UN Women (2023). A gender-responsive just transition for people and planet.

Therefore, understanding the relationship between the quality of paid work and unpaid care responsibilities is essential for a more comprehensive view of social dynamics and gender relations. As such, an intersectional lens toward the concept of green transition holistically accompanies a transition toward inclusive economies[50].

Alternative Movements

Globally, many movements have sought to tackle unequal distributions of paid and unpaid care work. Grassroots movements such as Egna Legna in Lebanon are bringing domestic workers together to demand fairer working and living conditions[51], and initiatives such as the South African Domestic Workers Rising campaign to advocate for change, highlight the grassroots and international reach of such demands[52].

Despite government cuts and restricted space for organizational efforts, these movements embody a shared pursuit of justice that is both context-specific and internationally relevant, reflecting similar dynamics of the unequal distribution of care work. Such movements are engendering reactions from governmental actors with notable changes in budgeting, discourse, national approaches, and policymaking.

50 Anderson, S. et al. (2023). Achieving just green economic transitions by improving gender equality. Observer Research Foundation, T20 Policy Briefs.
51 Shukr et al. (2023). Historicizing migrant domestic workers' community organizing and class struggle in Lebanon. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
52 Coffey, C. et al. (2020). Time to care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis. Oxfam International.

THE MENA REGION

The distribution of unpaid care work in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is highly unequal and is regarded as having the widest gender gap in the world[53]. Women, especially married women, take on much of the care responsibilities[54]. They are estimated to spend between 17 and 34 hours per week on unpaid care work, while men spend only 1 to 5 hours. In certain contexts, such as Jordan, this difference results in a striking ratio of 19:1[55]. Other studies estimate that women undertake roughly 4.7 times more unpaid care work than men[56]. When combining paid and unpaid care work, studies indicate that women work longer hours than men in nearly all countries in the region, except Iraq and Qatar[57]. However, it is important to note that such ratios are underestimated given the lack of proper monitoring and official governmental data[58].

Care work is often seen as primarily the responsibility of women, set against a backdrop of pervasive patriarchal structures and institutions that influence both formal and informal dynamics[59]. Factors such as conflict, climate change, and a political economy where around 10% of the population controls considerably more wealth than the poorest, contribute to worsening overall inequalities in the region[60]. MENA countries are still far from meeting targets such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 5.4, which focuses on recognizing and valuing care and domestic work[61].

Legislation and Policymaking

While the majority of countries in the MENA region have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[62], implementation remains weak, and most countries are yet to meet ILO standards when it comes to decent work standards and regulations such as maternity leaves[63]. The ILO Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183) requires a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave, with a recommendation for extending it to at least 18 weeks to ensure sufficient rest and recovery for mothers[64]. Morocco is the only country in the MENA region that has ratified this convention, out of 43 ratifications globally[65]. The average maternity leave in the region is 17 weeks[66]. Since 2011, three countries—Iran, Iraq, and Kuwait—have met or exceeded the 14-week standard, and 12 countries fall short of the minimum, while three (Iran, Kuwait, and Syria) provide 18 weeks or more[67].

53 UN Women (2020). The role of the care economy in promoting gender equality: Progress of women in the Arab States 2020.
54 Assaad, R. et al. (2022). The care economy in the Arab States: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work – brief. UN Women.
55 Krafft, C. et al. (2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's care work and employment in the Middle East and North Africa. Economic Research Forum, Working Papers SWP20225.
56 Husseini, R. (2022). Study gauges value of women's unpaid care work in Jordan. The Jordan Times.
57 UN Women (2015). Fact sheet – Middle East and North Africa, Progress of world's women 2015-2016: Transforming economies, realizing rights.
58 Krafft, C. et al. (2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's care work and employment in the Middle East and North Africa. Economic Research Forum, Working Papers SWP20225.
59 Abou-Habib, L. (2020). Feminist perspectives on care work in the MENA region. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
60 Assouad, L. (2020). Inequality and its discontents in the Middle East. Carnegie Middle East Center.
61 UNSD (2023). SDG Indicator Metadata. United Nations Statistics Division.
62 OHCHR. (n.d.). Arab countries and the state of ratification of CEDAW and OP-CEDAW.
63 Godwin, J. (2019). Gender justice & equality before the law: Analysis of progress and challenges in the Arab States region. UNDP.
64 International Labour Organization (2000). C183 - Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183).
65 International Labour Organization (2024). Ratifications of C183 - Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183).
66 International Labour Organization (2024). Investing in care policies can create millions of jobs in MENA, New International Labour Organization report finds.
67 International Labour Organization (2023). Care at work: Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work.

Paid Care Sectors

Paid care sectors are a central avenue for women's employment, reaching 60% in contexts such as Palestine[68]. Although there has been some progress in paid care services through state-sponsored programs and expansions in the public service sector, these improvements remain insufficient relative to the growing demand[69].

Accessibility to such sectors from a receiving point of view is disproportionately limited to women, especially those from low-income and rural households. Nearly 90% of women from low-income backgrounds report difficulties accessing healthcare, and rural women in Jordan highlight the distance to health facilities as a major barrier[70]. The stigmatization of sexual and reproductive health has also hindered advancements in health systems regarding women's access[71].

The paid care industry remains generally devalued, both from a social and a policy perspective, as they are often linked to less pay and fewer benefits[72]. Recognizing and supporting paid care services through policy and social recognition can help address the deficiencies and empower women, who play a crucial role in this sector.

Labor Force Participation

Unemployment remains a major issue in the region, particularly among youth. As care is considered primarily the responsibility of women, this impacts women's access to job opportunities as well as the overall female labor force participation rate (FLFPR)[73]. The region's FLFPR is estimated to be the lowest in the world according to 2023 data by Arab Barometer[74]. The region is reportedly host to 13 out of the 15 countries with the lowest FLFPR in the world, despite some initiatives to support women's economic participation and empowerment[75].

Factors contributing to women's FLFPR are diverse, including discriminatory laws and policies, limited opportunities in both the private and public sectors, disparities in land ownership, and patriarchal norms[76]. Other factors include disincentives to work in the private sector, limited access to capital and information, limited freedom of association and mobility, and harassment inside and outside the workplace[77].

FLFPR has only increased by a meager 0.17% annually over the last 30 years in the MENA region, while participation in the labor market is limited to only 25.2% for the female population aged 15 and above[78]. Progress has been made in certain countries, such as the United Arab Emirates where FLFPR increased from 25.0 to 46.5% between 1990 and 2013[79].

Paradoxically, the literature highlights that increased rates of education have not been accompanied by higher FLFPRs[80]. Some attribute this to opportunity structures in the MENA region and note that literature has often traditionally looked at supply-side explanations[81], while others identify some potential problems on the demand side[82]. In terms of the particularly disproportionate

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68 Assaad, R. et al. (2022). The care economy in the Arab States: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work – brief. UN Women.
69 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
70 UN Women (2015). Fact sheet – Middle East and North Africa, Progress of world's women 2015-2016: Transforming economies, realizing rights.
71 Abu-Habib, L., & Abdel Khalik, Z. (2021). Sexual and reproductive health in the Arab region.
72 Asi, Y. M. (2022). Women at work in the Arab World: Trends, gaps, and effects on the region. Arab Center Washington DC.
73 Elder, S. (2020). Women in labour markets: Measuring progress and identifying challenges. International Labour Organization.
74 Al-Shami, S., & Alsuwaidi, M. (2023). Confounding and confirming expectations on the "care economy" in MENA. Arab Barometer.
75 Moghadam, V. M. (2018). Gender inequality and economic inclusion in Tunisia: Key policy issues. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.
76 ESCWA (2022). Women's economic participation in Lebanon: A mapping analysis of laws and regulations.
77 McLoughlin, C. (2013). Women's economic role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Governance and Social Development Resource Centre.
78 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
79 UN Women (2015). Fact sheet – Middle East and North Africa, Progress of world's women 2015-2016: Transforming economies, realizing rights.
80 UNICEF (2021). Situational analysis of women and girls in the MENA and Arab States region: A decade review 2010-2020. UNICEF.
81 Assaad, R. et al. (2022). The care economy in the Arab States: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work – brief. UN Women.
82 Moghadam, V. M. (2023). Explanations for women's limited economic participation and empowerment in the MENA region. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs.

impact on married women in the region, scholars highlight women's tendencies to exit employment at marriage[83].

The conditions of women who participate in the official labor force are unaddressed at a policy level, as women have less access to social protection schemes, such as pensions, compared to their male counterparts[84]. Some estimates indicate that around half of employed women in the MENA region work in vulnerable positions[85]. However, women's participation in the labor force does not exempt them from carrying out unpaid and domestic care work, which results in what has been called "double day" work[86].

Informal Work

Lack of adequate and formal employment opportunities, combined with economic crises, has pushed women into paid work predominantly within the informal sector, where protection and benefits are largely absent[87]. As a result, women's opportunities for entrepreneurship are diminished[88].

The vulnerability of women's paid work goes hand-in-hand with structural features and gender dynamics that disproportionately expose women financially to economic fallout. Informal workers such as domestic workers, agricultural workers, and small traders, among whom women are over-represented, and refugees are subject to acute risks[89]. Overall, there were minimal responses to protect vulnerable workers[90].

Migrant Women Domestic Workers

Migrant women domestic workers in the MENA region, who undertake a substantial amount of paid care work, face the harsh conditions of the Kafala (sponsorship in Arabic) system, often described as "modern-day slavery"[91]. The complete lack of protection makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse as well as exploitation. Violations include but are not limited to 24-hour working cycles, passport confiscation, harassment and violence in different forms, and restriction of mobility, in addition to many others, with limited legal mechanisms in place to address them[92].

Rural Areas and Climate Change

Climate change has severely impacted the MENA region, in some areas more than others. The region is extremely vulnerable to climate change, with the elderly and children being the most at risk, and women and girls facing the greatest exposure to these vulnerabilities. Nonetheless, women and girls remain absent from decision-making spaces, and literature has noted how their active participation can open opportunities for sustainable, inclusive, and environmentally friendly pathways[93].

Rural labor is a key element in the political economies and social realities of MENA countries. Women's labor force involvement is supported by family-focused agricultural initiatives. However, parity in wages is still lacking in agricultural activities[94].

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83 Krafft, C. et al. (2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's care work and employment in the Middle East and North Africa. Economic Research Forum, Working Papers SWP20225.
84 UN Women (2015). Fact sheet – Middle East and North Africa, Progress of world's women 2015-2016: Transforming economies, realizing rights.
85 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work'. Oxfam International.
86 Khurma, M. et al. (2023). Women entrepreneurship in MENA: The cases of Bahrain, Lebanon, and Tunisia. Wilson Center.
87 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
88 Khurma, M. et al. (2023). Women entrepreneurship in MENA: The cases of Bahrain, Lebanon, and Tunisia. Wilson Center.
89 OECD (2020). COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: Impact on gender equality and policy responses. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19).
90 Krafft, C. et al. (2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's care work and employment in the Middle East and North Africa', Economic Research Forum, Working Papers SWP20225.
91 Abou-Habib, L. (2020). Feminist perspectives on care work in the MENA region. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
92 UN Women (2015). Fact sheet – Middle East and North Africa, Progress of world's women 2015-2016: Transforming economies, realizing rights.
93 Khadduri, R. et al. (2022). MENA regional overview: Gender and equality. Mannon Daniels.
94 Noureddine, A. (2023). Gender gap in MENA: Cultural, legal and institutional barriers. Fanack.

In addition, the literature highlights the lack of access to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) services in the MENA region and the amplification of gender-based water insecurity during times of crisis, especially for displaced women. In general, women face additional restrictions concerning their access to menstrual health and gender-sensitive sanitation services[95].

Agricultural workers are often overlooked in official social protection programs. A study in Morocco highlights the situation of women village workers who were ineligible for social protection or pension programs because their work was considered non-salaried, as they were paid based on tasks completed[96]. Such cases are not accounted for in official statistics of labor division and governmental valuations of different types of work. These conditions come against the backdrop of severe disparities between rural and urban areas, where services and infrastructural facilities are predominantly centered. An intersectional lens enhances our understanding of marginalized groups in policymaking and social dynamics, such as girls and women with disabilities in rural areas, who often have the lowest levels of educational attainment[97].

Social Norms

Informal justice systems are prevalent in the region; these systems have conflict resolution mechanisms that operate outside the formal system of state-based laws and courts (examples include Tribal Dispute Resolutions, religious courts and proceedings, etc.)[98]. Their expansion in the MENA region not only places pressure on women but also reinforces specific societal norms that impact their daily lives. These systems contribute to women's challenges in accessing paid work opportunities and safe work environments, as they perpetuate stigmatization and limit women's options for fair and equitable treatment. As a result, women may struggle to find employment in environments free from harassment and discrimination, further exacerbating their vulnerability and limiting their professional and personal growth[99]. Moreover, cultural norms, patriarchal structures, as well as social networks predominantly benefit men, placing women at a disadvantage in their access to capital and opportunities[100].

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of the region's healthcare and social protection systems. Measures such as lockdowns and school closures have had disproportionate impacts on women as a result of care work distribution[101].

Small and medium women-led businesses had higher rates of closure compared to those led by men[102], and the unemployment-to-population ratios for women increased significantly during the pandemic[103]. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market have continued even after it subsided[104]. Other literature indicates that the pandemic did not have a considerable impact on women's low employment[105]. However, online schooling in the region was linked to a reduction in reported care work, potentially easing the workload for parents.

On another hand, women in the MENA region were at the forefront of emergency responses during the pandemic, given their high presence

95 UNICEF (2021). Situational analysis of women and girls in the MENA and Arab States region: A decade review 2010-2020. UNICEF.
96 Moghadam, V. M. (2023). Explanations for women's limited economic participation and empowerment in the MENA region. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs.
97 Khadduri, R. et al. (2022). MENA regional overview: Gender and equality. Mannon Daniels.
98 UNDP (2013). Informal Justice Systems: Charting a course for human rights-based engagement.
99 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
100 UNICEF (2021). Situational analysis of women and girls in the MENA and Arab States region: A decade review 2010-2020.
101 OECD (2020). COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: Impact on gender equality and policy responses. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19).
102 Khurma, M. et al. (2023). Women entrepreneurship in MENA: The cases of Bahrain, Lebanon, and Tunisia. Wilson Center.
103 Barsoum, G., & Majbouri, M. (2021). A time of great intensity: The pandemic effect on work, care work and subjective wellbeing in MENA countries, Economic Research Forum, Working Paper No. 1528.
104 Noureddine, A. (2023). Gender gap in MENA: Cultural, legal and institutional barriers. Fanack.
105 Krafft, C. et al. (2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's care work and employment in the Middle East and North Africa. Economic Research Forum, Working Papers SWP20225.

in both the healthcare and social services sectors, which concurrently exposed them to virus risks[106]. Finally, the pandemic has been noted to have triggered a "shadow" pandemic of gender-based violence and accelerated the erosion of civic space and women's rights movements[107].

Rising Opposition

Women and marginalized communities in the MENA region have become more vocal and assertive in challenging social norms and deeply rooted patriarchal structures. Women's rights movements that focus on specific issues affecting women, including care work, alongside feminist movements that adopt more intersectional approaches, are playing an important role in facilitating conversations on gender dynamics[108].

Although relatively recent, limited in scope, and typically constrained by membership, organizational efforts have managed to influence some reforms across the region[109]. Mobilization is varied across different countries, with Lebanon and Jordan, for instance, standing out and witnessing many different initiatives[110]. In addition, initiatives focusing on the rights of specific groups, such as Egna Legna, working mostly on the rights of Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon, have seen an increase in discursive relevance throughout the last decade.

Macro-Challenges

The MENA region is host to several different conflicts and protracted social, political, and economic crises. The absence of women from peacemaking initiatives despite their role in providing paid and unpaid care work is notable[111].

This is related to overall representation at political leadership levels. 2022 estimates suggest that women represent only 18.3% of parliamentary seats in the MENA region, with these parliamentarians and civic space women organizers subject to high degrees of harassment and violence. The increased participation of MENA countries in international fora can present opportunities but also challenges for gender justice[112].

Recent developments across the world and in the MENA region have necessitated the recognition of paid and unpaid care work. Aging populations, migration, pandemics, and a plethora of other matters require MENA actors to recognize care work and value its main performers[113].

This section provides a country-specific overview of care work in the MENA region, focusing on both governmental and societal perspectives of paid and unpaid care work. It evaluates how different countries approach care work, including relevant policies, labor laws, and social discourses.

The analysis is divided into four parts: first, an introduction that provides an overview of each country's context regarding care work; second, a review of care-related policies, labor conditions, and legislation; third, an exploration of the social norms and cultural attitudes that shape dynamics of care work; and fourth, a discussion of challenges and barriers to improving care work conditions and achieving gender equality.

106 OECD (2020). COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: Impact on gender equality and policy responses. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19).
107 Khadduri, R. et al. (2022). MENA regional overview: Gender and equality. Mannon Daniels.
108 Barsoum, G., & Majbouri, M. (2021). A time of great intensity: The pandemic effect on work, care work and subjective wellbeing in MENA countries, Economic Research Forum, Working Paper No. 1528.
109 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
110 Abou-Habib, L. (2020). Feminist perspectives on care work in the MENA region. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
111 Asi, Y. M. (2022). Women at work in the Arab World: Trends, gaps, and effects on the region. Arab Center Washington DC.
112 Khadduri, R. et al. (2022). MENA regional overview: Gender and equality. Mannon Daniels.
113 Ismail, M. (2023). Towards an effective care economy for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The Oxford Institute of Population Ageing.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC REVIEW OF CARE WORK POLICIES, NORMS, & CHALLENGES

Lebanon

Care workers in Lebanon, especially those employed in their employers' homes, experience significant deficits in decent working conditions, including insufficient legal and social protections. The informal care workforce consists of Lebanese nationals, migrant domestic workers who are subject to the "Kafala" (sponsorship) system, as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugees[114].

Due to years of weak public financial management, and poor macroeconomic policies and decision-making, Lebanon has been grappling with severe challenges in its care economy. The latter further deteriorated due to the 2019 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic[115].

Since the 1970s, the country has relied heavily on underpaid migrant domestic workers through a system called Kafala that excludes them from the provisions of the 1946 labor law[116]. However, the economic downturn has led to a decline in the number of these migrant workers, especially in the first half of 2020, creating a gap in care services[117]. Coupled with the stigma surrounding care work and the meager protections it may provide[118], the economic crisis has discouraged national workers from joining the sector. The absence of coverage for care workers in the labor law denies them social protection, which can ultimately lead to lower care quality and jeopardize the health and development of those they care for[119]. As a result, the care economy continues to operate without sufficient regulation or oversight, highlighting the urgent need for innovative and sustainable solutions.

Legislation and Policymaking

The Lebanese Labor Law[120] regulates various aspects of employment, including working hours, wages, and conditions.

However, it falls short in many aspects, in those related to universal coverage of all workers, discriminatory practices, and protections.

For example, the labor law in Lebanon does not include any provisions that offer employees with minor children any flexible working arrangements[121]. However, Article 24 of Law No. 46/2017 permits married female public sector employees to work part-time at half-pay due to

114 International Labour Organization. (2024). Providing care through the social and solidarity economy - Lebanon.
115 Kebede, T. A., Stave, S. E., & Kattaa, M. (2020). Facing multiple crises: Rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable workers and small-scale enterprises in Lebanon. International Labor Organization.
116 Shukr et al. (2023). Historicizing migrant domestic workers' community organizing and class struggle in Lebanon. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
117 Merhi, E., & Buccianti Barakat, L. (2022). The repercussions of the economic crisis in Lebanon on its female migrant domestic workers, InteraXXIons, (2), 229-252.
118 Issa, M. (2024). Let's put a new deal for care at the heart of Lebanon's recovery plan. Oxfam.
119 International Labour Organization (2024). Providing care through the social and solidarity economy – Lebanon.
120 Labour Law of the Lebanese Republic 1946.
121 Wallace, T. (2013). Women's work in Lebanon: Making the invisible visible. Collective for Research and Training on Developments – Action (CRTD-A).

personal reasons for a maximum of three years, without affecting their family compensation, cooperative contributions, or other benefits[122].

In 2022, a draft law was proposed to amend some clauses of the labor law to incorporate flexible work arrangements[123]. This legislative reform aims to address gaps in the legal framework by aligning it with global developments and improving support for women who face the dual burden of unpaid care work and limited labor market participation[124]. By expanding the scope of social protection and reducing informal employment through flexible work arrangements, the reform seeks to alleviate the pressures on women and enhance their involvement in the workforce.

In terms of policies, women in Lebanon are entitled to 10 weeks of maternity paid leave under Law No. 226 and Law No. 267 of 2014[125]. However, there is no statutory paternity leave, although a draft law proposing three days of paternity leave was introduced and approved by the Council of Ministers in 2018 but has yet to be enacted by the Lebanese Parliament[126]. Additionally, there are no laws guaranteeing childcare leave, the right to breastfeed, or the provision of nursery or childcare facilities[127].

Nevertheless, the labor law excludes many groups, such as agriculture workers, casual and informal workers, domestic workers, and Syrian and Palestinian refugees. This leaves these groups with no access to social security benefits (including health insurance, pensions and retirement benefits, and maternity and family benefits), unemployment benefits and termination rights, fair wages, and decent working conditions[128].

Instead, the Kafala (sponsorship) system regulates the employment of migrant workers, which also includes domestic workers. Under this system, a worker's legal status and residency are tied to their employer, who controls the worker's life and employment conditions. This system often paves the way to restricted freedom and mobility, a high level of vulnerability to exploitation, as well as dependency on their employer, as losing their job usually obliges the worker to leave the country[129].

In September 2020, the Ministry of Labor issued a standard unified labor contract, marking an initial step toward abolishing the Kafala system[130]. The contract introduces several positive reforms, which include specifying the type and scope of workers' duties, establishing a minimum wage, and emphasizing workers' privacy and basic rights, such as mobility and the right to keep their official documents.

The contract also guarantees workers' right to vacations and limits working hours to 48 hours per week. Most importantly, it introduces the right to unilateral contract termination, allowing workers to terminate their contract in cases such as the employer's death or serious illness, and ensures they can designate an emergency contact and receive the contract in a language they understand[131].

However, the proposal received opposition from migrant workers recruitment agencies, and the State Shura Council, Lebanon's highest administrative court, delivered a significant setback to migrant domestic worker rights by halting the contract's implementation[132].

Labor Participation

Lebanon's female labor force participation rate was only 23.187% in 2019, with a notable decline in women's employment after marriage and

122 ESCWA (2022). Women's economic participation in Lebanon: A mapping analysis of laws and regulations.
123 ESCWA (2022). Law proposal on flexible working arrangements in Lebanon.
124 ESCWA (2023). Flexible work arrangements in Lebanon.
125 The Lebanese Republic (2021). Labor management procedures: Emergency crisis and COVID-19 response social safety net project.
126 Takieddine, M., & Abou Ali, L. (2021). Labour and employment comparative guide. Mondaq.
127 ESCWA (2022). Empowering women in the Arab region: Advancing the care economy - case study: Childcare in Lebanon.
128 Chaar, H. (2020). Protecting domestic workers in Lebanon: How to amend the labour code to better protect domestic migrant workers in Lebanon?. International Labour Organization.
129 Migrant Forum in Asia (2012). Policy Brief No. 2: Reform of the Kafala (Sponsorship) System.
130 International Labour Organization (2023). Lebanon takes crucial first step towards dismantling Kafala in Lebanon
131 Human Rights Watch (2020). Lebanon: New safeguards for migrant domestic workers.
132 Amnesty International (2020). Lebanon: Blow to migrant domestic worker rights.

motherhood[133], despite a notable increase in educational attainment among girls. FLFP slightly increased in 2023 to reach 27.5% compared to 65.5% for Lebanese males[134]. Among refugee women, labor force participation is even lower, with only 10% compared to 68% of refugee men[135]. Even when women secure formal employment, they often have lower wages compared to males, limited access to training and flexible work arrangements, and negative workplace attitudes[136].

The limited employment opportunities and economic difficulties have pushed women and vulnerable groups into informal labor in Lebanon[137]. This casualization is marked by the stark absence of benefits and safeguarding and grievance mechanisms, irregular and lower pay, and unrecognition, as this type of work often goes unrecorded and undervalued[138]. Women also often work in vulnerable fields, such as agriculture, where informality rates are also high[139].

Social Norms

In Lebanon, patriarchal structures influence gender dynamics from a political, social, and domestic lens, reinforcing social norms that assign unpaid care work predominantly to women[140]. This includes responsibilities related to domestic chores, reproductive tasks, and childcare[141]. Roughly 94% of individuals who used private childcare services were mothers, underscoring the expectation that women bear the primary responsibility for these roles[142].

Women's access to quality employment opportunities is significantly influenced by prevailing social norms and gendered power dynamics. Men are often regarded as the primary breadwinners, resulting in gender discrimination in the private sector and a tendency for employers to minimize the costs of maternity benefits, penalizing women for their caregiving duties[143].

Women also face serious challenges in balancing both paid and unpaid work[144], compounded by patriarchal structures that restrict their access to opportunities and professional networks. Studies show that women are denied sick leave 11 times more often than men and that single women without young children frequently face denials of vacation time[145].

Challenges

As discussed in the previous sections, there are major challenges rooted in legislative, economic, social, and structural conditions that impede efforts to improve work conditions in Lebanon, especially when it comes to paid and unpaid care work.

The exclusion of domestic workers and informal sector employees from labor laws leaves a significant segment of care workers of essential protections, including social security, health insurance, and fair wages. This absence of coverage hinders efforts to improve working conditions, as workers exist in a legal gray area, often unrecognized and undervalued by the system.

The Kafala system exacerbates the situation by tying migrant workers' legal status to employers, leading to exploitation, restricted mobility, and limited recourse for abuses. Even when reforms are proposed, such as the 2020 unified labor contract, they are faced with significant resistance and legal challenges, stalling progress.

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133 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
134 World Bank (2023). Gender Data Portal.
135 World Bank (2020). The mobility of displaced Syrians: An economic and social analysis.
136 ESCWA (2022). Women's economic participation in Lebanon: A mapping analysis of laws and regulations.
137 Salti, N., & Mezher, N. (2020). Women on the verge of an economic breakdown: Assessing the differential impacts of the economic crisis on women in Lebanon. UN Women.
138 Saghir, C. (2023). The Lebanese labor market: Where informality, exploitation, and unemployment run rampant. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy.
139 Bader et al. (2024). Diagnostic analysis of informality in agriculture, agri-food, and construction. International Labour Organization.
140 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
141 Wallace, T. (2013). Women's work in Lebanon: Making the invisible visible. Collective for Research and Training on Developments – Action (CRTD-A).
142 ESCWA (2022). Empowering women in the Arab region: Advancing the care economy - case study: Childcare in Lebanon.
143 International Labour Organization (2008). Social care needs and service provisions in Arab States: Bringing care work into focus in Lebanon. International Labour Organization, Issue Brief 2.
144 Wallace, T. (2013). Women's work in Lebanon: Making the invisible visible. Collective for Research and Training on Developments – Action (CRTD-A).
145 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.

Economic hardships, intensified by the ongoing crises, wars, and conflicts in Lebanon, have made it more difficult for migrant workers to find and sustain employment, creating a gap in care services that has not been filled by national workers due to the stigma and poor conditions associated with care work. This economic crisis deters investments in improving conditions for care work, as employers and government may prioritize economic recovery over labor reforms.

Moreover, the deeply ingrained and institutionalized patriarchal norms reinforce the assignment of unpaid care work to women, limiting their ability to engage in formal employment and reducing the pressure on policymakers to reform care work conditions. These norms perpetuate gender inequality by maintaining a status quo where care work is undervalued, both paid and unpaid.

Workplace discrimination, coupled with inadequate support for balancing work and family responsibilities, places additional burdens on women, who often find it difficult to secure formal employment or attain decent working conditions. The lack of political will to enact necessary reforms, such as those related to parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and social protections for care workers, further hinders progress. Consequently, these combined factors maintain a cycle where care work remains undervalued, making it challenging to improve work conditions in Lebanon, particularly for those involved in both paid and unpaid care work.

Finally, the absence of accurate data and the inadequacy of statistical systems at the governmental level obscure the true extent of women's employment and participation in the paid economy. This is compounded by the prevalence of disguised unemployment, where women who identify as housewives might be classified as unemployed in other countries[146]. The same lack of data impacts valuations of unpaid work and the amount of domestic work women perform[147].

Jordan

The care economy in Jordan can be best described as a bilateral challenge with equally important economic and social stakes. Similarly to other countries in the MENA region, the care economy in Jordan remains undervalued and underrecognized. Yet, statistics suggest that the case of Jordan may be more severe, with record numbers being achieved, especially in inequality in terms of time spent on unpaid work and Labor force participation.

In 2023, it was estimated that FLFPR in Jordan is at 14% compared to 63% for males in 2023[148]. Additionally, it was estimated that women spend around 19 hours on unpaid care work in Jordan, while men spend only a few hours, and the ratio of women's to men's time spent on unpaid care work reaches 19:1[149].

Effectively, social factors that come into play have a direct economic impact, often translated by women performing double work, which includes caring for children and the elderly, and managing household tasks[150]. This burden thus discourages and often prohibits women from participating in the labor market.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also undoubtedly increased women's unpaid care work, especially with the lockdowns and closures of educational facilities[151].

Despite policy reforms aimed at improving conditions for women in the workplace, challenges persist, particularly in the equitable distribution of unpaid care responsibilities[152]. Investing in the care economy, particularly in paid care sectors such as education and elder care, is key to alleviating some of these burdens but also creates significant employment opportunities, especially for women.

146 Wallace, T. (2013). Women's work in Lebanon: Making the invisible visible. Collective for Research and Training on Developments – Action (CRTD-A).
147 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
148 International Labour Organization. ILO Modelled Estimates and Projections database (ILOEST). ILOSTAT.
149 Alhawarin, I., Berri, N., Selwaness, I., & Sieverding, M. (2020). The care economy in Jordan: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work (Policy Brief No. 3). UN Women.
150 Ibid.
151 Perrin, J. (2021). Why we care: An overview of the distribution of unpaid care work in Ma'an, southern Jordan. Oxfam International.
152 World Bank. (2019). Improving women economic opportunities in Jordan.

Legislation and Policymaking

The Jordanian Labor Law, No. 8 of 1996, and its amendments cover basic elements such as minimum wage, working hours, and rest periods, however, further effort is necessary to address care workers. Although it captures elements of social security, health insurance, and mandatory workers' rights such as rest days, it could be beneficial to expand the framework and definition of labor in the context of Jordanian law[153].

However, discrepancies exist. For example, the framework surrounding labor in Jordan greatly differs between comes to private sector workers and domestic workers, yet very little clarity is provided by the legislation itself[154].

Nevertheless, there are substantial gender gaps in the protection the law offers. For Jordanians, despite taking steps towards protecting women's rights at work, there is a need for further inspection in terms of legislative implementation[155].

Jordan has implemented care policies to expand early childhood education, improve elderly care, as well as reform care leave[156]. Women employees are entitled to ten weeks of fully paid maternity leave, with six weeks required after delivery[157]. Moreover, employers with ten or more employees must grant up to one year of unpaid leave post-delivery, provided the woman does not work elsewhere during that period.

The Labor Law was amended in 2019 to include paid paternity leave which amounts to three days of paid leave after the birth of a child[158]. In terms of childcare, employers with over twenty female employees must provide suitable facilities if the number of children under the age of four is ten or more[159]. In terms of breastfeeding, female employees are entitled to an hour of paid breaks daily for a year after returning to work[160].

Similar to Lebanon, some groups are also excluded from the national labor code.

Although the Kafala system is not explicitly codified in Jordanian labor law, the country's reliance on sponsorship arrangements (kafeel) effectively makes its labor policies a de facto example of the Kafala system[161]. Despite specific legislation, the migrant labor system in Jordan remains deeply tied to a Kafala model, which grants employers significant power over migrant domestic workers. Without the right to resign or hold employers accountable, the Kafala system undermines the effectiveness of laws intended to uphold labor standards and human rights for these workers[162].

Thus, the residency permits of migrant workers are tied to their employer, creating a detrimental power balance, affecting migrant workers' movements and legal status in the country, a notion in line with the Kafala system implemented in other Arab countries[163].

Labor Participation

The FLFPR in Jordan was around 14% in 2023, making it one of the lowest in the world[164], despite a 98% literacy rate for women. Indeed, two-thirds of households rely solely on male breadwinners and only 3% rely on female ones[165]. The paid care sector is a main source of employment for women in Jordan – 60% of women[166] – and comprises around one-quarter of public employment and a small but growing share of private employment[167].

153 Jordanian Labour Law No. (8) of 1996 and its Amendments.
154 Coleman, D. (2022). Systemic vulnerability: Migrant workers in Jordan. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.
155 Ibid.
156 The Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development. (2021). Redistributing care work in Jordan: Enacting policy reforms.
157 Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. (2022). Labor management procedures: Strengthening reform management in Jordan (P171965).
158 Qutteineh, H. (2019). Jordan: Labor Law Is Amended. SHRM.
159 Qutteineh, H., & Anderson, C. (2019). Jordan's new labour law amendments impact the employment relationship. Ogletree Deakins.
160 Ibid.
161 Al Masri, S. (2024). Jordan's Syrian refugee response and discriminatory development aid. Middle East Research and Information Project.
162 Dela Rosa Lara, J. (2022). Domesticated: Migrant domestic workers in Jordan and their place in Jordan's law and homes (Master's thesis). SIT Graduate Institute.
163 International Labour Organization. (2024). Jordan: Regulatory framework governing migrant workers.
164 International Labour Organization (n.d.). "ILO Modelled Estimates and Projections database (ILOEST)"
165 Patchett, H. (2022). Who cares? The gendered distribution of unpaid care work in Jordan. Oxfam International.
166 Alhawarin, I., Berri, N., Selwaness, I., & Sieverding, M. (2020). The care economy in Jordan: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work (Policy Brief No. 3). UN Women.
167 Ibid.

Women's participation in the labor force is largely impacted by their unpaid care work duties, particularly after marriage[168]. Despite many initiatives for women's social empowerment, little progress has been made as to their "official" economic participation levels[169] and these initiatives often do not link women's paid participation with their domestic responsibilities.

Practical factors significantly restrict women's access to paid employment, as public transport systems are often unreliable and unsafe, with high reported rates of harassment both on public transit and in workplaces [170,171].

The quality of jobs in the care sector is characterized by a substantial wage gap and the work itself is precarious and largely devalued especially where women are greatly present. As such, public investment in economic and social sectors is necessary to improve educational, health, and social care institutions. Women stand to benefit from such improvements, especially those in distant governorates[172].

For migrant workers in the formal care sector, estimating participation rates is increasingly difficult. The main reason behind that is legislative and paperwork reasons. Effectively, evidence shows that fines for non-renewal of contracts are sometimes less expensive than renewals, which creates an incentive for employers to allow work permits to expire despite the difficulty it causes for workers. As a result of this vulnerability, domestic workers without work permits are often unable to leave the homes of their employers, thus falling under the category of informal labor[173].

Social Norms

Literature has pointed out the significant impact men have on women's career and work locations and the entrenched nature of gender norms around unpaid care work dominating households and societal dynamics. Institutions such as schools and vocational training programs play an important part in reinforcing such norms, as well as media organizations[174].

There have been positive behavioural signs towards sharing care work responsibilities between men and women; however, much can be done to improve recognition because woman and girl still carry the heaviest bruden[175]. That is because intrahousehold responsibilities are highly gendered, with men's roles as fathers perceived to be centered around discipline and material provision, whereas women's roles are perceived to be centered around taking care of children and the household. Indeed, women in Jordan spend around 221 minutes per day on children, compared to around 71 minutes for their male partners[176]. As a result, many Jordanian women have little expectation of a long-term career after marriage. It is important to note that not much can be deduced regarding the levels of satisfaction and content, as research has also shown that women reported unpaid care work as enjoyable[177].

Challenges

Working mothers in Jordan face significant barriers to social protection, particularly in the private sector, despite legal provisions aimed at protecting their rights. Maternity protection is undermined by discriminatory practices such as the non-renewal of contracts for pregnant women[178]. As a result, nurseries may become inaccessible financially (sometimes even geographically), making it extremely difficult for women to return to work after maternity leave.

Nevertheless, the absence of accurate data, especially in terms of formal and informal labor further widens the knowledge gap in care work in Jordan. As a result, one of the key steps to tackle issues in the care economy would be to quantify that data through a nationwide survey,to

168 Ibid.
169 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
170 Patchett, H. (2022). Who cares? The gendered distribution of unpaid care work in Jordan. Oxfam International.
171 Robbin, Z. H. (2022). Women's labor force participation and COVID-19 in Jordan. Middle East Institute.
172 Alhawarin, I., Berri, N., Selwaness, I., & Sieverding, M. (2020). The care economy in Jordan: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work (Policy Brief No. 3). UN Women.
173 Razzaz, S. (2017). A challenging market becomes more challenging. International Labour Organization.
174 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
175 Perrin, J. (2021). Why we care: An overview of the distribution of unpaid care work in Ma'an, southern Jordan. Oxfam International.
176 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
177 Patchett, H. (2022). Who cares? The gendered distribution of unpaid care work in Jordan. Oxfam International.
178 United Nations Jordan. (2021). Working mothers in Jordan face barriers to social protection.

then enable proper monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of already implemented care policies[179].

As the country's population witnesses increased aging, attention to eldercare services and the quality of work within eldercare on both provision and reception ends is necessary given their underdevelopment[180,181].

Some initiatives at the grassroots level have started targeting stereotypical understandings of gender roles. Moreover, literature has pointed out a systematically increased visibility of women's unpaid care work[182]. The Jordan National Strategy for Women has noted the role of advocacy campaigns and media in raising awareness and recognition of unpaid care work and in shifting perceptions around women's and men's roles[183].

Iraq

Inequalities between men and women in Iraq remain sharp despite many efforts to curb them. Female-headed households are more vulnerable to poverty and only 8 out of 100 Iraqi women have formally paid jobs as the country has the lowest FLFPR compared to surrounding jurisdictions[184] (FLFPR of 11% compared to 72% for males in 2023)[185].

In addition, Iraq has suffered major displacements since 2014, forcing 20.6% of women to take informal jobs to bear the cost of living[186]. Unpaid care work also increased with this displacement estimating women's unpaid work to be 10.5 weeks per year more than men's[187].

When it comes to unpaid care work, women and girls perform notably more than men and boys. Shifts in women's participation in income-generating activities have not been mirrored by shifts in unpaid care work distribution[188].

It is important to note that social norms in Iraq confine women to childbearing and household chores, causing several private sector employers to refrain from hiring women or mistreating them by denying basic rights such as adequate maternity leave[189].

Legislation and Policymaking

The Iraqi Provisional Constitution of 1970 "formally guaranteed equal rights to women and other laws specifically ensured their right to vote, attend school, run for political office, and own property"[190]. While progress has been made in women's educational attainment, health, and political representation, formal unemployment remains striking[191].

Iraqi labor law also states the right of everyone to work with no discrimination based on race or gender. It explicitly mentions a clause on wage equality between men and women, for the same type of work. Furthermore, in 2015, a maternity leave law was passed, granting women 14 weeks of paid maternity leave per year[192].

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179 Alhawarin, I., Berri, N., Selwaness, I., & Sieverding, M. (2020). The care economy in Jordan: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work (Policy Brief No. 3). UN Women.
180 Ibid.
181 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
182 Perrin, J. (2021). Why we care: An overview of the distribution of unpaid care work in Ma'an, southern Jordan. Oxfam International.
183 Patchett, H. (2022). Who cares? The gendered distribution of unpaid care work in Jordan. Oxfam International.
184 Faraj, N. (2020). The economic participation of Iraqi women is among the lowest in the world. Kirkuknow.
185 International Labour Organization. ILO Modelled Estimates and Projections database (ILOEST).
186 Jadoo, S. A. A., Sarhan, Y. T., Al-Samarrai, M. A. M., Al-Taha, M. A., AL-Any, B. N., & Soofi, A. K. (2019). The impact of displacement on the social, economic and health situation on a sample of internally displaced families in Anbar Province, Iraq. Jour
187 Vilardo, V., & Bittar, S. (2018). Gender profile – Iraq: A situation analysis on gender equality and women's empowerment in Iraq. Oxfam, Policy & Practice.
188 CLCI. (2021). Gender analysis of livelihoods programming and individual, household and community dynamics in Iraq. CALP Network.
189 Aleiwi, A. A. (2022). Women's role in the iraqi economy between reality and ambition. American Journal of Economics and Business Management, 5(10), 134-145.
190 Human Rights Watch. (2003). Human Rights Watch briefing paper: Background on women's status in Iraq prior to the fall of the Saddam Hussein government.
191 Abood, L.S. (2021). Feminization of unemployment in Iraq', Social Science and Humanities Journal (SSHJ), 5(5), pp. 2196–2203.
192 Mohammed, N. O. (2022). Women's right to equal employment opportunities in Kurdistan Region of Iraq. International Journal of Social Science and Human Research, 5(5), 1970-1974.

Still, in many instances labor legislation proves to be inconsistent with the reality of women in the workforce, especially due to underlying social norms that will be unpacked in the next sections[193].

Labor Participation

Despite women dominating employment in the public sector, which is considered to be the largest employer in Iraq (70.5% compared to 33.7% for men), the overall FLFPR remains low[194].

In fact, the ILO estimates Iraq has the third lowest FLFPR, 11%, among 189 countries FLFPR of 11% compared to 72% for males in 2023)[195]. This observation is due to multiple factors, such as women's engagement in 86% of unpaid domestic care work[196].

Traditional gender roles, where women are housekeepers and men are breadwinners, play an enormous part in hindering the ability of women to enter the workforce.

This results in undermining their potential and career growth. Even in female-dominated sectors, such as Education (the ministry of education employs three women for every two men), leadership positions remain predominantly occupied by men[197].

Moreover, women in formal employment have reported wage discrimination in the private sector and, to a lesser degree, in the public sector. Another reason that drives women away from jobs is the pervasiveness of gender-based violence in the workplace. Around 52% of employed women reported experiencing harassment in the workplace, and most of them avoid filing a complaint due to the absence of a well-operating police force and safe grievance mechanisms[198].

However, compared to other MENA contexts, literature has noted that local tasks such as looking after livestock and fetching water were generally evenly split between women and girls and men and boys[199].

Conflict and Care

The domestic responsibilities of women take a turn when faced with conflict. In fact, research by Dietrich and Carter analyzes gender and conflict in communities of Iraq affected by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)[200].

The authors highlight the role of women in keeping their children from joining ISIS, ensuring the safety of the family, providing education, and often overcoming notable barriers. They showcase the role that women play in establishing shelters for women and girls who have escaped attempts of honor killings.

Moreover, the authors mention the active role of women took as nurses, doctors, and teachers. The research highlights that due to the overwhelming presence of men in the public space and the restricted mobilities of women, the majority of victims were men.

While the conditions decreased women's access to public spaces and employment opportunities, their decision-making powers increased notably, especially during displacement. Consequently, the article emphasizes "the increased relevance of the domestic sphere" in unsafe public spaces, which, despite that, has not resulted in "a general acknowledgment of domestic responsibilities as work." Finally, the research emphasizes that gender norms themselves amplify tensions, insecurity, and vulnerability[201].

193 Al Shamy, S., & Abbas, M. A. R. (2021). Barriers to women's economic empowerment in Iraq. Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government, 27(6), 86-98.
194 International Labour Organization. (2022). Iraq Labour Force Survey 2021.
195 International Labour Organization. ILO Modelled Estimates and Projections database (ILOEST).
196 Addati, L. et al. (2018). Care work and care jobs: For the future of decent work. International Labour Organization.
197 Faraj, N. (2020). 9 out of 10 Iraqi women stay out of the job market. Middle East Research Institute.
198 Younis, M. S., & Lafta, R. K. (2021). The plight of women in Iraq: Gender disparity, violence, and mental health (Vol. 67). SAGE Publications.
199 CLCI. (2021). Gender analysis of livelihoods programming and individual, household and community dynamics in Iraq. CALP Network.
200 Dietrich, L. & Carter, S.E. (2017). Gender and Conflict Analysis in ISIS Affected Communities of Iraq. Oxfam.
201 Ibid.

Social Norms

In Iraq, the patriarchal structure embedded in society influences women's paid and unpaid care work. This structure enforces a gendered division of labor between men and women based on traditional gender roles. Women, for example, are expected to take on household duties from cleaning and cooking to bearing children and obeying their husband's commands. On the other hand, men hold power, are the head of the household, and are required to provide for the family. This construct forbids women from entering the workforce without their husband's permission or blessing, which they usually do not grant to avoid experiencing backlash from society. Even when given permission, women find themselves overwhelmed with domestic work, leaving them with little time to engage in society.

In these traditional societies, women are primarily perceived as housewives, and hence, they are frequently disregarded from decision-making. This reality also contributes to weakening their self-esteem and gradually driving them away from the job market[202].

Media plays a significant role in reinforcing those traditional gender roles as well. For example, Sayidaty, an Arab women's magazine based in Riyadh, has reached a wide range of audience with 4.5 million followers on Instagram. This magazine encourages a woman always to obey her husband and put his needs over hers. Consequently, this results in women losing their autonomy and ability to make decisions regarding their working lives[203].

Challenges

Several challenges englobe the role of women in society and the care economy in Iraq. The increasing burden of conflict makes it extremely difficult for women to still be present in the labor market while still making sure their families are safe.

Nevertheless, the scarcity of women in leadership positions has contributed to a vicious cycle whereby a female point of view is missing from decision-making processes and, accordingly, less female-friendly contexts[204]. Improving conceptualizations of gender roles and acknowledging women's leadership can inform policymaking and work distributions.

Opportunities

Social change would be the ultimate route to ensuring more women are present in the labor force. Furthermore, unpacking the reasons why public work seems more interesting to women than private functions could be a key to leveraging the presence of women in different fields. By developing communication strategies to break down social barriers to working women, the social construct could start to shift in their favor[205].

That being said, the safe and nurturing nature of women can also be used as an entry point to strengthen the role of labor participation in the context of displacement.

By creating management facilities in centers for displacements, the maintenance, cooking, and management roles can be divided amongst women to ensure a productive contribution from them.

Furthermore, education plays an important role in allowing young girls to seek potential careers by observing successful women in their surroundings being empowered professionally.

As a final note, given that several data gaps are present surrounding women in the labor force in Iraq, an extensive, nation nationwide study to cover the most common drivers and barriers to entry to the labor market would be essential to derive policy change.

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202 Dietrich, L., Al Jbouri, M., Badi, K., & Al Ani, R. (2021). Social norms structuring masculinities, gender roles, and stereotypes: Iraqi men and boys' common misconceptions about women and girls' participation and empowerment. Oxfam.

203 Alkaff, S. N. H., & Lulu, R. A. (2021). Love, sex and the Arab woman: A thematic analysis of relationship advice articles in Arabic language women's magazines. Sexuality & Culture, 25(1), 288-305.

204 Faraj, N. (2020). 9 out of 10 Iraqi women stay out of the job market. Middle East Research Institute.

205 El-Khalil, S., & Ismail, T. (2024). Navigating social norms to empower Iraq's female workforce. World Bank Blogs.

Gulf Countries

This analysis considers Gulf countries as a single group, given their shared characteristics in the distribution of paid and unpaid care work, domestic labor, and the overarching structure of their political economies.

In 2017, there were an estimated 2.4 million migrant domestic workers in the MENA region employed under the Kafala system, with increasing recruitment from East African states due to perceptions of cheaper labor and fewer worker protection requirements. Foreign workers are 98% of the labor force in less populated GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council[206]) countries, while 70% of those are female domestic workers[207].

Some countries have implemented programs and national strategies to promote women's formal paid labor participation. In the last 4 decades, female participation in the labor force doubled in Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and KSA and tripled in the UAE and Oman[208].

However, despite women's increased presence in the workplace, they continue to carry the burden of unpaid domestic care responsibilities[209].

Oman, for example, has made gradual progress in women's rights, such as voting, running for office, and holding ministerial roles. They now constitute over 50% of university students[210], and workforce participation is increasing. Legal strides include universal suffrage (2003), ratification of CEDAW (2006), and a royal decree in 2008 granting equal land ownership rights. However, restrictions in legal, economic, and political spheres remain[211]. Patriarchal structures and discriminatory laws, as well as urban/rural dynamics, have impacted women's attainment of complete public life participation, especially rural women[212].

In the GCC, social, cultural, and religious norms suggest that men are primarily the breadwinners and women are caregivers. Such factors affect the women's professional experiences and hinder them from getting jobs despite their progress in educational attainment[213].

Below, we highlight both the similarities and the specific issues in each country.

Legislation and Policymaking

All Arab countries have signed and ratified the CEDAW Convention[214], however many of them have placed reservations on some articles; hence, gender discrimination remains prevalent in various contexts, including the Gulf.

Bahrain has implemented many changes in its legal apparatus to address gender discrimination in the workplace, but such provisions remain generic with limited impact on source issues[215]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the country's Supreme Council for Women implemented policies such as supporting the female workforce, especially those on the frontline, which comprise 75% of the pandemic's national task force. These steps are considered part of the kingdom's attempts not to allow the COVID-19 pandemic to offset the progress made concerning women's social and economic situation[216].

Other jurisdictions, such as Qatar, have adopted a more nuanced approach, characterized by the preservation of basic values and increased attention to women's social status, all while keeping up with human rights legislation and

206 The Gulf Cooperation Council includes Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar.
207 Aarthi, S. V., & Sahu, M. (2021). Migration policy in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states: A critical analysis. Contemporary Review of the Middle East, 8(4), 410–434.
208 Lukova, N. (2021). Labor rights of national women in the GCC. Astrolabe: A CIS Student Research Journal, 2021(3). HBKU College of Islamic Studies.
209 Al-Ansari, H. (2020). 3 ways Bahrain is supporting women through COVID-19 and beyond. World Economic Forum.
210 Loloia, A. (2022). The role of women in Oman's social and economic progress. Arab Center Washington DC.
211 Ibid.
212 OHCHR (2024). Civil society organizations brief the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the Situation of Women in Greece, Oman and the Central African Republic.
213 Al Boinin, H. (2023). Women's entrepreneurship in the GCC: A literature analysis from a socio-cultural perspective. Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy, 17(5), 999-1021.
214 Social Watch (2010). The Arab region: 30 years of CEDAW. Social Watch.
215 Bahrain Center for Human Rights (2020). The female workforce in Bahrain: Underrepresentation, discrimination and inadequate reforms.
216 Al-Ansari, H. (2020). 3 ways Bahrain is supporting women through COVID-19 and beyond. World Economic Forum.

updating their legislative systems[217]. A report by the State of Qatar on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has emphasized (1) increasing women's participation in the Shura Council, (2) establishing the Department of Family Affairs, which promotes women's empowerment and participation in Arab, regional, and international conferences on women's affairs and encourages efforts for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls, (3) recognizing women's unpaid work (and its support through public services and infrastructural provisions, social protection policies and the promotion of shared domestic responsibilities), (4) improving access to sexual and birth-giving health services and women's economic participation, and (5) ensuring equal pay and access to economic resources. Such recommendations are rooted in Qatar's 2030 vision on sustainable development, which itself centralizes the family's role as a basic pillar of society, pays specific attention to SDG 5 on gender equality and the insurance of statistical information, and recognizes the state's role in caring for the elderly and persons with disabilities and adhering to their requirements[218].

In terms of maternity leave, all Gulf countries have laws in place to secure women's rights to maternity leave, but most are not generous in comparison to Western Countries that offer, on average, 14 weeks of paid maternity leave.[219] Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait give women two months of paid maternity leave and allow women to extend this period one to two months. However, this extension time may take the form of unpaid leave in most of the mentioned countries[220]. Oman grants women 60 days of maternity leave with the right to extend 6 months, though unpaid[221]. Bahrain has extended paid maternity leave to 70 days in 2021[222]. In addition, the Shura Services of Bahrain drafted a law to ensure paid leave for women who experience miscarriages and abortions. However, the law was not passed due to concerns from authorities[223]. In the United Arab Emirates, private sectors give women 45 days of fully paid maternity leave if they have worked for at least a year in the institution; otherwise, they receive half-pay[224].

Finally, the personal status law in some Gulf countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar give men the right to stop their wives from working if they feel it is interfering or impeding on their marital duties as a wife or mother[225].

Similar to many other Arab countries, migrant workers' labor in the Gulf states is also regulated by the Kafala sponsorship system.

Labor Participation

Female labor participation is still relatively low in the GCC. As previously mentioned, several factors influence the rates of female participation in the workforce, from social norms to religious beliefs, despite women's high literacy rates[226]. According to the World Bank Gender Data, FLFPR in 2023 in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar was 34.5%, 44.1%, 32%, 47.6%, and 64.1%, respectively[227]. Yet, it is important to note that none of the mentioned countries has data published or available about time spent on unpaid domestic and care work by sex.

However, it is also worth noting that non-national women are more likely to be involved in the GCC workforce than national women[228].

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217 State of Qatar (2014). The national report of the State of Qatar on The complete and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 2014 – 2019. UN Women.
218 Ibid.
219 Vanderlinden, K., Buffel, V., Van de Putte, B., & Van de Velde, S. (2020). Motherhood in Europe: An examination of parental leave regulations and breastfeeding policy influences on breastfeeding initiation and duration. Social Sciences, 9(12), 222.
220 Kooli, C., & Al Muftah, H. (2020). Impact of the legal context on protecting and guaranteeing women's rights at work in the MENA region. Journal of International Women's Studies, 21(6), 98-121.
221 HLB Hamt. (2024, May 26). A comparison of maternity leaves in GCC countries. HLB Hamt Business Consulting.
222 DT News. (2021). Bahrain extends maternity leave by 10 days.
223 Bahrain Mirror. (2018). BCCI rejects bill granting females who aborted or gave birth to dead baby maternity leave.
224 Barda, T. (2020). Maternity leave in UAE: 12 things you didn't know about your maternity leave rights. Gulf News.
225 Liloia, A. (2020). Barriers to women's workforce participation in the Gulf Arab states. Arab Center Washington DC.
226 Al Boinin, H. (2023). Women's entrepreneurship in the GCC: A literature analysis from a socio-cultural perspective. Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy, 17(5), 999-1021.
227 World Bank (n.d.). Gender Data Portal.
228 Young, K. E. (2016). Women's labor force participation across the GCC. Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

Women in Saudi Arabia make up 60% of university students, but only 20% join the labor force after graduation[229].

The gender wage gap also remains widely present in the Gulf region, despite legal prohibition in contexts such as Bahrain and high educational attainment. Women's official employment is also concentrated in specific sectors, while their presence in unions and decision-making positions is minimal[230]. For instance, women in Kuwait constitute 55.5% of the Kuwaiti public sector workforce[231]. The public sector is the most female-populated in the GCC[232].

The implementation of protective policies such as maternity leaves also remains far from international standards, with leaves also being associated with no public coverage, disincentivizing employers from hiring women[233].

The Kafala System

Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia have all introduced initiatives to reform the Kafala system, which governs the sponsorship of migrant workers in the Gulf[234]. Bahrain announced in 2009 that it would dismantle the Kafala system by transferring sponsorship responsibilities to the Labor Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA)[235]. However, the LMRA only regulates work processes and post-recruitment issues, leaving the Kafala system largely intact[236]. While restrictions have been reduced—such as ending workers' dependency on employers for entry and exit and allowing some employment mobility—these reforms have been undermined by a 2011 law that requires workers to wait a year before changing employers. Kuwait announced the abolition of Kafala in 2011 but instead only eased restrictions, particularly allowing workers to change sponsors more easily, excluding domestic workers[237]. Additionally, a self-sponsorship system was proposed for those with university degrees, while others remain tied to national sponsors. Saudi Arabia has proposed reforms that would transfer sponsorship from individual employers to recruitment and placement agencies[238]. These agencies would become the sponsors, with a new Foreign Workers' Affairs Agency monitoring them. An insurance program was also proposed to protect employers financially. However, concerns remain that this system might not eliminate the risk of abuse and exploitation since workers would still need sponsor consent to change jobs or leave the country.

Overall, while these initiatives represent some progress, they have not fully dismantled the Kafala system, and significant challenges remain in protecting migrant workers' rights.

Arab and regional feminist groups and domestic workers' rights collectives raised their voices on the Kafala system in the Arab region long before the spotlight brought by the 2022 Qatar World Cup that shed light on the labor abuse migrant workers were facing[239]. The Gulf, in particular, is marked by a myriad of issues about the working conditions of migrant workers.

In many contexts, authorities took no steps to change the state of the Kafala system, and none of the Gulf countries ratified or became parties to the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families[240].

Under the current conditions, migrant workers are subject to abuse, confiscation of passports, minimal regulations and protections, hazardous

229 Ibid.
230 Bahrain Center for Human Rights (2020). The female workforce in Bahrain: Underrepresentation, discrimination and inadequate reforms.
231 Young, K. E. (2016). Women's labor force participation across the GCC. Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.
232 Al Gharaibeh, F. M. (2015). An exploration of the evolution of women's roles in societies of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Social Development Issues, 37(3), 22-44.
233 Bahrain Center for Human Rights (2020). The female workforce in Bahrain: Underrepresentation, discrimination and inadequate reforms.
234 Migrant Forum in Asia (2012). Policy Brief No. 2: Reform of the Kafala (Sponsorship) System.
235 Ibid.
236 International Labour Organization (2017). Employer-migrant worker relationships in the Middle East: Exploring scope for internal labour market mobility and fair migration.
237 Human Rights Watch (2010). Kuwait: Government Pledges to End Sponsorship System.
238 International Labour Organization (2017). Employer-migrant worker relationships in the Middle East: Exploring scope for internal labour market mobility and fair migration.
239 Human Rights Watch (2022). FIFA/Qatar: Migrant workers call for compensation for abuses.
240 Amnesty International (2023). Oman 2022.

working conditions, late and non-payment of wages[241], and the prohibition of organizational efforts [242,243,244]. This comes with minimal efforts at mitigation by both national authorities and origin country apparatuses who are often considered complicit in the recruitment and working processes involved[245], leaving complaints to fall on deaf ears[246].

Governments remain negligent in their efforts to address migrant workers' precarious working conditions despite their ratification of numerous conventions and protocols. Others, such as Bahrain, have introduced reforms to improve the conditions of migrant workers but fell short of granting them adequate protections and equal rights and have not ratified conventions related to migrant workers despite them comprising around 36.6% of the country's total female workforce. Not to mention the questionable efficacy of many laws in place, such as the 2008 anti-trafficking law, considering there was no evidence found that officials have used this law to prosecute perpetrators[247,248].

In Qatar, many claims, ratifications, measures, agreements, abolitions, and reforms aimed at benefiting migrant workers, yet weak implementation and enforcement remain an obstacle to meaningful change[249,250]. In an interview with The Guardian, 50 women who worked under the Kafala system in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar reported that they worked 7 days a week, had their passports confiscated, and some were abused physically[251].

Meaningful pressure to ensure that vulnerable migrants receive the protection they deserve is still insufficient, as many migrant workers in the region continue to endure abuse while the situation goes largely unnoticed.

Social Norms

Conservative social norms in the Gulf still impact women's FLFPRs due to gender role expectations and the dominance of patriarchal and tribal systems imposing restrictions on women's mobility and their formal paid labor participation. These conditions are accentuated for women in rural areas. For example, remote areas in Oman pose numerous barriers for women wishing to start their own businesses, their access to resources, and their access to information, technology, and training[252].

Previous studies have shown that ideological struggles can act as more important barriers than material ones when it comes to women's paid labor participation in such countries, as they hinder women's abilities to perform their dual roles as mothers and paid workers[253].

These ideological and traditional norms expect women to be the primary caretakers of the household. This includes conducting all housework chores, raising children, and taking good care of husbands and the elderly[254].

These norms affect women's ability to enter and succeed in the labor force or start their professional journey and limit their ability to network, venture, and get support from family[255].

241 Ibid.
242 Amnesty International (2020). Qatar: 100 World Cup stadium workers not paid for up to seven months.
243 Human Rights Watch (2022). FIFA/Qatar: Migrant workers call for compensation for abuses.
244 Amnesty International (2019). Reality check: Migrant workers rights with two years to Qatar 2022 World Cup.
245 Human Rights Watch (2017). "Working like a robot": Abuse of Tanzanian domestic workers in Oman and the United Arab Emirates.
246 Johnson, M., & Wilcke, C. (2015) Caged in and breaking loose: Intimate labour, the state and migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. In: Sara Friedman & Pardis Mahdavi, eds. Migrant Encounters: Intimate Labor, the State, and Mobi.
247 Human Rights Watch (2009). For a better life: Migrant worker abuse in Bahrain and the government reform agenda.
248 UNHCR (2008). Trafficking in persons report 2008 – Bahrain.
249 Amnesty International (2019). Reality check: Migrant workers rights with two years to Qatar 2022 World Cup.
250 State of Qatar (2014). The national report of the State of Qatar on The complete and effective implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 2014 – 2019. UN Women.
251 McQue, K. (2024). "Every day I cry": 50 women talk about life as a domestic worker under the Gulf's kafala system. The Guardian.
252 Liloia, A. (2022). The role of women in Oman's social and economic progress. Arab Center Washington DC.
253 Al Khateeb, S.A. (1987). Female employment and family commitment in Saudi Arabia. A case study of Riyadh city. Social Anthropology Department University College London, Doctoral thesis.
254 Al Gharaibeh, F. M. (2015). An exploration of the evolution of women's roles in societies of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Social Development Issues, 37(3), 22-44.
255 Al Boinin, H. (2023). Women's entrepreneurship in the GCC: A literature analysis from a socio-cultural perspective. Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy, 17(5), 999-1021.

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) conducted a survey that included several GCC countries that surveyed 1500 women. The data shows that 59% of these women want financial independence and prefer to work, but cultural expectations surrounding family life have a major influence on their ambitions. Ninety-four% of them claim that they want employers that respect their work-life balance and respect their desire for a full career and enough family time[256]. Another study by the Middle East Council shows that most women feel pressured to prioritize their family roles and let go of their careers[257].

Despite having several governmental initiatives to increase women's presence in the workforce, the Gulf governments are simultaneously perceived to encourage women to commit to traditional female roles concerning their families. For instance, Qatar has stated in its National Development Strategy that women have an "indispensable role in upholding traditional familial and cultural values"[258].

Hence, these traditional norms still have a major influence on women's choices. Therefore, it has been observed that women who try to balance their work and family life prefer public sector jobs since these sectors are considered safer and more family-friendly[259].

Challenges

Many GCC countries have made efforts to introduce laws to support women in the workforce, but significant gaps remain. Most legislative reforms often exclude domestic workers from protections under general labor laws, creating a divide between those in formal and informal employment.

Thus, migrant domestic workers have organized themselves through various means despite heavy restrictions. In Saudi Arabia, for example, migrant workers have mobilized social networks among their own communities to enable freelance work, as it is "very difficult for lone migrant women to negotiate life as freelancers outside of sponsors' homes" and have benefitted from support from voluntary associations within and outside the country[260]. Yet still, migrant workers and migrant domestic workers' rights organizations, as well as broader women's and feminist initiatives, have continued organizing within and outside the region.

The current state of affairs of paid and unpaid care work in the Gulf region is a stark reflection of the notion that "legislative reforms alone do not automatically translate into real impact for workers, and for these changes to be more than ink on paper, far greater efforts are needed"[261].

In addition, there exists a heavy reliance on foreign healthcare workers in the Gulf, creating a dual labor market where non-national workers, especially women, face different working conditions[262]. This large number of workers unprotected by the law magnifies the original challenges.

Nevertheless, civil society organizations remain highly monitored and largely restricted by governments, which hinders their women's rights and human rights advocacy, especially on demands related to free movement, types of employment, abortion, and nationality issues[263].

Opportunities

Given the wide nature of challenges arising in terms of the care economy in GCC countries, several options emerge in terms of building solutions.

256 PwC. (2022). MENA Women in Work Survey.
257 Ben Mimoune, N., & Kabbani, N. S. (2023). Women of the Gulf break labor market barriers: A journey in progress (Issue Brief). Middle East Council on Global Affairs.
258 Liloia, A. (2020). Barriers to women's workforce participation in the Gulf Arab states. Arab Center Washington DC.
259 Ben Mimoune, N., & Kabbani, N. S. (2023). Women of the Gulf break labor market barriers: A journey in progress (Issue Brief). Middle East Council on Global Affairs.
260 Johnson, M., & Wilcke, C. (2015). Caged in and breaking loose: Intimate labour, the state and migrant domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. In S. Friedman & P. Mahdavi (Eds.), Migrant encounters: Intimate labor, the state, and mobility across Asia (pp. 135–159). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
261 Amnesty International (2019). Reality check: Migrant workers rights with two years to Qatar 2022 World Cup.
262 Sheikh, J. I., Cheema, S., Chaabna, K., Lowenfels, A. B., & Mamtani, R. (2019). Capacity building in health care professions within the Gulf Cooperation Council countries: Paving the way forward. BMC Medical Education, 19(1), 83.
263 Liloia, A. (2020). Barriers to women's workforce participation in the Gulf Arab states. Arab Center Washington DC.

First and foremost, by making sure policies are put into action properly, especially regarding the Kafala system. By ensuring proper policy implementation, threats surrounding the Kafala system could slowly be abolished. Nevertheless, further revisions of labor laws and legislation surrounding Kafala should also be examined to evaluate how to further diminish its risks.

Secondly, provision of longer periods of paid maternity leaves in countries could also provide support to women wanting to reintegrate the labor force following their pregnancy. That being said, alternative childcare options sponsored by the government that match the work-life balance of working mothers are essential, especially for non-national women.

Governments should be committed to also refining personal status laws, which tend to limit movement for women - indirectly allowing male relatives to make decisions on behalf of their female relatives.

Additionally, non-national women must receive support in facilities and incentives in GCC countries, considering their large involvement in the labor force.

Finally, raising awareness on the importance of financial independence for women is key in the region and a building block to abolishing patriarchal norms in the region. Tunisia

Tunisia

Tunisia has made significant strides in advancing gender equality, particularly by being the only MENA country to withdraw its reservations from the CEDAW convention in 2011 and achieving notable progress in its gender gap index (from ranking 108 in 2011[264] to dropping to 128 in 2023[265]).

However, since President Kais Said assumed office in October 2019 and the 25th of July Pro-Kais movement in 2021, Tunisia has experienced a notable regression in gender equality and women's rights. His administration has been criticized for undermining democratic institutions and reversing progressive reforms achieved after the 2011 revolution. For instance, the obligation to respect gender parity in high-level appointments was abrogated, and the government has failed to ratify certain international agreements promoting women's rights. Additionally, there has been a significant decrease in women's representation in parliament, dropping by half, which many attribute to changes in electoral laws and political appointments under Said's rule[266].

These developments have raised concerns among human rights organizations about the potential erosion of women's rights in Tunisia.

Although there is still discourse about gender equality and women's rights in Tunisia, the issue of care work is rarely if ever brought up in public debates.

It is important to note that unpaid care work remains disproportionately performed by women in Tunisia - like many other Arab countries or countries in the MENA region.

It is estimated that women perform around eight times more domestic work than their male counterparts[267]. Other estimates suggest that women spend more than five times more on unpaid care work than men, with married women being on the upper side of the spectrum[268]. A more recent statistic obtained by the UN in 2020 suggests that women above the age of 15 spend almost 21.9% of their time on domestic and unpaid work. Even though data may vary slightly between sources, it remains obvious that women are bearing the heavy burden of unpaid care work in Tunisia.

Nevertheless, the Tunisian Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood and Seniors budget has even estimated the monetary value of unpaid care

264 Hausmann, R., Tyson, L. D., & Zahidi, S. (2011). The global gender gap report 2011. World Economic Forum.
265 Global Gender Gap Index (2023)
266 Amnesty International. (2023b). Human rights in Tunisia.
267 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
268 El Lahga, A. & Amara, M. (2020). The care economy in Tunisia: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.

work done by women between the years 2005 and 2010 to be worth around 4 billion dollars[269].

Women are part of the formal workforce, however, more prominently, the informal workforce. Effectively, women form 32.5% of the informal economy[270] and are prone to this due to social expectations restricting their proper employment. The FLFPR in Tunisia was estimated to be 26.9% compared to 68% for males[271].

Furthermore, only 17.3% of women above the legal working age in Tunisia receive a pension, compared to a striking 94% of men[272].

The unequal distribution of unpaid care work disproportionately assigned to women significantly affects their health and well-being, particularly for those balancing multiple paid and unpaid care and non-care responsibilities[273].

In Tunisia, as in other contexts, these dynamics were amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and women's overall access to adequate social services further deteriorated[274]. Indeed, access to social services is particularly difficult for rural Tunisian women in light of situations such as the country's water crisis, which has constrained sanitary and food and water provision responsibilities.

These realities stand in contrast to various sociopolitical developments that were seen as progressive and promotive of gender equality[275]. More recently, marginalized groups have been on the receiving end of an authoritative turn at the state level, which has seen a narrowing down of safe havens and a shrinking of space for black African migrants and refugees[276].

Despite having a strong women's movement that has had a palpable impact on law and policy changes, positive policy outcomes risk being reversed with the current political landscape.[277]

Legislation and Policymaking

The country's new constitution of 2022 declares that men and women are equal in rights and duties (Article 23)[278], yet some literature highlights gaps in policymaking and implementation, especially on matters related to labor rights.

In Tunisia, women in formal employment enjoy maternity benefits across both public and private institutions. This includes a two-month paid maternity leave and on-site childcare facilities at 50-employee-plus workplaces. The law applying to private sector employers mandates 30 days of unpaid leave and daily breastfeeding breaks, but its implementation remains inadequate[279]. Although better than its Arab counterparts, it still lags behind international standards of labor.

Nevertheless, according to the Tunisia labor law, there are restrictions on women working at night in some industrial jobs (Article 66)[280], and Articles 77 and 78 prohibit them from working in hazardous jobs to ensure their safety[281].

The Tunisian labor law also forces employers to provide equal opportunities for both genders in hiring and promotions and considers wage discrimination illegal[282]. However, there are concerns about the actual implementation of this law in practice.

In comparison to other MENA countries, women in Tunisia have obtained more rights throughout the years. For example, women under the law have

269 The New Arab (2023). Unpaid care work behind Tunisia's 'feminisation' of poverty'.
270 Mahmoud, S. (2023). Forgotten toilers: Women working in the informal economy in Tunisia. Capire.
271 World Bank. (n.d.). Gender Data Portal.
272 UN Women. (2021). Country fact sheet: Tunisia. UN Women Data Hub.
273 Tunis Afrique Presse (2021). Tunisia: Focus on Oxfam-Tunisia campaign on women's unpaid care work. allAfrica.
274 UN Women (2020). Tunisian women in the face of COVID-19: During and after confinement.
275 The New Arab (2023). Unpaid care work behind Tunisia's 'feminisation' of poverty'.
276 Human Rights Watch. (2023). Tunisia: No safe haven for black African migrants, refugees.
277 Moghadam, V. M. (2018). Gender inequality and economic inclusion in Tunisia: Key policy issues (Issue Brief). Edward P. Djerejian Center for the Middle East.
278 Tunisia Constitution of 2022.
279 Moghadam, V. M. (2018). Gender inequality and economic inclusion in Tunisia: Key policy issues (Issue Brief). Edward P. Djerejian Center for the Middle East.
280 World Bank. (2023). Women, business and the law: Tunisia 2023.
281 Learning Partnership. (2017). Labor Code of Tunisia.
282 UNFPA (2018). Tunisia Country Assessment.

the right to own their passports and move freely across borders with no restrictions. In addition, Tunisia's "Code du Statut Personnel" (Article 23) allows a woman to maintain her autonomy during marriage, requiring no obligations from her towards her spouse, and lets her choose her place of living. Nevertheless, that same law does not allow women to be the "head" of the house like men[283].

In more recent years, Tunisia has made a major stride in implementing laws protecting women. For example, in 2017, a law on the elimination of violence against women was passed, criminalizing all forms of violence against women and girls, providing protection and support for survivors, and mandating preventive and educational measures to combat gender-based violence[284]. However, women's rights activists pinpointed that this law has been partially implemented, and its potential in protecting women is limited[285].

In 2018, president Beji proposed an inheritance equality law, challenging Tunisian traditional norms. After sparking significant debate in Tunisia, the law was therefore not passed[286].

The partial implementation such laws and the failure to pass other legislations highlight structural and cultural barriers that continue to hinder women's full participation in Tunisia's workforce. Gender-based violence and unequal inheritance rights perpetuate economic dependency and limit women's access to resources, which are critical for improving their female labor force participation.

Labor Participation

Female participation in the labor force is relatively low in Tunisia, with only 28% of women being active members of the workforce in contrast to 65.5% of Tunisian men[287].

It has been registered that the majority of women in the workforce prefer public sector jobs since they consider them to be stable and family-friendly[288]. They are also more employed in social service sectors, such as health and education institutions, compared to men[289]. The composition of paid care sectors reflects the Tunisian workforce's gender composition and skill distribution that plays within gender roles[290].

Despite these two sectors' contribution to women's employment, women are still twice as likely to be unemployed compared to men, primarily due to unpaid care work responsibilities, which also impacts their ability to participate in unions and political activities[291].

Similar to other MENA countries, women's high unemployment rates come concurrently with high educational attainments[292], and they are greatly present in the country's interior regions, which lack adequate infrastructure, healthcare, and communication networks when compared to coastal areas.

Women's paid work -especially in the private sector- is also hindered by the fact that private sector employers are not obligated to provide paid maternity leave, even though the law requires that new mothers be granted 30 days of unpaid leave and allowed daily breaks during working hours to breastfeed for up to one year after childbirth[293].

Women's low rates of labor participation are also due to employer discrimination. An experiment done in Tunisia showed that women, in general, had lower rates of being invited to an interview after sending out applications. In the IT sector, women were 15% less likely to get a callback than men.

283 World Bank. (2023). Women, business and the law: Tunisia 2023.
284 UN Women. (2017). Tunisia passes historic law to end violence against women and girls. UN Women.
285 Youssef, M. (2021). Three waves of gender reform in Tunisia: Reflections on the eve of National Women's Day. Wilson Center.
286 Ibid.
287 The New Arab (2023). Unpaid care work behind Tunisia's 'feminisation' of poverty.
288 Mouelhi, R. B. A., & Goaied, M. (2017). Women in the Tunisian Labor Market. Economic Research Forum.
289 Alaref, J., Nikaein Towfighian, S., Paez, G. N., & Audah, M. (2014). Tunisia labor market field experiment paper. The World Bank.
290 El Lahga, A., & Amara, M. (2020). The care economy in Tunisia: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
291 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
292 Nazier, H. & Ezzat, A. (2022). Gender differences and time allocation: A comparative analysis of Egypt and Tunisia. The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance, 85, pp. 174–193.
293 Moghadam, V. M. (2018). Gender inequality and economic inclusion in Tunisia: Key policy issues (Issue Brief). Edward P. Djerejian Center for the Middle East.

Additionally, veiled women had an 8.5% less chance to get the job than non-veiled women[294].

Women in Tunisia have been thriving as entrepreneurs. In 2005, Tunisia had 5,000 women entrepreneurs, and that number doubled over a period of three years[295]. In 2020, the number of members of "the Chamber of Women Entrepreneurs in Tunisia" was 18,000[296]. Most of these women decided to become entrepreneurs to be able to balance their work-family life and secure their labor rights. It is also recorded that more women (29.4%) want to be fully independent in their businesses in comparison to men (25.8%) driven by a desire to ensure fair treatment[297]. For instance, a Tunisian female entrepreneur said, "*chose to build my business to be independent, achieve my personal goals, and convince those around me of my capability to manage a firm*," which is a common motive for women entrepreneurs in Tunisia[298]. Being a female entrepreneur has its own increased obstacles in Tunisia due to sociocultural norms also being embedded in Tunisian law and policies, making the process harder for women[299].

Unfortunately, labor dynamics have disproportionate impacts on various social groups, especially rural women in informal labor. The majority of working women in Tunisia are employed in the informal sector, with only 26.5% of all women enjoying comprehensive social protection[300]. For example, women need to be registered to a social security system in order to enjoy maternity leave. Consequently, women workers in informal settings are excluded from such benefits[301].

Informality is a perennial issue across Tunisia's rural contexts, especially for rural women working in family farming or low-paid seasonal positions, despite comprising 43% of all working women and the sector contributing up to 9% of the country's GDP. This space is characterized by exclusion from state economic development projects, precarious working hours, economic dependency on men, and lack of recognition[302]. The lack of recognition for women in these informal jobs is clear. For example, in 2019, 40 fatalities and 496 injuries were the result of inadequate transportation to these informal agricultural jobs[303].

Clearly, rural women are less represented in formal employment, and those in the agricultural sector earn around 50% less than their male counterparts[304].

Social Norms

Social and cultural norms play a big role in determining Tunisian women's futures. Like several other countries in the MENA region, the patriarchal view is dominant in Tunisia, designating men as household providers and women as caregivers. Other common social perceptions are that women are weak, need protection, and are too emotional to become leaders[305]. Such beliefs often hinder women from fully exercising their legal rights.

In Tunisia, education is valued for women but is typically viewed as a pre-marriage pursuit rather than a primal step toward a career and a step for social mobility[306].

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294 Alaref, J., Towfighian, S. N., Paez, G. N., & Audah, M. (2020). The impact of employer discrimination on female labor market outcomes: Experimental evidence from Tunisia (Policy Research Working Paper No. 9361). World Bank.
295 Drine, I., & Grach, M. (2012). Supporting women entrepreneurs in Tunisia. European Journal of Development Research, 24(3), 450–464.
296 Ben Salem, A., Malek, A., & Chka, H. (2020). Profile of women entrepreneurs in Tunisia and their choice of entrepreneurial career: An exploratory study. Journal of Enterprising Culture, 28(3), 281–303.
297 Drine, I., & Grach, M. (2012). Supporting women entrepreneurs in Tunisia. European Journal of Development Research, 24(3), 450–464.
298 Ben Salem, A., Malek, A., & Chka, H. (2020). Profile of women entrepreneurs in Tunisia and their choice of entrepreneurial career: An exploratory study. Journal of Enterprising Culture, 28(3), 281–303.
299 Drine, I., & Grach, M. (2012). Supporting women entrepreneurs in Tunisia. European Journal of Development Research, 24(3), 450–464.
300 Murphy, E.C. et al. (2023). "No place for a woman": Access, exclusion, insecurity and the mobility regime in grand tunis'. Geoforum, 142, p. 103753.
301 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
302 Mbarek, F. (2022). Rural women in Tunisia: The dilemmas of informal and feminized labour'. Assafir Al-Arabi.
303 Mahmoud, S. (2023). Forgotten toilers: Women working in the informal economy in Tunisia. Capire.
304 Murphy, E.C. et al. (2023). "No place for a woman": Access, exclusion, insecurity and the mobility regime in grand tunis'. Geoforum, 142, p. 103753.
305 Jasinska, M. (2017). Tackling social norms that drive violence against women in Tunisia: Reflections from the SVRI Forum 2017. Sexual Violence Research Initiative.
306 Goedhuys, M., Mahé, C., Nillesen, E., & Reitmann, A.-K. (2023). Measuring social norms towards women and work in Tunisia: An assessment of the "opinion-matching" method. Agence Française de Développement.

Social norms are also prevalent in the workforce itself, for women are more likely to work as teachers, social assistants, or nurses. This perception that women must be confined to their "natural role" even in the workforce is widespread in Tunisia[307]. Some are even restricted to fewer job options, needing to look for jobs respecting "female modesty," a conservative value in Islam[308].

Within the male-dominated workforce, women often face the dilemma of balancing their cultural roles with professional demands. Job expectations may require assertiveness, firmness, and dominance, which may conflict with socially accepted feminine attitudes and thus be frowned upon[309].

Cultural norms add obstacles to several law-given freedoms for women. For instance, in Medenine, a conservative city in Tunisia, three out of four women need male authorization to go out of their houses and on trips[310]. Women in general in Tunisia are also discouraged from independent traveling and relocating for job opportunities[311].

Because of these socio-cultural traditions, women are often confined to family roles that demand hours of unpaid care work.

On another note, social norms in Tunisia perpetuate violence against women and restrict their empowerment. Around 47.65% of women have experienced a form of abuse in Tunisia, 55% of which label it as a part of "ordinary life." To add, 90% of the Tunisian population believes that matters of violence are private and domestic that should not be publicly addressed[312]. These findings show that social norms influence how both genders perceive certain behaviors as "normal," ultimately affecting their quality of life.

Challenges

Girls in Tunisia are potentially raised with the idea that care is exclusively a woman's responsibility[313], which limits men's involvement in these tasks. Rigid social expectations and gender roles[314], stigmatization, and patriarchal structures[315] play a direct role in the current state of affairs when it comes to unpaid care work in Tunisia and men's dominance over household decisions despite their limited domestic contributions[316].

Despite benefiting from gender equity-related regulations and the rise of many women to notable political positions[317], women are still underrepresented in political spheres, and this, in turn, impacts the prospects of gender-sensitive policymaking. Importantly, political violence against women and problematic media and attention to women's issues accentuate women's accession to decision-making processes[318]. Political participation is even worse for women with disabilities who face compound barriers and tokenistic approaches[319]. However, with the current landscape, the country is facing a multifaceted crisis represented to a large degree by a popular loss of confidence in the prevailing unjust system and its lack of accountability[320].

Feminist organizers have battled for gender equality across different public and workplaces and have warned against the dangers of feminizing labor in certain areas, which can lead to further oppression[321].

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307 Arfaoui, K. (2016). Women and leadership in the post-Arab Spring: The case of Tunisia. In F. Sadiqi (Ed.), Women's Movements in Post-"Arab Spring" North Africa (pp. 223–234). Palgrave Macmillan.
308 Goedhuys, M., Mahé, C., Nillesen, E., & Reitmann, A.-K. (2023). Measuring social norms towards women and work in Tunisia: An assessment of the "opinion-matching" method. Agence Française de Développement.
309 Ibid.
310 von Schlieben, H. (2021). Tunisia: Unlocking the potential of women as agents of change. Cities Alliance.
311 World Bank. (2021). Women, business and the law 2021: Tunisia snapshot.
312 Jasinska, M. (2017). Tackling social norms that drive violence against women in Tunisia: Reflections from the SVRI Forum 2017. Sexual Violence Research Initiative.
313 Galand, S. (2020) "What will the others think?" Reflections on social norms and unpaid care work in Tunisia. Oxfam.
314 Murphy et al. (2023). "No place for a woman": Access, exclusion, insecurity and the mobility regime in grand Tunis. Geoforum, 142, p. 103753.
315 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
316 El Lahga, A., & Amara, M. (2020). The care economy in Tunisia: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
317 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). 2019: Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
318 Murphy et al. (2023). "No place for a woman": Access, exclusion, insecurity and the mobility regime in grand Tunis. Geoforum, 142, p. 103753.
319 El Lahga, A., & Amara, M. (2020). The care economy in Tunisia: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
320 Mbarek, F. (2022). Rural women in Tunisia: The dilemmas of informal and feminized labour. Assafir Al-Arabi.
321 Ibid.

Literature has pointed out several policy recommendations that can improve the state of affairs of unpaid care work and women's rights in Tunisia. This includes enhancing and mobilizing resources for the country's social services sectors, improving local access to such sectors, supporting daycare and safe transportation[322], constructing childcare facilities[323], improving water access and the provision of public water networks and infrastructures[324], developing elder-care provisions, establishing a national dialogue on care, and providing the necessary information and data through the conduction of regular time-use surveys[325].

Morocco

As of 2021, Morocco ranked 140th out of 149 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index[326]; despite a slight improvement in ranking in 2024 (137th), it is still within the bottom 10 countries in the index[327]. These indices highlight the weak engagement and role of women in the formal economy in Morocco[328].

2023 also saw its lowest point in the FLFPR, which decreased to 19.8%[329], in addition to a persistent and significant gender wage gap, an overrepresentation of women in the informal economy and precarious and unpaid labor, and workforce exits after marriage[330].

Notably, gender imbalances in employment are more pronounced in rural areas where women represent almost two-thirds of contributing family workers, according to a report published by the ILO[331]. The same report identifies multiple barriers to young women's economic empowerment: (1) high dependency on women to perform unpaid family work, (2) gender stereotyping of roles, (3) limited access to education, market and technical information, training, local enterprises, and (4) and deeply-rooted patriarchal norms.

The disproportional burden of unpaid care work in Morocco and the informal economy, including self-employed women, were also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which female poverty has been set back an estimated six years[332], and during which violence against women, especially working-class women and domestic workers, has risen.

In fact, it is estimated that women spend around 38% of their free time on domestic work, compared to 5% for men, and the pandemic has further relegated women to the domestic sphere[333].

Efforts such as revisions of laws like the 2004 Moudawana (Family Code) removed multiple elements that restricted women's roles and rights and set out principles related to joint domestic and familial responsibility[334], and recent initiatives have sought to align the Moroccan legal framework to the SDGs, specifically when it comes to gender equality[335]. Yet, other legal codes like that of labor, cultural attitudes and barriers remain a great obstacle.

Legislation and Policy Making

According to Moroccan labor law, various sectors have different legal minimum wages. For example, workers in the agriculture sector receive a minimum wage of 76.7 Moroccan dirhams (MAD) daily. The labor law provides social security services for wage workers, but

322 El Lahga, A., & Amara, M. (2020). The care economy in Tunisia: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
323 Moghadam, V. M. (2018). Gender inequality and economic inclusion in Tunisia: Key policy issues (Issue Brief). Edward P. Djerejian Center for the Middle East.
324 Nazier, H. & Ezzat, A. (2022). Gender differences and time allocation: A comparative analysis of Egypt and Tunisia. The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance, 85, pp. 174–193.
325 El Lahga, A., & Amara, M. (2020). The care economy in Tunisia: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
326 Bernard, H. (2023). The gender wage gap in Morocco. The Borgen Project.
327 Global Gender Gap Index (2024). World Economic Forum.
328 Taqeem Initiative (2018). Morocco: Young women's employment and empowerment in the rural economy. International Labour Organization.
329 World Bank (2024). Gender Data.
330 Bernard, H. (2023). The gender wage gap in Morocco. The Borgen Project.
331 Taqeem Initiative (2018). Morocco: Young women's employment and empowerment in the rural economy. International Labour Organization.
332 Bernard, H. (2023). The gender wage gap in Morocco. The Borgen Project.
333 Ennaji, M. (2021). Unemployment and conflict: How COVID-19 has affected women in Morocco. The Conversation.
334 Taqeem Initiative (2018). Morocco: Young women's employment and empowerment in the rural economy. International Labour Organization.
335 Bernard, H. (2023). The gender wage gap in Morocco. The Borgen Project.

they are obligated to register with the National Social Security Fund (CNSS). This fund covers illness, maternity, disability, and pensions. For a woman to be allowed maternity leave, she has to contribute to the CNSS for 54 days in the 10 working months before she leaves. She benefits from a daily income that equals her daily salary but for a maximum of 6,000 MAD per month, and a compulsory full coverage of pregnancy medical procedures, by the mandatory health insurance (AMO). For the mother, the maternity leave lasts for 14 weeks, with a minimum of 7 weeks post-delivery; however, the father is offered only 3 days of paternity leave, with the utmost salary of 692 MAD[336].

However, the legal status of domestic workers in Morocco, as outlined in the 2018 law, demands contracts for employment, registration with CNSS, and a minimum wage that cannot be less than 60% of the legal wages of the industrial and commercial domains, which is 2828.71 MAD per month. Although the law is present, the conformation rate is relatively low, where only less than 2000 domestic workers were registered with the CNSS in 2020, compared to the employment of approximately 490,000 domestic workers[337].

The benefits mentioned are for the formal wage workers; informal wage workers, such as domestic workers, unpaid family workers, and self-employed workers, on the other hand, do not benefit from social security, and work protections, and they often do not have legal work contracts. Despite the efforts to lower the rate of informal wage workers, it was still 55% in 2019, which is significantly high. Thus, more than half of the country's workers are excluded from benefits provided by the labor law[338].

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the government aimed at developing a reform plan that acts on the universalization of health insurance to include non-wage workers, expansion of pension schemes to those who do not have access to pensions, generalization of the family allowance program to integrate vulnerable households, and lastly broadening the loss of employment allowance[339]. However, some of the suggested initiatives received criticism. According to the Moroccan Observatory for Social Protection, the strategy falls short in many pillars such as gender-sensitivity of policies, measures to curb unemployment or to support persons involuntarily unemployed, and the ineffective targeting measures of social protection interventions[340].

Labor Participation

As mentioned, the FLFPR decreased in Morocco, since 1990 to reach 19.8% in 2023 -a record low- compared to that of men which is 68.3%[341]. Women are also mostly represented in informal and unpaid work, with 65% of women engaging in vulnerable employment compared to 37% of men[342]. As a result, women are at a higher risk of poverty, due to the lack of social security, social safety nets, and formal work agreements[343].

Multiple barriers have hindered women's participation in the labor force, especially in rural areas. One of the most prominent barriers is the "double burden" where women are expected to balance their professional paid work and unpaid care work at home[344]. This, consequently, restricts their ability to be actively involved in the labor market, particularly in the private sector which rarely has flexible work arrangements, not to mention the physical and psychological toll it has on the women. Nevertheless, gender stereotypes play a significant role as they shape the type of training and education women should get. For instance, women are encouraged to work in "feminine" fields such as education, social work, and healthcare, while men are expected to work in more "critical" fields like defense, interior, or finance. In rural areas, where traditional norms are still highly prevalent, women's access to

336 Gannat, H. (2021). Labor regulation and social protection for workers in Morocco. World Bank.
337 Ibid.
338 Ibid.
339 Ibid.
340 HES Press Morocco. (2024). Report card on Morocco's social protection policies: Achievements and challenges.
341 World Bank (2023). Gender Data Portal: Morocco.
342 Bernard, H. (2023). The gender wage gap in Morocco. The Borgen Project.
343 World Bank (2023) Gender Data Portal: Morocco.
344 Barnett, C. (2024). Gender Role Attitudes, Perceived Norms, and the "Double Burden" in Morocco. World Bank.

training is limited to prevent their interactions with men[345].

With a literacy rate of 69.1% for women compared to that of men which is 85.6%[346], women's job opportunities remain limited as most jobs require the candidate to be literate. However, literacy rates remain very low in rural and remote areas: for example, in 2017, 90% of women were illiterate in rural areas primarily due to traditional and cultural norms[347].

Although gender equality laws exist, inconsistency in their implementation is clear, resulting in sharper gender disparities in the workforce[348].

Social Norms

Patriarchy prevails and persists in Morocco and traditions and customs are an important and crucial pillar in society. The culture is characterized by a patriarchal structure in which men are regarded as superior to women. The former are traditionally viewed as the primary providers and protectors of the family, whereas the latter are primarily responsible for caregiving roles. Consequently, the autonomy of women is often undermined as they are always referred to as daughters, wives, or mothers[349].

This power dynamic enforces the economic dependency of women on men, especially in the presence of discriminatory laws that fail to guarantee equal rights. For example, the inheritance law provides the man with double the shares of the woman in Morocco, a practice inspired by the norm that men should support their families financially. This deprives women from having collateral in the first place, and consequently limiting their access to finances for personal or professional causes[350].

Moreover, according to a report by the High Commission for Planning (HCP) in Morocco, nearly 75% of inactive young women attributed their exit from the labor market to responsibilities related to childcare and household chores, as well as opposition from their spouse or father[351]. These norms extend to employers as well, where companies also perceive married women as less dependable considering they do not have enough time to work while taking on family duties. The HCP report has shown that the marital status gap, the labor difference in FLFPR between married and unmarried women, is 70%[352].

Challenges

Despite the growing presence of Moroccan workers in the informal sector, they remain excluded from labor law protections, resulting in the denial of essential rights such as social security, health insurance, and workplace protections. This exclusion hinders efforts to improve labor conditions, as the government often neglects the rights of employees. Women, who are disproportionately represented in the informal sector, face additional challenges, including the denial of maternity leave, medical coverage for childbirth, and access to childcare services.

In the early 2000s, Morocco made strides in strengthening its legal framework for gender equality, embedding equality and parity as constitutional values, and implementing reforms and policies to promote women's rights. However, these efforts have often faced resistance within a challenging political climate. Some organizations such as the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (ADFM), has played a pivotal role in advancing women's rights, particularly by advocating for reforms in the social security system to protect vulnerable women workers and address the gender wage gap. Their work highlights the importance of systemic gender equality in fostering women's economic empowerment[353].

345 Taqeem Initiative (2018). Morocco: Young women's employment and empowerment in the rural economy. International Labour Organization.
346 World Bank (2022). Gender Data Portal: Morocco.
347 Rodriguez, M. (2017). Five facts about women's education in Morocco. The Borgen Project.
348 Bernard, H. (2023). The gender wage gap in Morocco. The Borgen Project.
349 Taqeem Initiative (2018). Morocco: Young women's employment and empowerment in the rural economy. International Labour Organization.
350 Ibid.
351 Haut-Commissariat au Plan (2024). Profils et déterminants des jeunes NEETS au Maroc: Un éclairage à partir de l'enquête nationale sur l'emploi 2022.
352 World Bank (2015). Female labor force participation in Morocco: Constraints and priorities. World Bank.
353 Bernard, H. (2023). The gender wage gap in Morocco. The Borgen Project.

In addition, National government programs were also implemented recently, such as the Tadamon program which "enables all beneficiaries to receive healthcare from both public and private clinics. This new reform is designed to reduce the burden on public health facilities and ensure equal access to healthcare resources"[354].

However, initiatives such as Tadamon minimally reached rural populations, women farmers, and laborers specifically. As the father is considered the head of the household, this hampered women from directly applying for governmental support schemes. This pushed local communities to rely on familial and communal support and care, which women also largely performed[355].

Egypt

The disproportionate distribution of unpaid care work in Egypt is similar to the rest of the Arab region but with particular contextualities and differences.

Women perform the majority of unpaid care work with an estimated 88% of working-age women performing such tasks (91% according to other sources[356,357]). Married women in particular spend considerable time on unpaid care work, twice as much as unmarried women, around seven times more than their male partners, compared to six times between unmarried women and men[358]. The responsibilities that women carry out domestically take place regardless of the state of women's employment, which often leads to double-day work[359], and often both types of activities are under-compensated and underrecognized[360].

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, women and girls took the responsibility of increased domestic care responsibilities and many had to resign from their formal jobs in the process[361]. Women's vulnerabilities were also accentuated during the pandemic, be it related to financial insecurity, precarious employment, or COVID-19 contraction[362].

Legislation and Policymaking

Similar to many Arab countries, women in Egypt still face many legislative and regulatory barriers to enter the formal labor market. Legislative barriers include and are not limited to the Egyptian labor code, social security laws, personal status laws and many more. For example, most work in Egypt is regulated by the Labor law No.12 of 2003[363] to the explicit exclusion of domestic work, informal and casual labor, and agricultural work. These categories are characterized by minimal to no benefits, minimal to no social protection schemes, no legal protection and higher vulnerability and exposure to exploitation and abuse. Nevertheless, the labor code falls short in relation to safeguarding policies. For instance, even though maternity leave is 90 days paid leave, there are no parental leaves for fathers, which ultimately places the caregiving responsibilities and burden on mothers solely. On January 6th, 2025, a draft law was submitted to parliament for the Manpower Committee of the House to introduce legal amendments in order to protect working women[364].

The social insurance law No. 148 of 2019 -although provides insurance and pension for working women – it excludes and does not cover women in the informal sector and who make the larger proportion of careworkers in Egypt[365] - leaving those who need protection the most without it.

Another challenge lies in the implementation of safeguarding laws in a professional setting. In 2014, Egypt amended its Penal Code to introduce a clear definition of sexual harassment

354 Hickey, M. (2024). Morocco aims to achieve universal healthcare through integrating all healthcare programs (2022–present).
355 Leonardelli, I. et al. (2021). COVID-19 in Rural India, Algeria, and Morocco: A feminist analysis of small-scale farmers' and agricultural laborers' experiences and inventive practices, Frontiers in Human Dynamics, 3.
356 FAO (2022). Gender, water, and agriculture – Assessing the nexus in Egypt Cairo.
357 Selwaness, I. (2021). Recognising and redistributing unpaid care work in Egypt, the forum: ERF Policy Portal.
358 Ibid.
359 Selwaness, I. & Helmy, I. (2020). The care economy in Egypt: The road towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
360 Elmenoufi, M. et al. (2017). What women give. Egypt Today.
361 El Saadany, N. (2021). Egyptian women & labor force: Challenges and opportunities. Wilson Center.
362 Salem, N. (2021). Egypt's COVID-19 response through a gender lens. Arab Law Quarterly, 35(3), pp. 341–356.
363 Egypt Labor Law No.2 of 2003.
364 Egypt Today. (2025). Egypt's new draft labor law provides advantages, guarantees for working women.
365 Egypt Social Insurance Law No. 148 2019.

and criminalize it for the first time, while also increasing penalties for related offenses. More recently, in August 2021, the code was further revised, elevating sexual harassment from a misdemeanor to a felony and imposing stricter penalties. However, the enforcement of the law remains inconsistent: according to the law, women must often detain their harasser or take them to a police station to file a formal complaint, due to inadequate enforcement by the security and judicial sectors[366]. According to the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights (ECWR), police officers frequently refuse to document cases, and survivors struggle to prove incidents, especially verbal harassment, which commonly occurs in private settings like workplaces[367].

These examples highlight the significant legal challenges and systemic barriers that women in Egypt face when entering the labor force and seeking recognition or compensation for care work. Despite some legislative advancements, gaps in enforcement, exclusions from labor protections, and the undervaluation of unpaid and paid care work continue to hinder gender equality and women's economic participation.

Labor Participation

The World Bank reported in 2023 that women's participation in Egypt's labor force stood at just 17.5% compared to an 83% for males with advanced education attainment[368]. There exists a strong correlation between low FLFPR in Egypt and unpaid care work responsibilities expected from women. It was estimated that 65% of women who leave the labor force in Egypt do so in order to care for their children and families[369]. Either way, according UN Women, Egyptian women spend almost the same time on carework whether they are employed or not, which doubles the burden they face[370].

Nevertheless, although educational attainment has significantly improved for Egyptian women throughout the last three decades, it has not contributed to narrowing gender gap in the labor force participation, another example of a paradox prevalent in the MENA region. This limits women's ability to improve their own well-being, that of their children, and the overall economy. Additionally, the private sector often proves incompatible with women's domestic responsibilities, as evidenced by the higher likelihood of women leaving the private sector after marriage[371].

Care jobs in the private sector have become more feminized when compared to the public one, yet rates of informality have risen and job quality has declined. In fact, women "were almost four times more likely than men to be employed in paid care sectors (health, education, social work or domestic work) compared to other sectors of the economy"[372]. However, women's employment in vulnerable and informal sectors has been a feature of the Egyptian economy[373]. Women in the informal sector often participate as non-wage workers in household production or family businesses[374]. In fact, those involved in family businesses often do not receive an income, leaving them exposed to conditions of economic dependency, vulnerability to violence, and exclusion from decision-making[375].

Several articles have highlighted Egypt's response to the pandemic relating to the implementing of measures to support women, ranking first in a report by UN Women and the UNDP. These measures included 21 gender-sensitive ones, targeting women's economic security, unpaid care work, violence against women, and work benefits such as leaves for women of children with disabilities without losing their jobs[376].

366 Abdelaal, H. (2022). Sexual harassment laws in Egypt: Does stricter mean more effective?. The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy.
367 Ibid.
368 World Bank (2023). Group Data.
369 International Labour Organization. (2023). Education and Mismatch Indicators database (EMI) ILOSTAT.
370 UN Women. (2022). The care economy in Egypt: The road towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work.
371 Nazier, H. (2019). Women's access to paid work in Egypt: The paradox, the why and the cure. Alternative Policy Solutions.
372 Selwaness, I. & Helmy, I. (2020). The care economy in Egypt: The road towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
373 Nazier, H. (2019). Women's access to paid work in Egypt: The paradox, the why and the cure. Alternative Policy Solutions.
374 Kärkkäinen, O. (2011). Women and work in Egypt: tourism and ICT Sectors: A case study. European Training Foundation.
375 Elmenoufi, M. et al. (2017). What women give. Egypt Today.
376 Egypt Independent (2020). Egypt #1 country in the Middle East to support women during coronavirus: UN Report.

The country was also considered the first globally to release a women's policy tracker[377].

And contrary to many other MENA countries, the government has taken some steps to recognize and research unpaid care work, resulting in many state agencies cooperating with research organizations to collect data on women's domestic, care and unpaid market work[378].

Nevertheless, research has asserted that women's involvement in unpaid market work is higher for disadvantaged women, leading to intersecting forms of marginalization. These conditions are especially true for domestic work where migrant workers are overly represented and remain excluded from the Egyptian labor code and as a result from the reception of legal protection. Accordingly, Egyptian labor dynamics leave most women with limited access to protections and union rights[379].

Agriculture and Rural Areas

Women's unpaid market labor is mostly concentrated in rural areas which are characterized by more prevalent patriarchal structures[380], especially in rural Upper Egypt where larger gender gaps exist in terms of access to resources, literacy, and other aspects[381]. In addition to their domestic responsibilities, women often take care of agricultural and irrigation activities and yet are framed as mere helpers and left unpaid, while men are often renumerated for their work in cash or produce[382].

Research by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) highlights that women's agricultural activities are not considered "economic", overlooking their contributions to activities such as animal husbandry and livestock care, with women twice as likely to be primary livestock carers compared to rural men. The research adds that despite these contributions, gender gaps are significant when it comes to decisions regarding resources and assets, land ownership, and participation in water management associations despite the increased participation of women as farm workers and managers[383]. Women's contribution to the agricultural sector is highly unrecognized and unvalued/undervalued[384]. It is important to note that when it comes to care labor, women spend significantly more time than men[385].

Social Norms

Social barriers continue to play an important role in the division of unpaid care responsibilities in Egypt. Addressing such barriers is deemed essential to successfully implement policies and interventions aiming at redistributing unpaid care work[386].

These norms shape several realities, including the choice to participate in the private sector or the public one, which is considered more "family-friendly"[387]. On a broader level, these norms often restrict women's mobility within the realm of the family, in some areas more than others[388], such as agricultural areas where state service provision is already limited. Power inequalities between men and women are accentuated in rural areas, and some research suggests that it is these norms that explain why women's irrigation work is ignored or undervalued and that structure women's participation in water management groups[389].

Social barriers also have notable discursive implications. This has allowed the proliferation of terminology such as "settled at home" to describe unemployed women, which gives the impression

377 The National Council for Women (2020). Egypt's rapid response on women's situation during COVID-19.
378 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
379 Ibid.
380 Ibid.
381 FAO (2022). Gender, water and agriculture – Assessing the nexus in Egypt Cairo.
382 Ibid.
383 Ibid.
384 Ibid.
385 El Khorazaty, N.E. & Zaky, H. H. M. (2022). A gender approach to time and food security: a case study of Egypt, Discover Sustainability, 3(1), p. 34.
386 Selwaness, I. & Helmy, I. (2020). The care economy in Egypt: The road towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
387 Nazier, H. (2019). Women's access to paid work in Egypt: The paradox, the why and the cure. Alternative Policy Solutions.
388 Kärkkäinen, O. (2011). Women and work in Egypt: tourism and ICT Sectors: A case study. European Training Foundation.
389 FAO (2022). Gender, water and agriculture – Assessing the nexus in Egypt Cairo.

that women are in "a state of relaxation and leisure" and disregards their domestic work[390].

Challenges

Many challenges remain to address unpaid care work in Egypt. Despite research initiatives by state and non-state organizations, there needs to be more emphasis on the importance of care work performed largely by women[391]. Recommendations by the literature include the promotion of gender-neutral policies, as some regulations that apply to women only tend to be disincentives for employers to recruit women[392]. Others focus on appropriate employment legislation as a requirement for gender equality. This goes beyond maternity leave, nursing breaks, prohibition of pregnant workers' dismissal and legislation on sexual harassment in the workplace to include "[paid] paternity leave, equal pay for work of equal value, and parents' entitlement to flexible/part-time employment"[393]. Other research recommends the expansion of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services, the focus on changing attitudes by pushing for the involvement of men in unpaid care work and the guarantee of care workers' representation as pathways for contributing to inclusive and sustainable economic growth[394].

However, the gap between care needs and available services in the country continues to widen due to a shortage of essential childcare and educational institutions. This, in turn, hinders a more equitable distribution of unpaid care work[395].

Yemen

According to the 2004 Census, women made up less than 5% of the informal sector workforce in Yemen (Government of Yemen, 2007). Within this sector, most women were engaged in home-based work, while the majority of men worked outside the home. This national classification marked progress in recognizing various groups of informal workers, including home-based workers and street vendors[396].

Little to no effort has been made in Yemen to address these gaps, especially with Yemen witnessing one of the worst conflicts in recent history and one of the most dangerous humanitarian crises. Around 80% of the population amounting up to 24 million people have been left in need of humanitarian aid, half of which are acutely food insecure[397].

The United Nations has labeled the crisis in Yemen as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world for a period of time. Despite the Hudaydah agreement in 2018, fighting has since continued[398]. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic came as healthcare systems in Yemen collapsed, with deaths in Yemen being five times the global average[399].

These protracted crises have had catastrophic impacts on women and girls[400], while plans for advancing gender equality in Yemen remain low[401]. The vitality of many communities in the country depends on women's care work, which is highly risky and driven by insecurity in a context of conflict[402]. For example, in the North, both urban and rural women experience a significant increase in their workload as they balance family care responsibilities with generating essential income, primarily through small-scale and home-based economic activities like sewing, crafts, and incense production.

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390 New Woman Foundation (2016). The value of women's unpaid housework in Egypt.
391 Tabet, K. et al. (2019). Counting on women's work without counting women's work. Oxfam International.
392 Selwaness, I. (2021). Recognising and redistributing unpaid care work in Egypt, the forum: ERF Policy Portal.
393 Nazier, H. (2019). Women's access to paid work in Egypt: The paradox, the why and the cure. Alternative Policy Solutions.
394 Selwaness, I. & Helmy, I. (2020). The care economy in Egypt: The road towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
395 Ibid.
396 Omeira, M. (2013). From informality to decent work in Yemen. International Labor Organization.
397 Karasapan, O. (2020). Yemen's children: A crisis within a crisis. Brookings.
398 UNHCR (2020). 2019 Yemen Country Report.
399 Looi M. K. (2020). Covid-19: Deaths in Yemen are five times global average as healthcare collapses. BMJ (Clinical research ed.), 370, m2997.
400 UNFPA (2023). 12.6 million women and girls in Yemen need life-saving support.
401 Peace Track Initiative et al. (2019). Changes ahead: Yemeni women map the road to peace. Women's International Leage for Peace and Freedom.
402 al-Gawfi, I. et al. (2020). The role of women in peacebuilding in Yemen. Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient.

However, they report little to no change in men's contribution to household labor[403].

This means that the situation in Yemen is no different than other Arab counterparts and that although contexts change, the unrecognized care responsibilities women bear remain the same.

Legislation and Policymaking

The Yemen labor law presents significant gaps and in relation to women's involvement in the labor force and with regards to care work protections. Similar to most cases in the MENA and GCC regions, it excludes public servants, foreigners, casual and informal workers, and domestic workers[404].

According to Labor Law No.5 of 1995, women in the private sector are granted 60 days of paid maternity leave only, which falls below the 14-week minimum that is recommended by the ILO. It does not provide paternity leave, nor provide provisions for parental leave beyond maternity which ultimately prevents shared caregiving responsibilities and reinforces the notion of caregiving being the sole responsibility of women[405].

The latter are also overrepresented in the informal sector, and considering the labor law in Yemen does not include informal workers, most women are left without any legal protection, social protection and security or benefits. This overrepresentation is also related to poor job growth for women and the youth, eventually confining them to a space that is characterized by weak or lack of social and legal protection[406].

Nevertheless, unpaid carework which includes child-rearing, elder care or household labor is not legally recognized or compensated, like many other examples in the MENA region. This also means that tax benefits or social security credits for women taking household and caregiving responsibilities are also absent.

Another restriction on women in Yemen under the labor law is related to working in night shift jobs. Under Article 46(2), women are forbidden to work or be employed at night except for the month of Ramadan which shall be decided by the relevant ministry[407]. This prohibition has many gendered implications: (1) it means there are industry-large opportunities that women cannot work in such as the healthcare sector; (2) it reinforces gendered expectations on unpaid care work and reproduces the idea that women's primary role is within the household as an unpaid care workers; (3) and it disadvantages working mothers who rely on night shifts and flexible shifts to balance their source of income with their care responsibilities.

The culmination of legal restrictions have contributed to an extremely low female labor force participation rate in Yemen.

Labor Participation

In 2023, the World Bank portal published that the labor force participation rate among women in the Republic of Yemen was at 5.1% compared to 60.4% for men[408], one of the lowest FLFPRs in the world[409].

Although vulnerable employment (employment with with no formal work arrangements, weak social protection or safety nets) has improved for women in Yemen since 1991 from 62.7% to 46.8%, their engagement in formal employment clearly remains minimal[410].

The current conflict in Yemen has led to a change in workforce dynamics, as more women joined the paid workforce, including in jobs previously dominated by men. However, the conflict did not sustainably promote women's labor force participation in the public and private sectors. Accordingly, most working women are active in the agricultural sector and perform unpaid work, according to the committee responsible for following up on the implementation of the CEDAW treaty[411].

403 Ibid.
404 Labor Law No.5 of 1995 in Yemen.
405 Ibid.
406 Bruni, M., Salvini, A., Uhlenhaut, L., (2014). Demographic and labour market trends in Yemen. International Labour Organization.
407 Article 46(2) of Yemen Labor Law. Page 12.
408 World Bank. (2023). Gender Data Portal.
409 Al-Ammar, F. & Patchett, H. (2019). The repercussions of war on women in the Yemeni workforce. The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.
410 World Bank (2023). Gender Data Portal for Yemen.
411 Al-Ammar, F. & Patchett, H. (2019). The repercussions of war on women in the Yemeni workforce. The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.

Al-Ammar and Patchett add that women's increased participation has been reported to increase women's decision-making ability in the household and the reversal of domestic gender roles. However, this has also been reported to increase domestic conflict[412].

Self-employment is also widely present in Yemen, 93% of which is informal due to legislation being based on "the model of a male breadwinner in protected full-time employment, which is far from national realities". In addition to informal workers being invisibilized, the research adds that women's employment is often under-measured and excluded from official statistics, as activities such as fetching water are often not considered "economic"[413].

It is important to note that women's participation in the informal economy as well is not robust, as a notable portion of their time is dedicated to unpaid work in agricultural and domestic settings[414].

While several steps have been taken to improve women's participation in Yemeni politico-economic processes, they are poorly implemented and absent in many areas. At the level of politics, The National Conference of Women, for example, suggested a quota system, and yet the representation of women in all negotiation delegations fell short of the 30% minimum quota, and out of 28 delegates, only three women and two were in the government delegation[415].

Social Norms

Above factors such as the low FLFPR are impacted by the prevalence of tribal and patriarchal norms in Yemen, which propagate beliefs that women's roles are primarily domestic[416].

Women's work has largely been centered within the household or specific roles such as teaching or nursing despite their strive for further education, which is hindered by early marriage societal tendencies. These domestic responsibilities are rendered difficult as a result of men's lack of fulfillment of their domestic duties[417]. The reversal of "traditional roles" as some men lost jobs and women took over breadwinning roles has "increased social tensions and exposed women to domestic violence, with perpetrators being close family members, including fathers, brothers and husbands and extended family members"[418].

Previous research has looked at the role that the war played in gender dynamics and the distribution of care work in Yemen. A report by Heinze and Stevens notes that women's roles changed significantly after the war[419]. They explain that there are two perspectives on women's roles. One reinforces a binary outlook that situates women's responsibilities inside the household and men's responsibilities outside. The other is an "egalitarian ethic" which is characterized by more openness towards female leaders. Heinze and Stevens explain that women became more involved in community and humanitarian work, women-led CSOs were present even in locations of conflict, and women were involved in mediating and resolving conflict. Many participants felt that positive changes to women's roles were here to last, with some conditioning this on the presence of further support and encouragement. However, the report also highlighted that women's role changes were perceived to have a negative impact on the relationship between men and women, in some areas more than others. Finally, the report emphasizes the frontline role that women have played in "sustaining families and communities and addressing the devastating effects of conflict".

412 Ibid.
413 Omeira, M. (2013). From informality to decent work in Yemen. International Labour Organization, Working Paper.
414 Noor Aldeen, A. (n.d.). Challenges for Yemeni women at work. Yemeni Women's Voices Platform.
415 Peace Track Initiative et al. (2019). Changes ahead: Yemeni women map the road to peace. Women's International Leage for Peace and Freedom.
416 Al-Ammar, F. & Patchett, H. (2019). The repercussions of war on women in the Yemeni workforce. The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.
417 Noor Aldeen, A. (n.d.). Challenges for Yemeni women at work. Yemeni Women's Voices Platform.
418 Peace Track Initiative et al. (2019). Changes ahead: Yemeni women map the road to peace. Women's International Leage for Peace and Freedom.
419 Heinze, M. & Stevens, S. (2018). Women as Peacebuilders in Yemen. Social Development Direct and Yemen Polling Center.

Other literature has focused on the active role that women played in conflict factions. al-Gawfi et al.[420] show how women supported some factions and encouraged their children to join the fight, but suggest that women's contributions to peace far outweigh their participation in the war. The research adds that mobility security restrictions, when coupled with limited resources, have been accompanied by a number of girls being out of school, representing a majority of children in such a situation. Furthermore, environmental impacts from the war have rendered water management tasks, where women are greatly represented, difficult and with increased exposure to violence and harassment. They add that in many areas of the North women reported a doubling of their work[421].

Challenges

As the country's multifaceted crisis continues, there remain many challenges and barriers to socioeconomic recovery and gender justice. First, women remain absent from decision-making processes despite being present in several ministries[422]. The inclusion of women in peacebuilding efforts can go a long way in building a post-war society where women's participation in the labor force is full and gender-sensitive policies are in place[423].

Approaches of humanitarian and relief initiatives have mostly viewed women as conduits for services or providers of data. In contrast, it is recommended that women's work is leveraged to support political entitlement with both domestic and international actors[424].

Finally, in recent times Yemeni society has become more accepting of women's specific economic contributions, yet the provision of skills, tools, and expertise remains lacking for strong and effective participation[425]. Relatedly, 74% of illiterates in Yemen are women as of 2012 UNESCO data. As such, an opportunity exists for "*improving women's employment and literacy through public investment in education, health, and social care. Such investment would have to be part of a coherent set of policies promoting decent work for all women and men*"[426].

Palestine

Palestinian residents face a multiplicity of intersecting crises impacting their access to fair social, economic, and political justice. Settlement violence and mass murders, blockades, economic downturns, and the COVID-19 pandemic have exasperated the difficulties that the population has been facing.

Women in Palestine perform approximately seven times more unpaid care work than men, averaging 35 hours per week compared to just 5 hours for men, a figure that rises to 44 hours for married women. Additionally, married women work more total hours (combining both paid and unpaid labor) than their employed, married male counterparts[427].

These dynamics were accentuated due to the onset of the pandemic with schools closing and work shifting to remote and online arrangement and lockdown mobility restrictions have been associated with increased gender-based violence levels and the prevention of women accessing essential services[428]. Other estimates by UN Women in 2022 indicated that women spend around eight times longer durations than men on unpaid care and domestic work[429].

Conflict witnessed a tremendous reported increase in the intensity and time of unpaid care and domestic work, itself further accentuated by difficulties accessing hygiene and sanitation, stress, and the increased demand for emotional support, increased numbers of disabilities and injuries, the inaccessibility of food markets, electricity crises, climate-related events,and

420 al-Gawfi, I. et al. (2020). The role of women in peacebuilding in Yemen. Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient.
421 Ibid.
422 Noor Aldeen, A. (n.d.). Challenges for Yemeni women at work. Yemeni Women's Voices Platform.
423 Al-Ammar, F. & Patchett, H. (2019). The repercussions of war on women in the Yemeni workforce. The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.
424 al-Gawfi, I. et al. (2020). The role of women in peacebuilding in Yemen. Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient.
425 Noor Aldeen, A. (n.d.). Challenges for Yemeni women at work. Yemeni Women's Voices Platform.
426 Omeira, M. (2013). From informality to decent work in Yemen. International Labour Organization, Working Paper.
427 Fallah, B. (2020). The care economy in Palestine: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
428 El-Yousef, T. (2021). Unpaid care work: A gateway for gender equality. This Week in Palestine.
429 Valuing Women's Work Conference (2023). Valuing Women's Work Conference Statement: The value of all women's work deserves to be recognized, fairly measured, and invested in as part of the economy'.

increased poverty levels[430]. Moreover, women have reported suffering from time poverty[431].

In addition, even though women have occupied positions that were previously inaccessible to them, this has not changed unpaid care work distribution. While technological advancements such as the availability of washing machines, fridges, and others have had a positive impact with regard to household work time allocation, it has not affected the burden or size of care responsibilities that women carry[432].

Contextually specific to Palestine, over 750,000 Palestinians have been arrested by Israeli forces in 1967. As the overwhelming portion is comprised of men, this has led to a rise in female-headed households and to more women taking the role of primary income earner[433].

However, it is important to note that patterns of paid and unpaid work vary across Palestinian regions, with poor and rural contexts more likely to witness more distinct gender divisions of labor[434].

Legislation and Policymaking

According to the labor law in Palestine no.7 of 2000, women are entitled to 70 days of paid maternity leave (of which 6 are postnatal)[435]. Prior to 2022, the law did not provide paternity leave. Yet, in 2022, the PA approved a three-day paternity leave in the public sector[436]. In the Labour Law no.7 of 2000, there is no mention of paternity leaves and other sources add that this is not mandated by law and is only offered by some employers.

AbuMezied and Sawafta[437] identify several characteristics of the legislative and policy framework in place in Palestine that impact care work, beginning with the fact that the Palestinian Labor Law No.7 does not recognize it. Paid domestic workers were only recognized in 2013 and the law does not include regulations supporting the redistribution of unpaid care and domestic work. The authors highlight that the majority of elder care centers are established and run by civil society and charity organizations, with only one governmental center in the West Bank. While the PA undertook some measures for social protection and in the context of the pandemic, only one measure supported unpaid care and COVID-19 response policies did not address unpaid care needs and very limitedly included care providers.

Finally, access to health facilities remains a considerable issue for women in Palestine, as a paper by Morrar and Taweel[438] finds that only 58% of women reported having safe access.

Palestine's care policies and services do not adequately cover childcare needs and urgently require expansion[439]. The same can be said about the coverage of elder care services, as the state is limitedly involved in welfare provisioning and continues to be so as the recent adoption of policies has further stripped back the role of the state. The absence of the state is notable, especially in social reproduction, with women not viewing the state as a major actor in care service provision when asked about their demands for change (a limitation to such a finding is the fact that the majority of the women asked were middle-class[440]. During the pandemic, recovery policies were highly fragmented despite the challenges being highly multi-layered[441].

430 AbuMezied, A. & Sawafta, M. (2022). Analysing care policies and practices in times of austerity and conflict: The case of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)', Gender & Development, 30(1–2), pp. 341–359.
431 Abu Mezied et al. (2019). Rapid care analysis: A contextualized tool for the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Oxfam.
432 Ibid.
433 Bargawi et al. (2022). Re-negotiating social reproduction, work and gender roles in occupied Palestine, Review of International Political Economy, 29(6), pp. 1917–1944.
434 Ibid.
435 Labour Law No.7 of 2000 in Palestine.
436 International Labor Organization. (2022). The situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories.
437 AbuMezied, A. & Sawafta, M. (2022). Analysing care policies and practices in times of austerity and conflict: The case of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)', Gender & Development, 30(1–2), pp. 341–359.
438 Morrar, R. & Taweel, R.J. (2016). The gendered impact of COVID-19 pandemic in Palestine. Korea Institute for International Economic Policy.
439 Fallah, B. (2020). The care economy in Palestine: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
440 Bargawi et al. (2022). Re-negotiating social reproduction, work and gender roles in occupied Palestine, Review of International Political Economy, 29(6), pp. 1917–1944.
441 AbuMezied, A. & Sawafta, M. (2022). Analysing care policies and practices in times of austerity and conflict: The case of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)', Gender & Development, 30(1–2), pp. 341–359.

Labor Participation

Women's work for pay in Palestine is mostly concentrated in care sectors (around half of employed women), and in the private sector – as opposed to the government sector or UNRWA – protection and security schemes are lacking, with half as many women as men earning the minimum wage[442]. In terms of localization, half of the care sector workforce works in the government sector, followed by the private sector, and lastly UNRWA[443]. Furthermore, in sectors like education and health, the gender pay gap is reported to be 40%[444].

Similarly to other MENA countries, according to the World Bank, the female labor force participation rate is low, standing at 18.9% compared to males at 71.9% in the West Bank and Gaza in 2022[445]; with the unemployment rate being 78% for women between the ages of 20 and 29 [446],[447] despite higher female primary and secondary enrolment ratios than male ones in the entire MENA region[448] in 2019. Also similarly to regional counterparts, Palestine witnesses a considerable rate of exit from the labor market by women upon marriage[449].

The COVID-19 pandemic also notably impacted women's micro-to-small-to-medium enterprises, adding to the vulnerability-accentuating barriers that women businesses face on both financial and non-financial levels. Informal workers, for their part, lacked specific safety nets. Comprising a large portion of the care sector, women were also frontline health workers in the West Bank and Gaza and were at higher risks of being exposed to the virus[450].

Social Norms

Social norms uphold patriarchal stereotypes and structures, especially regarding women's participation in the workforce and care responsibilities. Reproductive labor is viewed as exclusively women's duty, with men in the West Bank expecting tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and ironing to be performed by women[451].

Where patriarchal norms shape daily life, care work remains divided along gendered lines across the four governorates. Tasks traditionally performed by women are devalued, while men's involvement in such work is often seen as socially unacceptable.

These societal norms reinforce the notion that housework is an obligatory responsibility for women. This feminization of labor frames domestic work as unpaid, unproductive, and inherently feminine, ultimately excluding women's contributions from economic data and further restricting their participation in the workforce[452].

There has been a notable shift in perception and attitudes regarding women's participation in the workforce in recent decades[453]. However, research has also shown that dominant narratives locate domestic work responsibilities solely with the wife and/or mother of the household[454].

Confirming the points made above, individualizing social reproduction has become widely spread in certain contexts, as opposed to demanding greater investment by state actors or private firms[455].

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442 Fallah, B. (2020). The care economy in Palestine: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
443 Ibid.
444 AbuMezied, A. & Sawafta, M. (2022). Analysing care policies and practices in times of austerity and conflict: The case of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)', Gender & Development, 30(1–2), pp. 341–359.
445 World Bank Gender Data in West Bank and Gaza.
446 Abu Mezied et al. (2019). Rapid care analysis: A contextualized tool for the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Oxfam.
447 Fallah, B. (2020). The care economy in Palestine: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
448 al-Botmeh, S. (2015). Unlocking the labor market for Palestinian women. Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network.
449 Fallah, B. (n.d.). The care economy in Palestine: Exploratory analysis and policy implications, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.
450 Morrar, R. & Taweel, R. J. (2016). The gendered impact of COVID-19 pandemic in Palestine. Korea Institute for International Economic Policy.
451 Jarboo, M., Qazzaz, H., Rahhal, R., & Abu Ouda, M. (2019). Rapid care analysis: A contextualized tool for the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Oxfam.
452 Abu Ghaza, R. (2023). The impact of women's compulsory participation in home care work on their exclusion from the Palestinian labor force: A case study of Salfit, Qalqilya, Tubas, and Tulkarem. Reform.
453 Abu Mezied et al. (2019). Rapid care analysis: A contextualized tool for the Occupied Palestinian Territory', Oxfam, Policy & Practice.
454 Bargawi et al. (2022). Re-negotiating social reproduction, work and gender roles in occupied Palestine', Review of International Political Economy, 29(6), pp. 1917–1944.
455 Ibid.

Challenges

Challenges for a fairer and more equitable distribution of unpaid care work and gender justice overall remain in Palestine and there are many necessary steps on a national and international level to be taken[456].

Policy and non-policy recommendations from existing literature point to several directions. Some focus on enhancing labor law compliance and expanding ECCE and parental leave, as well as raising awareness of gender equality[457]. Others focus on expanding employment rights coverage in the private sector, improving working conditions and benefits, and expanding coverage of work benefits[458].

Social norms and attitudes are commonly identified in the literature as areas to address, especially with some Palestinian men turning their frustrations "resulting from political and economic disempowerment into violence against female family members"[459]. Oxfam recommends raising awareness around care work and gender roles to change male behavior and attitudes at an individual level in the household[460].

Pandemic times have witnessed the launch of many public awareness campaigns such as "Qadderha" (appreciate her) in Palestine but these remain small piecemeal efforts that do not result in large impact or change. "Unpaid care work and the need to consider it in awareness-raising campaigns has gained momentum with many women's rights organizations, which have now included this issue set into their work agendas"[461].

Sudan

Sudan's socioeconomic realities – which were already strained during the pandemic, especially for women[462] – have been deeply affected by the endemic armed conflicts, which have pervaded citizen areas.

Historically, unpaid care work has been the primary responsibility of women in Sudan, with husbands rarely contributing[463]. Such division of labor has absorbed women into the tasks, as adolescent girls get further commodified within households, and disproportionately carry out care and domestic activities in the context of food and economically precarious environments, accentuating their safety concerns.

This has impacted girls' attendance of school, while other incidents have increased adolescent girls' exposure to all forms of violence and forced child marriage, centrally perpetrated by male household members[464]. Indeed, UNICEF has highlighted that gender-based violence is one of the most critical threats to women and children in South Sudan[465].

Furthermore, the impact of climate change and events such as floods have particularly impacted women's work given their involvement in food, water and energy provision activities[466]. Climate change also impacts agriculture as a whole in Sudan, which is a sector that is linked to many households' well-being and is central to the livelihoods of women. The task of gathering water has been rendered arduous for women by the inaccessibility of water sources as they travel long distances carrying heavy weights, and yet men control water management and operation[467].

456 Morrar, R. & Taweel, R.J. (2016). The gendered impact of COVID-19 pandemic in Palestine. Korea Institute for International Economic Policy.
457 Fallah, B. (2020). The care economy in Palestine: Towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. UN Women.
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459 Bargawi et al. (2022). Re-negotiating social reproduction, work and gender roles in occupied Palestine, Review of International Political Economy, 29(6), pp. 1917–1944.
460 Abu Mezied et al. (2019). Rapid care analysis: A contextualized tool for the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Oxfam.
461 AbuMezied, A. & Sawafta, M. (2022). Analysing care policies and practices in times of austerity and conflict: the case of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)', Gender & Development, 30(1–2), pp. 341–359.
462 Eltayeb, S. & Badri, A. (2022). Women mental health status and behaviour change during the COVID-19 in Sudan. Heliyon, 8(5).
463 Tønnessen, L. (2019). Women at work in Sudan: Marital privilege or constitutional right?. Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 26(2), pp. 223–244.
464 Lee-Koo, K. and Jay, H. (2018). Child, early and forced marriage in South Sudan. Plan International.
465 UNICEF (2019). Gender-Based Violence.
466 Giovetti, O. (2022). Gender equality in South Sudan: What we know in 2022. Concern Worldwide.
467 Whipkey, K. (2023). Gender analysis in Sudan: Exploring gender dimensions of humanitarian action and women's voice and leadership in East Darfur, Gadarif, Kassala, South Darfur, and South Kordofan. Care Evaluations.

"According to FAO, women represent 49% of the farmers in the irrigated sector and 57% in the rainfed traditional sector in Sudan"[468]. Despite their large contribution, their labor is often unrecognized and they are not encouraged to participate in modernized agriculture. This means that their role has not improved with technological advances in agriculture such as in the production of cash crops, in addition to policy inconsistencies with regard to the demise of women farmers.

Gender gaps remain in areas such as WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) services, especially in technical and leadership activities and unpaid work, not to mention gaps in awareness around gender bias across WASH programming. Marginalized groups in general have highlighted that the government was not monitoring the water supply sufficiently[469]. This has exasperated unjust gender dynamics and has undermined the establishment of an enabling and participatory sector.

An IOM report highlights that these difficulties were accentuated by barriers such as violence against women, rigid norms and stereotypes, inadequate legal and policy frameworks, and mechanisms for access to justice by survivors of GBV and work-related discrimination. On a more labor-related note, lack of education for girls, institutionalized inequalities in job recruitment, remuneration, and entitlement systems, lack of access to information and documentation, and lack of "internal policies and guidance to support managers to recognize and respond to staff when they appear to experience violence at home", lack of workplace safety have also undermined the enrollment of women in the formal labor market. This comes in a context where there exists a serious unequal division of care and household work, lack of access to Menstrual Hygiene Management materials, lack of professional support, and stigma related to sexual and reproductive health[470].

Legislation and Policymaking

Sudan's legislative framework is characterized by gender discriminatory laws[471]. Sudan's labor laws reveal several critical shortcomings in protecting and promoting women's rights, particularly in relation to care work. These gaps contribute to gender disparities in the workforce, making it difficult for women to participate fully in economic activities. Key areas of concern include insufficient maternity leave, the exclusion of domestic workers from legal protections, restrictions on employment types and hours, and the lack of support for unpaid care work.

Sudan has ratified the International Labour Organization's Convention 183 on Maternity Protection, which sets international standards for maternity leave. However, national legislation falls short of these standards, providing only eight weeks of paid maternity leave instead of the ILO's recommended 14 weeks[472]. This limited duration often forces women to return to work before they have fully recovered from childbirth or have sufficient time to care for their newborns. The inadequate leave policies may discourage female workforce participation and contribute to job insecurity for new mothers.

The Sudanese Labour Act of 1997 does not extend its protections to domestic workers, who are primarily women. As a result, this sector lacks critical legal safeguards such as minimum wage protections, regulated working hours, and social security benefits. This exclusion leaves domestic workers vulnerable to exploitation, poor working conditions, and even abuse[473]. Without formal recognition and legal coverage, domestic work remains undervalued, despite its essential role in supporting households and the broader economy.

In addition, women in Sudan face additional legal barriers to employment due to restrictive labor provisions. Article 19 of the Labour Act prohibits women from engaging in occupations

468 UN Women. (2024). Enhancing the capacities of women in agriculture in Sudan.
469 Whipkey, K. (2023). Gender analysis in Sudan: Exploring gender dimensions of humanitarian action and women's voice and leadership in East Darfur, Gadarif, Kassala, South Darfur, and South Kordofan. Care Evaluations.
470 Denman, K., & Lipscomb, L. (2020). Closing the gender gap in the humanitarian water, sanitation and hygiene sector in South Sudan. International Organization for Migration, Abridged Research Report.
471 Tønnessen, L. (2019). Women at work in Sudan: Marital privilege or constitutional right?. Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 26(2), pp. 223–244.
472 UN Women. (2024). Landscape of care work in Sudan.
473 UNFPA. (2018). Sudan Gender Justice & The Law.

considered hazardous, arduous, or harmful to their health, such as those involving heavy lifting or exposure to harmful substances. These provisions limit employment opportunities and reinforce traditional gender roles that confine women to specific types of work. Furthermore, Article 20 restricts women from working between 10:00 PM and 6:00 AM, further reducing their opportunities for economic advancement[474]. These restrictions, rather than ensuring safety, often serve to marginalize women from more lucrative and diverse employment opportunities.

Sudan's labor laws fail to address the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women. Women in Sudan are often responsible for childcare, eldercare, and household responsibilities, limiting their ability to engage in paid employment. The absence of policies such as flexible working arrangements, affordable childcare services, or parental leave for both parents exacerbates these challenges. Without formal support structures, many women are forced to leave the workforce or accept informal, low-paying jobs that offer little security[475].

Labor Participation

Before 2019, Sudan had an extremely regressive legislative system vis-à-vis women's rights compared to other countries in the region and on a global scale. Sudan is one of 18 countries worldwide where women need permission from their male guardians for paid work, which places them under their husbands' supervision, with the potential risk of having their work activities restricted or revoked if they do not comply with imposed regulations[476].

The 2019 revolution which saw the active participation of women, saw the change of many laws, and women were appointed for leading positions in the transitional government. In November of that year, "all laws restricting women's freedom of dress, movement, association, work and study" were repealed and in 2020 Female Genital Mutilation became punishable by three years of imprisonment and a fine and the requirement for women to obtain permission from their husbands to travel was abolished.

Gender disparities are widely present within the Sudanese labor force, as 2012 estimates indicated that women only comprised 31.1% of it despite higher education attainments[477]. In 2023, this figure further regressed to 27.9% for women compared to 67.8% for men[478]; while in South Sudan FLFPR is at 70.3% among females, almost equal to that of males (71.1%)[479]. Furthermore, adolescent women are often engaged in small business activities like collecting and selling firewood to cope with livelihood crises. As such, continued education is often limited and not a priority[480], and when it is accessed, is poorly adapted to workforce needs[481].

Social Norms

The discriminatory nature of the above policy and legal frameworks reinforces and is reinforced by patriarchal social norms dictating gender roles in Sudanese society. These norms constrain women's bargaining power with regard to paid work[482], but also constrain their involvement in decision-making or political activity, especially in the countryside, and their access to land ownership. Literature ascribes some of these dynamics to a lack of awareness about the harmful nature of prevalent traditions and mindsets[483].

474 Ibid.
475 UN Women. (2024). Landscape of care work in Sudan.
476 Tønnessen, L. (2019). Women at work in Sudan: Marital privilege or constitutional right?. Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 26(2), pp. 223–244.
477 JICA (2012). The Republic of Sudan: Country Gender Profile. Japan International Cooperation Agency.
478 World Bank (2023). Gender Data Portal in Sudan.
479 Ibid.
480 Lee-Koo, K. and Jay, H. (2018). Child, early and forced marriage in South Sudan. Plan International.
481 Whipkey, K. (2023). Gender analysis in Sudan: Exploring gender dimensions of humanitarian action and women's voice and leadership in East Darfur, Gadarif, Kassala, South Darfur, and South Kordofan. Care Evaluations.
482 Tønnessen, L. (2019). Women at work in Sudan: Marital privilege or constitutional right?. Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 26(2), pp. 223–244.
483 Giovetti, O. (2022). Gender equality in South Sudan: What we know in 2022. Concern Worldwide.

Moreover, the intersection of such beliefs with the state of education limits women's perceptions of themselves and their capabilities[484]. Even when women do engage in income generation, it is mostly under the umbrella of "assisting" the household, and their domestic and field participation is culturally understood as not being a profession.

In addition, women's participation in the labor force has not necessarily been a positive reality, as it accumulates the number of activities they are performing and is often followed by backlash within conservative contexts. Social norms dictate specific tasks for women such as gathering water and ascribe them the primary task of overcoming food burdens despite men being considered the breadwinners of the household[485].

Challenges

Many challenges remain as to socio-economic justice, gender equality, and unpaid care work distribution in Sudan, especially with the volatile politico-military conditions that have historically cropped up and more recently reemerged. Post-2019 revolution discussions highlighted gender equality as a priority, which represents a significant step in that regard albeit hitherto lacking in focus and sustainability[486].

Adolescent girls have been informed that access to free and quality education is one of their highest priorities, and accordingly addressing schools' infrastructural provisions such as access to sanitary items and latrines is an important measure to support girls' attendance[487].

On its part, women's entry to WASH services remains an area to consider by humanitarian agencies. Centering women's participation in the WASH sector can mobilize existing policy and fulfill commitments by existing initiatives[488].

A report by Care International identifies several directions for potential livelihood interventions, including organizing/ supporting female livelihood groups, linking female producers to marketing agencies and buyers, developing village savings and loans associations for women and mixed-gender groups, building financial literacy skills, and promoting behavior change amongst men and boys to encourage them to participate in their household responsibilities[489].

Finally, as South Sudan representative Mary Fatiya asserts:

"[in] War, women are affected by sexual violence, carry the burden of care work under difficult circumstances, yet in peacebuilding, [...] they are [...] not recognized and least represented in decision-making bodies"[490].

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484 Whipkey, K. (2023) 'Gender Analysis in Sudan: Exploring Gender Dimensions of Humanitarian Action and Women's Voice and Leadership in East Darfur, Gadarif, Kassala, South Darfur, and South Kordofan', Care Evaluations.
485 Ibid.
486 Giovetti, O. (2022). Gender equality in South Sudan: What we know in 2022. Concern Worldwide.
487 Lee-Koo, K. and Jay, H. (2018). Child, early and forced marriage in South Sudan. Plan International.
488 Denman, K. and Lipscomb, L. (2020). Closing the gender gap in the humanitarian water, sanitation and hygiene sector in South Sudan. International Organization for Migration.
489 Whipkey, K. (2023) 'Gender Analysis in Sudan: Exploring Gender Dimensions of Humanitarian Action and Women's Voice and Leadership in East Darfur, Gadarif, Kassala, South Darfur, and South Kordofan', Care Evaluations.
490 Kapombe, M. (2022), X Post.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region faces entrenched challenges in addressing gender inequality, particularly in relation to the distribution of unpaid care work, which remains disproportionately borne by women.

Women—especially married women—in many countries within the region are responsible for the majority of care work, including household duties and caregiving for children, elderly family members, and others. Studies show that women in the region spend far more time on unpaid care work compared to men, with estimates indicating that women spend between 17 and 34 hours per week on such tasks, while men typically dedicate just 1 to 5 hours. These gendered disparities in care work are a reflection of broader societal and structural inequalities, deeply influenced by patriarchal norms and systems that frame caregiving as primarily the responsibility of women.

The unequal distribution of care work is further compounded by persistent socio-economic challenges in the region. Factors such as armed conflict, political instability, climate change, and a highly unequal political economy contribute to widening gender gaps, making it more difficult for women to balance caregiving responsibilities with economic participation. The ongoing crises in the region—including economic recessions, migration, and regional conflicts —further intensify the gendered division of labor, limiting women's opportunities for economic and social advancement.

Despite some progress in certain countries where female labor force participation has shown improvement, the region continues to have the lowest female labor force participation rate globally, with substantial barriers to women's access to paid employment and economic independence.

Although women play a significant role in paid care work, particularly in sectors like healthcare and social services, this sector remains undervalued and underfunded in the region. Despite the centrality of women to the care economy, paid care work is often regarded as low-status, poorly compensated, and lacking in social protections. This economic undervaluation is compounded by limited support from national policies, where many countries in the region fail to meet international standards for maternal protection, maternity leave, and labor rights for women.

For instance, while the International Labour Organization (ILO) Maternity Protection Convention recommends a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave, with some countries extending this to 18 weeks, most countries in the MENA region still fall short of meeting these basic standards, leaving women without adequate support during critical periods.

The informal care sector, where many women work, remains largely unregulated, leaving them without legal protections or benefits. Migrant women domestic workers, a particularly vulnerable group in the region, face harsh working conditions under the Kafala system, which has been described as modern-day slavery. These workers are subjected to long working hours, poor living conditions, restricted mobility, and abuse, with little to no legal recourse to protect their rights. Rural women, who are often employed in agricultural and subsistence work, are also excluded from official labor protections and social services, exacerbating their vulnerability in times of economic or environmental crises.

Social norms and informal justice systems in the MENA region further perpetuate gender inequality by reinforcing patriarchal structures that limit women's opportunities and rights.

These systems often function outside formal legal frameworks, and their existence places additional pressures on women. For instance, in many areas, women's access to paid employment is restricted by familial and societal expectations, and informal justice mechanisms may exacerbate gender-based violence or discrimination, further limiting women's ability to seek fair treatment in employment, healthcare, or public life. These challenges are further compounded by the region's low rates of women's political participation, with women occupying only 18.3% of parliamentary seats in the MENA region, and facing high levels of violence and harassment in both public and private spheres.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further illuminated the systemic vulnerabilities of the MENA region, particularly for women who bear the brunt of unpaid care work. During the pandemic, the closure of schools, lockdowns, and the strain on healthcare systems exacerbated the burden on women, pushing them into more intense caregiving roles, while simultaneously reducing their economic opportunities.

The pandemic also contributed to a rise in the gender gap in unemployment, especially among women-led small and medium-sized businesses, which faced higher rates of closure compared to businesses led by men. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of the region's social protection and healthcare systems, which were ill-equipped to handle the surge in caregiving responsibilities and healthcare needs.

In the face of these challenges, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of care work in the MENA region. The intersection of various crises—including the COVID-19 pandemic, migration, economic instability, and an aging population—has underscored the critical need for policies that value and support both paid and unpaid care work. However, these changes will require deep structural reforms, including addressing the gendered division of labor, enhancing social protections for women, improving access to healthcare and other essential services, and fostering women's participation in decision-making processes at all levels.

The MENA region's future success in achieving gender equality will depend on the recognition of the unpaid and paid care work that women contribute. There must be a concerted effort to address the institutional and societal barriers that prevent women from fully participating in the labor market and society, and to ensure that women's rights are protected across all spheres. Mobilization efforts, both at the grassroots level and through international fora, offer some hope, but without systemic change, the region will struggle to realize true gender equality.

It is essential for the region to not only improve the recognition of care work but also to provide tangible support and protections for women, particularly those in marginalized communities, ensuring that care work is valued and supported through social and economic policies that reflect its true significance.

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