

LABOUR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

FEMINIST VISIONS OF THE FUTURE OF WORK

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)

Amal Nasser



The MENA region has the lowest rate of female participation in the labour market worldwide. However, a slow growth can be observed.



Central feminist discussions revolve around women's legal rights, exploitation of domestic workers and recently on unpaid care work.



Imagining other scenarios for the future of work is not the focus of feminist activists. Yet, there are openings to build a more organized movement to engage in wider economic debates on the future of work.

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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)

The
FUTURE
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FEMINIST

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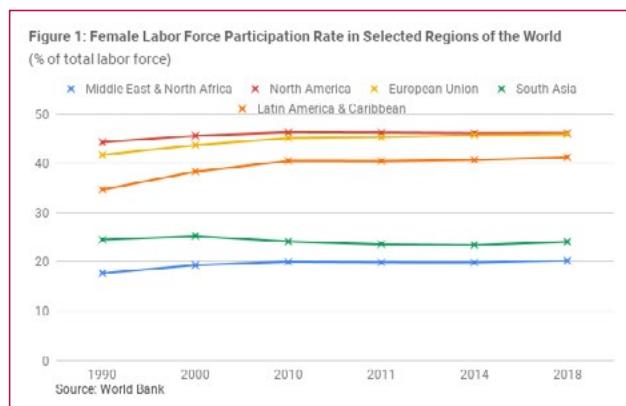
1

INTRODUCTION

Work is essential not only for the economic prosperity of individuals and societies but also for a person's self-understanding and sense of accomplishment in life. Tackling the issue of work has never been easy and is getting more complex as our world is getting more complicated every day. The factors that influence and drive our thinking about work are sometimes universal, yet those which influence the way we work are culture-, region-, and/or gender-specific. Changing political, economic, and technological structures also shape the nature of work and its evolution.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) one cannot speak of a single economic structure that unifies people's perception of work, but rather of similarities between structures. The introduction of feminism, and its intersections with the political left, brings to discussions about the future of work in MENA certain values such as the inclusion and empowerment of women and minorities in the labour market.

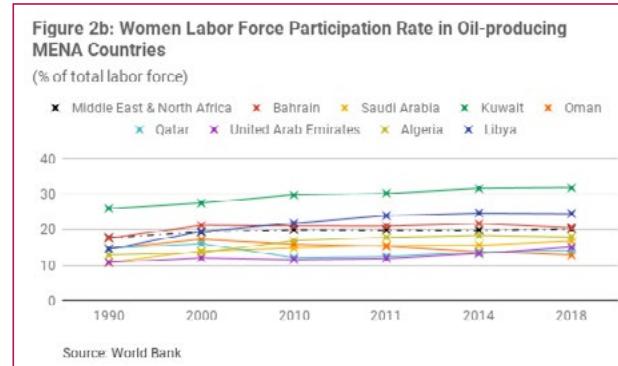
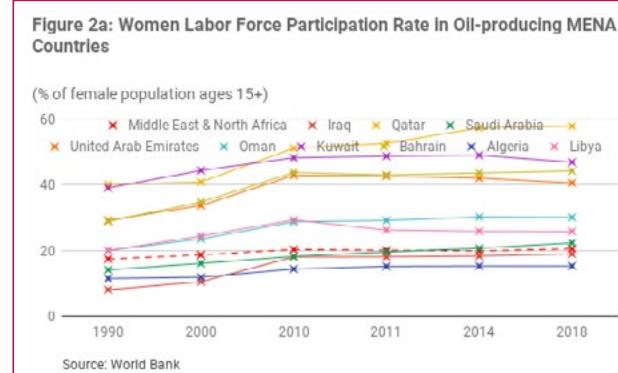
Compared to other regions in the world, the MENA region has the lowest rate of women's participation in the labour market, not only as a share of the total labour force but also as a share of the female population (Figure 1).



Given the globally low participation rate of women in the labour market, it is not a surprise to learn that the gap between women's and men's average labour force participation in Arab and North African states is among the highest in the world, with Arab States having the biggest gap in the world according to the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The economies of the MENA region can be divided into oil-producing and oil-importing countries, with higher levels of industrialisation in the oil-producing countries, and dominance of the service sector in the oil-importing countries.

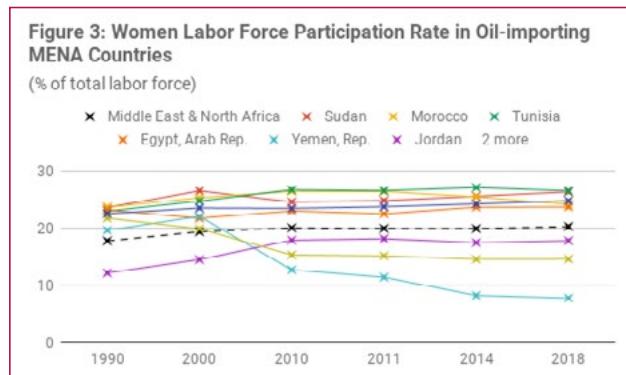
Oil-producing countries such as the gulf countries enjoy higher levels of women's labour market participation (as a share of the female population) than the MENA average (Figure 2a), whereas the overall share of women in the total labour force in most of those countries remains lower than the MENA average (Figure 2b). This is attributed to the generally low unemployment rate in oil-rich Gulf countries and their high demand for labour, which leaves a greater opportunity for women to participate in the labour market, yet this effect is dampened by the high numbers of male non-citizens in the labour force (Buttorif, Welborne and al-Lawati 2018).



Women in other oil-producing countries such as Algeria and Libya have varying labour market participation rates.; Algeria's rate is below that of the MENA average (Figure 2a),

while Libya's rate is higher than that of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)¹ average. This debunks the common impression that oil-based economies generally have a low rate of women participation in the labour market.

There has been a slow yet positive growth of the labour participation rate of women in the MENA region. However, this growth was disrupted in countries experiencing civil wars after the uprisings of 2011, i. e. Syria, Libya and Yemen (Figure 3).



Women's unemployment in 2018 remained high in the region; women are twice as likely to be unemployed as men (ILO 2018). This indicates the large portion of unutilised human capital in Arab countries, as well as persistent inter-gender financial dependency.

Working poverty refers to those who are vulnerable to poverty despite having a job. Women are less likely to experience working poverty than men. In Arab States, the rate of women's working poverty is 13 percent, while it is 22 percent for men (ILO 2018). This could be explained by women being more likely to provide a supplementary role to household income, whereas men are most likely to be the sole breadwinners in their households.

Although women's engagement in the labour force in the region is lower than other regions in the world, it still is promising for the future. The steady growth in the participation rate of women in the labour market is an indication that the labour market has the potential to attract women. With appropriate policies, and most importantly a stable political climate, women's presence in the labour market can grow immensely. Women's engagement in the labour market will not only benefit women, but also improve regional economies.

¹ The GCC consists of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman.

2

DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS REGARDING THE FUTURE OF WORK

2.1 CENTRAL DISCUSSIONS

Discussions in the MENA region concerning work are mainly concentrated around issues of job creation or the availability of work for future entrants into the labour force, as well as for those currently unemployed, especially youth.

The issue of job creation remains essential in any discussion regarding the future of work in the region, or the future of the region in general. Millions of youth enter the labour market each year; the region's rate of labour force is expected to grow by 2.2 percent annually in the next five years (International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2018). Oil-importing countries must sustain an average gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 6.2 percent in order to keep the unemployment rate at its current level, yet GDP growth for those economies is 4.9 percent (IMF 2018). Other countries, such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, lost in their current wars what had been gained in decades of work on job creation and inclusion of women in the labour market.

Many countries are recognising the need for better job creation mechanisms to guarantee future political stability. This, however, goes without significant investment in education and scientific research to foster innovation, which is crucial for future competition not only in the domestic labour markets but also in global markets.

From a socio-political perspective on work, there are rising voices, especially from feminist activists, to stop the exploitation of domestic workers. Domestic workers are a large subgroup of the many migrant workers in the region, and the Middle East hosts 11.7 percent of the world's migrant workers (ILOS 2015). The issue of migrant workers and their rights, or lack thereof, came to the forefront in recent years due to the increasing number of reported cases of migrants subjected to exploitation or, particularly amongst domestic workers, to physical violence.

The notorious Kafala system² of migrant worker sponsorship

is being revised in many countries according to the different authorities. No complete abolition of the Kafala system has been reported yet, although a few countries have portrayed some of their labour law reform as its abolition, such as in Qatar and Bahrain.

Although working conditions are not a central issue in discussions regarding work in the region in general, the conditions of migrant workers remain a critical concern for feminist activists in the region, as a large share of migrant workers are women domestic workers.

A recent trend, especially in countries heavily reliant on migrant workers, is the nationalisation of jobs. Although the nationalisation of jobs aims to bring more job opportunities to the national workforce, it also leaves many foreign workers (from the region or other regions) at risk of losing their sources of income. This could lead to a decrease of the remittances they send back home, on which many countries in the region are dependent. It also undermines the quality of work, as the new workforce entrants might not be qualified or trained for their jobs. Nationality cannot be the sole qualification in a competitive setting. If competition in labour markets is eliminated, all other effort to foster innovation and accelerate job creation may be undermined, if not ruined.

In the MENA region, the issue of unpaid care work, where the stereotypical gender role of women entails doing domestic work without help from male partners or relatives, is relatively newly discussed in the literature. The discussions call for more male participation in domestic work and encourage women to estimate the losses they incur by engaging in unpaid care labour instead of deploying their labour in the formal labour market. They are also concerned with recording and estimating the value of the unpaid care work in order to have a more accurate estimation of women's contribution to the economy (Alenzi 2015). In 2012, women in Egypt spent on average 30 hours a week in unpaid care labour, whereas men spent just 4 hours (*ibid*).

² The Kafala system (meaning "sponsorship system") regulates the relationship between employers and migrant workers and puts the migrant worker's legal immigration status in the hands of the sponsor (kafeel). Under the Kafala system, which is very common in GCC countries, Jordan, and Lebanon, a migrant worker would not be able

to enter the country, transfer employment nor leave the country without the written permission of their kafeel.

Discussions about unpaid care labour can be supported through calls for the acknowledgement of care work as labour, and through the inclusion of caregivers in the state provided social safety nets from which tax-paying workers benefit. Marriage in the region is considered, more or less, a form of a social protection for women. Yet since women do most of the care labour in a household while remaining dependent on their male partners, an alternative social safety net could increase their agency and opportunities for financial independence.

2.2 THE DISCOURSE ON THE FUTURE OF WORK

The discourse around the future of work in the region is currently led by International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the IMF and the World Bank (WB). This comes as no surprise since their technical and financial assistance and advice are sought by governments in the region. The proposed policies and programs by the IFIs are, so far, neoliberal in nature. It is very challenging given the volatile political situation in many countries in the region to promote clear alternative to these policies, but people's dissatisfaction with neoliberal economic policy can be seen in the different demonstrations taking place in countries such as Jordan, Egypt, or even in Yemen prior to its civil war.

Digitalisation is one of the hot topics regarding the future of work. The digitalisation of industries, and the creation of a digital workforce, has been a focal point for GCC countries especially in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and its Vision 2030, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and its Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030 (Bohsali et al. 2017). The target for GCC countries is to increase digital jobs from their current level of 1.7 percent to the European Union (EU) average level of 5.4 percent (*ibid*). Most people who hold digital jobs in the GCC are graduates of foreign universities since the GCC's education system, much like education systems of the region, has not kept up with global technological progress (*ibid*). Other countries in the region, such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, outsource their Information and Communication Technology (ICT) jobs. Egypt alone is outsourcing about 90,000 jobs in the ICT sector to businesses in KSA and other GCC countries.

Despite their reliance on foreign-trained ICT workers, the GCC countries are leading digitalisation in the region through investments in the creation of digital jobs. Yet while many countries in the region are following the trends of digitalisation and innovation in labour markets, there is a lack of discussion about labour conditions. In addition, it is difficult to achieve a more gender-balanced workforce in conservative countries such as the GCC, where non-citizen male workers are more than half of the total labour force because of the mismatch between the gender ratios of the general population and the workforce. Digitalisation in undemocratic countries is also being used in surveillance of political dissent and of workers, especially in countries that do not permit trade unions (Clayton and Colville 2014).

The war on trade unions is getting fiercer every day in Egypt. Labour laws in GCC countries do not permit unions, and unions are struggling to survive in countries such as Lebanon (Abdo, Fakhry and Kobaissy 2017), Morocco (Kasraoui 2019), and Yemen (Alghad 2019). On the other hand, labour unions in Tunisia, where trade unions have won the Nobel Prize for their contribution to the development of a pluralistic democracy, are gaining more power as the economic situation deteriorates in the country and workers are expressing their demands (Jebli 2018).

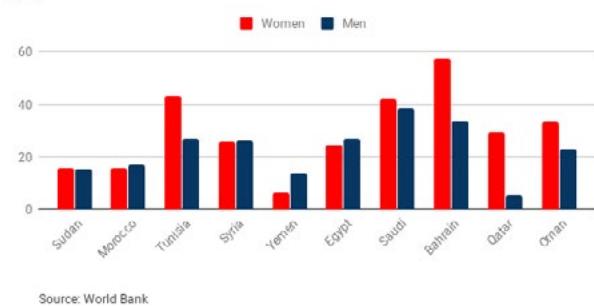
Generally speaking, the trends dominating the discourse of the future of work are mainly concerned with what should be done, and not necessarily with how things should be done. Therefore, there are no substantial debates regarding the creation of social safety nets or the expansion of existing ones, particularly for the working poor or for disenfranchised segments of the population like minorities and women.

2.3 CHALLENGES

The challenges in planning the future of work in MENA are immense. The political instability of a region ravaged with numerous wars threatens economic stability. Additionally, the very weak democratic representation of people in politics poses a great challenge to people's ability to assemble and discuss their visions of the future and organise to push for policies that make those visions a reality. Women's voices are seldom heard in political and economic fora, and political suppression will further marginalize voices of women and minorities, making it difficult to have feminist viewpoints heard on any topic, and especially on economic issues.

The deteriorating state of education systems in the region, and the internationally low ranking of its higher-education facilities, suggest a bleak forecast for the future of work in a world economy that is increasingly dominated by competitiveness. Although girls in MENA are less likely than boys to drop out of school, they are more likely to never enter school in the first place (UNICEF 2017). The low levels of enrolment of girls in school in some countries will limit the future of women in work.

Figure 4: School Enrollment in Tertiary Education in Selected MENA Countries
2011



The share of women enrolled in tertiary education has steadily grown in recent years and has even surpassed the level of their male counterparts in many countries in the region (Figure 4). This indicates that women's low rate of par-

ticipation in the labour force is not due to their lack of skills or training.

Among the economic and political challenges to imagining a better future of work in MENA is government's inability to provide and promote alternatives to the policies and programs proposed or supported by the IFIs, which have played and are still playing a major role in shaping the region's economic policies without significant resistance by policy-makers. It is very challenging to politically advocate for socially-just values in a region that is governed by monarchies or fascist military and religious regimes. Of all the challenges, in such a politically volatile region, the most difficult is the lack of freedom of thought, speech, assembly, association and organization. It is essential for any society to come together and discuss topics that matter to its members without fear of prosecution.

3

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND (FEMINIST) ACTORS IN THE REGION

Most feminist discourses in MENA focus on the participation and inclusion of women in politics, the elimination of sexual harassment, and the attainment of sexual freedom. Inclusion of women in the labour market is being debated with less urgency – not because it is believed to be irrelevant, but because it is a complex and multifaceted issue. It also requires creative approaches toward job creation and gender-inclusion.

The inclusion of women in the labour force is mistakenly seen by many in the region as a threat to men's position in the labour market. Changing this perception requires a better economic and social imagination of the future in which inclusion of any subgroup of the population is not a threat to others.

It is hoped that having more women involved in politics will lead to a better engagement with women-related topics such as girls' education, gender-equality in wages, domestic and reproductive labour, discrimination and violence against women at the workplace, and legislated protection of women's rights. So far, the general debates adopted by governments and some civil society organisations are limited to basic topics of women in the labour market and women's financial empowerment as part of women's general empowerment and path toward emancipation. Calling for adequate, women-specific social benefits such as paid maternity leave and paid daycare is difficult in poor countries in the region since there are few social safety nets for both the working and non-working populations. In oil-rich countries, women can receive paid maternity leave, however support is below the ILO recommended length of 14 weeks. For example, women in KSA and Kuwait receive only 10 weeks of paid leave, while in the UAE private sector, women receive as little as 45 days paid leave. A lack of a political will, rather than a scarcity of economic resources, hinders governments from granting adequate women-specific social benefits.

Since the 2011 uprisings, there has been increased awareness of women's exploitation in the labour market in countries experiencing conflicts, war, or severe political repression. Efforts to raise awareness are not necessarily interested in analysing the future of work from a technical angle and advocating for investment in innovation or ICT education, but rather in addressing injustices inflicted on women labourers. Women in war-torn areas are facing exploitation in

the informal sector as they are forced to enter the labour market to provide for their families, especially when they are mothers and/or the head of their households. In Yemen, women head 52 percent of the households of internally displaced people since men have been shipped off to the battlefronts (World Bank 2017). Women also continue to receive lower wages than men; even in high-income countries such as Qatar the wage gap between men and women is between 25 and 50 percent (Doha News 2012)

The exploitation of women in the labour market is also apparent in the type of labour in which women are forced to engage. Prostitution is on the rise in war-ravaged Syria (Alsaaba and Kapilashrami 2016), Libya, and Yemen, where women find themselves without a source of income, or an education that provides options away from involuntary sex-work.

The aim of awareness-raising efforts is to let women know that they are being exploited (Nasser 2017), to include other women and feminists in discussions, and to eventually pressure the political elite to act to protect women.

Current feminist discussions in the region are more consumed with surviving war and violence, rather than with imagining scenarios for the future of work. Although the feminist communities in the region are not highly organised, the discourse found within leftist groups in the Levant and North Africa, and the experiences of feminist collectives such as Dammeh Coop in Beirut, Ikhtyar in Cairo and the Feminist Collective of Algiers present possibilities for a more organized movement. These countries have groups of activists, sociologists, political scientists, and economists that are heavily engaged in discussions about gender, sexuality, repression of minorities, and women-related issues that could be mobilized into wider discussions regarding the future of work from a feminist perspective.

The histories of working women that go back to the early decades of the 20th century in those countries (Khalifa 2017) were and still are a catalyst for the current generation to organise and work towards changing the conditions in the labour market for women and all workers in general. For example, in Lebanon the debate about women's engagement in formal jobs started more than a hundred years ago, and women's voting rights resulted from the pressure of working women (Muglia 2014). Today, Lebanon is of the site

of the region's first LGBTQI organization, Helem, as well as several feminist non-government organizations (NGOs) that work on women empowerment, sexual freedom, and workers' rights. In Egypt, women have also been part of the formal labour market for a century, and their engagement in public life gained them the right to vote in 1956. Currently, young feminists are re-reading the history of the Egyptian labour movement from a feminist perspective and creating feminist gender-conscious content on arrays of issues on platforms such as jeem.me. In 2018, the women's movement in Jordan launched a coalition that included nine women's rights organizations, as well as unions and other labour entities, to call for improvements to workplace conditions for women and increased inclusion of women in the labour force. The movement has also been effective in ensuring laws that require employers to provide on-site day-care facilities for their personnel are enforced. Such laws have enabled many women to take on jobs that they would not have otherwise been able to hold. Tunisia is by far the most advanced country in the region in terms of feminist organization and achievements. The legislative gains that Tunisian women have fought for, such as the abolishment of polygamy in the 1950s (which is allowed in Muslim Sharia Law), and the establishment of the equal inheritance law, remain unparalleled in the region (Reuters 2018).

4

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF WORK

With the feminist discourse in the region preoccupied with the social aspects of the gender-based inequalities in society, there is a crucial need to expand discussions to economic and legislative topics. Feminists should be bolder in their approaches. There should be more emphasis on topics that are important to the discourse on work, such as the right to form trade unions and to have just and fair labour laws that eliminate all forms of workers' exploitation. It is also vital to advocate for legislation that protects women and oppressed groups and that fosters their empowerment by enforcing equal pay, setting gender quotas for employers, and prohibiting sexual harassment at the workplace. Social justice should always be on the agenda along with the question of workers' rights to be considered as human rights.

As mentioned before, it is crucial for feminist groups to have the freedom of assembly in order for them to gather, share, and debate. Bringing together feminist groups from different countries in the region, and going beyond the dominance of Beirut, Cairo, and Tunis in the region's feminist discourse, will enrich and widen the feminist movement. Knowledge dissemination is key in building such a movement.

In the years that followed the Arab spring, the internet became a place for public discussions and collective action. There are many good Arabic-speaking platforms on the internet, such as mada masr, Aljumhuriya or 7iber, which engage in a range of discussions from feminist and social justice perspectives. Utilising these channels and sources of knowledge to engage in wider economic debates on the future of work, and publishing more content on the topic, will enable the movement to reach beyond the intellectual elite.

Since the debate on the future of work in the region is a relatively new one, there are still many points to be addressed. Bringing more visibility to this discussion will surely widen its spectrum of topics. For example, the issue of child labour is of growing concern in many countries. Additionally, in a region torn by wars and armed conflicts, there is little discussion about the future of the planet and the environment. Feminist movements can advocate for investment in green jobs in the region, not only for the sake of the environment but also to diversify oil-reliant economies. Freedom of movement of workers is still an undebated issue in the re-

gion, but could be presented into workers' rights discussions by feminist groups. It is essential to keep the feminist movement dynamic by engaging people from all genders, age-groups, nationalities, social classes, as well as geographic and ethnic backgrounds.

The main challenge to a feminist discourse on the future of work in the region at the moment is political, not economic. It will be crucial to fight the far-right that has manifested itself as hostile and violent monarchies, or as fascist military and religious regimes, in order to go forward with any plans for a socially-just world. Recent events have shown that the region is moving towards the political right, making it more important than ever to have an organized and vocal feminist movement that tackles issues such as the future of work with specific plans for targeted gender- and class-sensitive policies and programs that empower women and oppressed ethnic and sexual groups and that guarantee prosperity and dignity for all.

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GLOSSARY TERMS

GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
EU	European Union
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IFIs	International Financial Institutions
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-government organisation
UAE	United Arab Emirates
WB	World Bank

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amal Nasser is a non-resident economist with the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies focusing on the political economy of Yemen and the wider Middle East and North Africa. She is recently studying the impact of war on women in Yemen and taking part in the AUB's "Knowledge Is Power (KIP): Women and the Arab MENA Economies" project. She holds a Master of Science in Industrial and Network Economics from the Berlin Institute of Technology, where she also received her Bachelor of Science in Economics, and her writing and analysis is featured in media outlets such as Al-Monitor, the Financial Times, Reuters and The New Arab.

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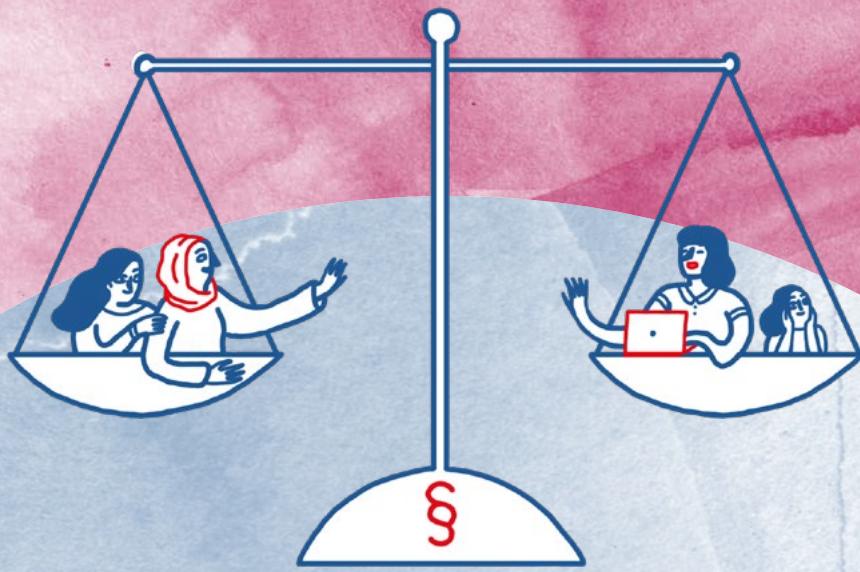
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THE FUTURE IS FEMINIST

"The Future is Feminist" is a global project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, working worldwide with feminists to develop positive visions for a better future that focus on economic policy issues and critical economic perspectives. The project in particular analyses the effects of digitalization and the future of work. It identifies common concerns of feminist and labour movements to create space for new powerful alliances

aiming at social change. The project is a continuation of the work of feminist networks in the Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and Northern Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa regions. It offers activists the opportunity to exchange ideas on burning issues, regional experiences and political strategies while serving as a space to experiment with new ideas.



FEMINIST VISIONS OF THE FUTURE OF WORK: MENA



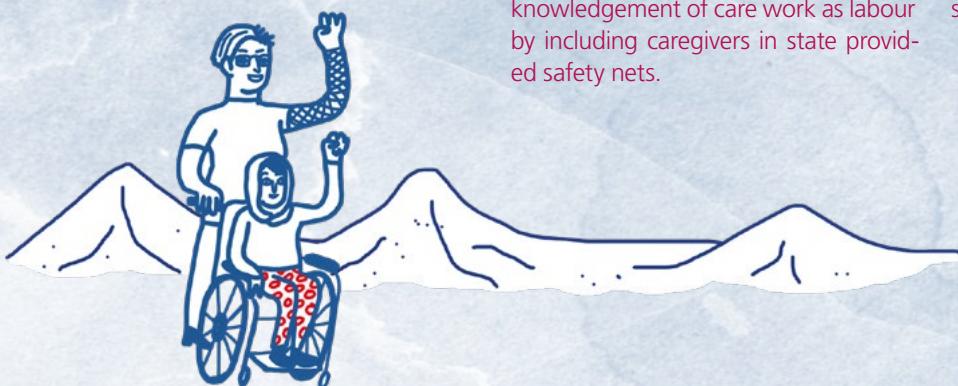
The MENA region is characterized by the lowest rate of female participation in the labour market worldwide and a high rate of women's unemployment. Women's labour force participation is on average higher in oil-producing states than in oil-importing states within the region. A growth can be observed, although it is quite slow.



Central discussions from a feminist perspective revolve around women's legal rights, the exploitation of domestic workers and more recently on unpaid care work. Domestic workers are a large subgroup of the many migrant workers in the region and the lack of their rights came to the forefront in recent years and remains a critical concern for feminist activists. Unpaid care work is a relatively newly discussed topic and debates center around the acknowledgement of care work as labour by including caregivers in state provided safety nets.



Imagining other scenarios for the future of work is currently not the focus of feminist movements. Discussions on the topic are mainly led by International Financial Institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, which are neo-liberal in nature. However, there are possibilities and potential entry points for a more organized movement across the region to engage in wider economic debates on the future of work. Knowledge dissemination is key in building such a movement.



For further information on this topic:
[www.fes.de/themenportal-gender-jugend-senioren/
gender-matters/the-future-is-feminist](http://www.fes.de/themenportal-gender-jugend-senioren/gender-matters/the-future-is-feminist)