GENDER DIMENSIONS OF INFORMAL LABOR

Literature on women’s economic empowerment confirm the importance of labor as one of the main pillars of women’s economic independence and participation in public life, a way to promote their social status, and allow them to take part in decision making, whether on the political level, in businesses, or within families. However, labor is not in any case sufficient for economic empowerment, if its quality is low and does not result in a considerable level of women’s economic empowerment. The informal sector is considered one of the important economic sectors in developing countries which absorb a large part of the labor in general, and women’s labor in particular, whether it is waged or own-account labor. No matter what the pattern is, it is a vulnerable sector in general, and is the main refuge of all categories unable to find job opportunities in the public sector. Therefore, social protection is a factor that can compensate such a situation, by being included under the umbrella of social security, health insurance, and other services provided to women such as maternity leave, nurseries, etc. Moreover, women’s social protection in the informal sector is becoming more important due to their various roles, whether at home by looking after their families, or outside home, i.e. at work, which would expose them to more risks and aggravate their vulnerability. As a matter of fact, working in the informal sector lacks many conditions required to promote women’s social empowerment. This labor is by definition outside the scope of any legal protection, whether it pertains to the Labor Law, minimum wage, or social security laws. It is also outside the scope of trade union protection. The situation gets even worse if a part of this labor takes place inside the family and is not paid. In this case, it is no more a matter of social protection, social security, and trade union protection, but also has to do with lacking the prerequisites of ensuring the minimum economic independence for women, which is supposed to be achieved through work in the market.

The present document is a regional report that aims at defining the gender dimensions of informal labor in the 13 Arab countries covered by the report on informal labor, i.e. Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, and Bahrain. Therefore, the report on the gender dimensions of informal labor will mainly focus on extracting a set of attributes and specificities that are common between all Arab countries in terms of labor and gender, and on highlighting the differences among them. It will also expose the basic problems faced by women in the informal sector, along with their reasons, taking into consideration governmental policies, trends towards women’s social protection in this sector if applicable, in addition to the roles played by the civil society in this regard according to national reports. It is worth noting that this report, being a regional one, counts mainly on national reports received from relevant Arab countries. However, the key problem is that data included in many national reports did not cover the gender dimensions of informal labor to a satisfying degree. The writer had then to count on other complementing sources. Furthermore, data included in the reports are different in terms of their baseline; thus, it would be hard to compare them.

The report is composed of three parts: the first part is a review of some literature on women’s labor and informal labor in general. After reviewing the relevant literature and studies, many common aspects and attributes emerged, meaning that the relation between women and the labor market, whether formal or informal, is an international issue, and that the status of women in the labor market is the lowest in general, with a lot of differences due to the different degrees of economic and social development and other variables. The second part of the report tries to read the indications about women’s participation to the informal labor market in the countries under study. This part also tackles the determinants of such participation. The third part focuses on social protection policies that are available to protect women in the informal sector on one hand, and the roles played by civil society organizations (CSOs) to protect women in this sector on the other. Finally, the report gives some recommendations to help rectify the situation of women in the informal sector in a way or another.

ONE: WOMEN AND INFORMAL LABOR – READING THE LITERATURE: PROBLEMS WITHOUT SOLUTIONS

Studying the situation of women in the labor market, especially in informal labor, cannot be separated from the problems of this sector in general, and particularly other issues related to gender dimensions. It is possible to detect some of these problems in the relevant literature such as:

• The prevalence of contradictory economic trends regarding the informal labor market with those who consider that it is good to expand it to reflect market flexibility, encourage investment, and increase job opportunities. According to those people, the informal labor market is better and more efficient than the formal labor market which can result in disturbances in the labor distribution, wasted resources, and a lack of encouragement in recruitment. According to a report issued by the World Bank in 2009 entitled «Doing Business 2009», governments were facing the challenge of reconciling the protection of workers’ rights with the flexibility of the labor market. In fact, this flexibility became one of the main pillars of investment encouragement, in addition to other pillars like expediting the measures of starting work, the project of cross-border taxes and trade, credit, closing measures, etc. The report also noted that the insistence of developing countries to strictly organise the labor market in order to protect workers’ rights pushed workers and employers to the informal sector. Furthermore, this strict formality of the labor market led to negative results such as a weakened capacity to create jobs, and less investment in research and development, which would reduce productivity. Others have an opposite view; they think that the absence of any social protection from this type of labor has many negative effects, such as aggravating social inequality, and harming poor and marginalized workers. As a matter of fact, there is a clear difference among economists related to gender dimensions. It is possible to detect some of those differences in the labor market flexibility depends undoubtedly on the strife of international financial institutions to impose one economic system in the framework of the so-called neo-liberal model, for that reason, all obstacles impeding investors is essential and necessary, even if it hurts the other production parties like workers, limits their organisation and collective negotiation capacities, or restricts the States ability to play one of its main roles, i.e. an organizational one. Surprisingly, this trend is prevailing at a time when the United Nations has launched the post-SDGs 15 goals, proposing an inclusive development model based on mainly redefining the States role, whether regarding organizational, social, or distribution roles, and, in

4. Ibid
5. Chant, Sylvia & Pedwell, Carolyn, Women, Gender and the Informal Economy, An Assess
other cases, its economic one. The adoption of the market economy by the State and the abandoning of a large part of its economic assets reduced its capacity to play its social role, particularly in terms of providing labor market flexibility, seen as encouraging investment.

**TWO: READ THE INDICATORS AND DETERMINANTS RELEVANT TO WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOR MARKET IN THE COUNTRIES UNDER STUDY**

1. Comparative overview of the general aspects of informal labor:
   - Some studies estimated that informal labor in non-GCC Arab countries amounts to 6.2% of the total labor force. However, it only produces 3% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) because of its low legal status.
   - The size of informal labor went even bigger with the economic crisis and in spite of the structural changes in the Syrian economy that enabled the expansion of informal economic activities as a solution for the crisis and a way to create job opportunities. Therefore, the expansion of informal labor depended on the decline in public sector job opportunities and the limited opportunities available in the formal public sector.
   - Adopting an exclusive instead of an inclusive development policy related to informal labor was a form of adaptation that can be seen in many developing countries, while policies related to informal labor were generally oriented towards women.
   - The most dangerous thing is that it is often waged labor. When women are employed in the informal sector, their work is generally informal, with no social protection in general, whether related to health, safety, or violence against them. There is also a complex relation between informal labor and the insecure working environment, care responsibilities, and poverty, which necessitates deeper analyses.

2. Women and informal labor: Situations and problems:
   - Country reports show a low participation of women in the labor market in general, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region containing a large number of the countries under study. Women’s informal labor is mainly concentrated in the public sector. In Algeria, after the implementation of economic policies, the majority of women’s informal labor is mainly concentrated in the public sector.
   - Women’s participation in the labor market in general, and the informal sector in particular, is different from the one in Syria; the country saw high percentages of women in comparison with men in this sector. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, women’s participation in the labor market is low in general, indicating the importance of managing investment. Thus, many other factors leading to the expansion of informal economic activities as a solution for the crisis and a way to create job opportunities. Therefore, the adoption of an inclusive development policy related to informal labor was a form of adaptation that can be seen in many developing countries, while policies related to informal labor were generally oriented towards women.
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violence such as the seizing of their passports, delayed political circumstances have the right to benefit only from medical care services workers. All those workers are involved in informal working Syria, according to country reports. Estimations indicate that years due to the influx of refugees from the conflict zones in labor force in Lebanon increased by one-third in the last five domestic work.

The increasing percentages of women in the informal sector in addition to quality gaps. 

In the same context, in Sudan, the quality gap intersects with the geographic or regional gap. There are also huge geographic gaps between Khartoum and the remaining regions, and between rural and urban regions, in addition to quality gaps. 

The percentage of refugees who are women and girls has been increasing over the years due to the influx of refugees from the conflict zones in Lebanon. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 60% of those who work in the education sector are women and girls. As a result of these claims, a new national framework was launched in 2015 in Jordan. It was supported by the Ministry of Labor, the General Department of Retirement and Social Security for Workers and the Ministry of Finance. The aim was to formalize the informal sector and guarantee workers’ rights based on a rights approach. The system of social protection does not comply with the standards of social protection stipulated in the ILO. However, these attempts were never implemented; there still are no specific working hours, and human trafficking cases are increasing in tragic circumstances.

In order to grant social security to domestic, according to Jordan’s report. It was supported by the Ministry of Labor; the General Department of Retirement and Social Security for Workers number 39 (2015). The main goal was to extend the social protection umbrella of the formal sector to the informal sector. The new law was translated into a comprehensive social protection system through social safety nets, social security, and labor market policies. The goals of this roadmap were:

- An active social protection agency which organizes the programs of social safety nets according to scientific targeting systems based on criteria which contribute to covering poor and vulnerable individuals and families, and allows them to coordinate their work with stakeholders in governmental and non-governmental institutions.

In spite of the comprehensive vision of the Iraqi government, key questions arise: was this vision implemented on the ground? What is the expected economic cost to implement this ambitious vision?

In Egypt, article 26 of the unified Labor Law No. 12 of 2003 was reserved for informal labor. The relevant ministry develops programs of social safety nets according to scientific targeting systems to guarantee workers’ rights based on a rights approach. The system of social protection does not comply with the standards of social protection stipulated in the ILO; its seventh chapter was reserved to insurance programs. Three: Women’s Informal Labor Between State Policies and International organizations focused in recent years on the issue of social protection and informal labor as one of the key incentives which made many governments reconsider the current system is unable to ensure social protection to all citizens and vulnerable categories in the society, and the current social protection systems to guarantee workers’ rights based on a rights approach. 

The Egyptian government has extended some forms of social security to domestic workers outside the umbrella of social protection provided by the State for many reasons, on top of which is that the packages of this system are very limited and do not encourage expanding the basis to include more people in it. As for small and medium enterprises, the government ultimately tries to register them, knowing that this is not enough for its owners and does not give them incentives to consider registering their enterprises. 

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any policies without accurate statistics makes these policies unrealistic and inapplicable. a. It is impossible to say that all countries under study have similar dimensions of informal labor; there are differences between the countries. Some have formal rules organizing informal labor, but these rules are not really applied. Other states are totally inconsiderate of the good economic phenomenon absorbing an important part of unemployment. In any case, the whole approach, if applicable, is limited to some legal texts. b. Governments’ vision regarding informal labor is different from that of NGOs. The first party focuses on the idea of developing the informal sector, which is not existent in the governmental agendas. Approaches regarding the informal sector are not sensitive to gender issues. c. The main focus of the present paper, i.e., the situation of women in the informal sector, is not existent in the governmental agendas. d. Despite the approach by the first party to the exclusive development pattern, this issue was never tackled under an approach focused on the idea of changing said pattern. Therefore, the main reasons of the expansion and of this phenomenon is not being tackled.

e. A number of governments showed interest in some alternatives reducing the negative effects resulting from adopting market policies such as encouraging small and micro enterprises. Women were the most targeted category in this regard. However, it remains unsuccessful in absorbing large numbers of women who work for their own account for many reasons, some of which are due to the fears of some women to be provoked at work or in case they are loaned grants. The most important factor remains the lack of a comprehensive vision to deal with this issue. Guaranteeing the work and social security of women who work in the informal sector remains a key challenge. New programs are always in the link between this sector and governmental authorities. The second case is that of Fair Trade Egypt which focused on training the informal workers and promoting the most in the informal sector due to many social and cultural circumstances, and because they are bearing a double burden. Even those who are considered as the poorest female laborers and work in the formal sector suffer from low wages, mistreatment, violations, and discrimination in wages and employment conditions.

2. Civil society, informal labor, and women

First of all, it is worth noting that civil society is composed of many organizations such as CSOs, NGOs, trade unions, cooperatives, etc. It is thus normal that every organization approaches the issue differently, due to the differences in references. Secondly, the relation of the State with civil society in the Arab world is confused and dominated by mutual doubt more than interdependence and the capacity to build partnerships, which are the backbone of the civil sector that are tackled here. However, all these affect the approaches of dealing with informal labor on one hand and impede building real partnerships on the other hand.

CSOs have different experiences in dealing with informal labor and the situation of women in this sector. Egypt’s report included some of the most important categories of informal labor, the first of which was that of street food vendors. The attempt at organizing this relation between relevant governmental authorities and those who work in this sector, by developing workers’ organization and negotiation competences. The experience of Street Food Vendors Association was one of the first initiatives that can be considered an example to organize workers in this sector for almost two decades under a humanitarian and developmental approach. This association, established in 1986 thanks to cooperation between governmental officials and street food vendors, was able to protect the rights of food vendors, and deal with the issues of crowded streets and food safety. According to an agreement between the association and local officials, it became possible for health officials to accompany and train vendors on how to prepare acceptable food in appropriate and clean environment. Vendors are not allowed to trading before 6 a.m. and after 9 p.m. Authorities stopped chassing vendors as long as they abide by the agreed-upon rules. New carts were designed and pardoned. Officials and local residents have looked into consideration tourist needs and local commerce. This experience resulted from field research led by Planning, Analysis, and recommendations of the research revealed that this sector includes categories of citizens who represent a large part of the society in need for formality, care, and development. It is also considered an open economic activity allowing the entry and exit of labor force without restrictions, and the easy entry of women who look after their families. The results of this research were submitted to El Minya officials, who understood the issue and started to cooperate with vendors to establish the Street Food Vendors Association, which started with 28 members and was then joined by hundreds of others. The associations success was not limited to organizing the relation between the authorities and vendors and guaranteeing the safety of food sold by those vendors; it plays a role in developing vendors by granting loans and ensuring food production requirements, and also organizes social activities. It helps to eliminate dependency, and works on providing medical care to vendors and their families. These services improved the quality of the food sold. What is more important is that some women have taken leadership in this field, which legally and politically promoted and respected for vendors. This experience is now applied in the remaining Egyptian governorates so that food and social security of women who work in the informal sector are improved, and women’s rights are respected.

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2. Domestic female workers are the category that is suffering the most from violations in the informal sector. The situation is even worse for refugee and migrant labor in Lebanon and Bahrain. The impact of political circumstances such as war and civil strife is more severe on women.

3. The gender gap intersects with all the other gaps reflecting other aspects of discrimination, whether based on religion, sect, geography, or class. When women are classified in more than one gap, their situation is worse. The class and geographical gaps are the main variables in the Arab region. Less educated and poorer women are the ones mostly found working in the informal sector, leading them to accept working conditions that are degrading. As for the geographic location, its impact is also complex. In Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, and other Arab countries, there are gender gaps between rural and urban regions, and the south and north. Rural regions are poorer and have lower human development rates in general. Some regions are poorer than others, like food distribution. For example, Akkar and Bsharri in Lebanon, and Darfur in Sudan. Therefore, poor and illiterate women who live in the rural parts of the less developed regions are the most vulnerable in the informal labor market.

4. Despite the lack of social protection for women in the informal sector, the most vulnerable categories are women working in agriculture, particularly migrant workers, and domestic workers who work in the most severe conditions in terms of working hours and low wages. 5. There is a real tergiversation in reforming labor laws dealing with informal labor in general. Texts are developed without being respected, and in many cases, laws are implemented without considering the level of stability, or due to international pressure. But in all cases, governments do not want to tackle the issue seriously due to its high cost. In fact, covering informal labor socially incurs very high costs. Consequently, the proposed solutions are always partial and tend to target one or two categories with no comprehensive vision for every sector.

6. Not all reform initiatives are women sensitive. Each sector is subject to different labor protection norms; without discrepancies, and without acknowledging that there are vulnerable categories that are more exposed to risks, i.e., poor women in this sector. 7. Although micro-financing was originally targeting women, particularly poor women, there were no flexible programs to target and train women on work, sustainability, and management. In light of this low status of women, the decision regarding micro-financing remained in the hands of fathers, husbands, or sons. Moreover, women do not usually apply for loans and prefer borrowing from friends and neighbors, for religious reasons and fear from legal accountability if they were unable to manage their loans in the right way.

8. One of the key strategies to make informal labor tolerable and income generating consists in developing the competencies of those who work in the sector. Competencies development is more important for women because they are less educated and more vulnerable. Such development improves productivity and income. The key challenge is how to make efficient informal sector workers more efficient and overcoming cultural obstacles. Therefore, training should not be limited to work competencies, but must also include gender and political dimensions.

9. Market access is an urgent issue for the informal sector. It is more important for women due to constraints imposed on their activities, either because of family burdens or due to cultural constraints and financial difficulties. Thus, it is important to support and rollout the experience of fair trade centers.

10. Civil society almost makes no effort related to formality as a change enabler, knowing that this is the only way to obtain full rights before the law. Women are affected due to lack of time and having to face a double burden, or because trade union officials are not interested in promoting women’s membership.

Finally, women informal labor can be approached by NGOs under a rights perspective by focusing on formality, competencies development, rights awareness, and contributing to fair trade conditions, in addition to other fields which tackled as being suffusions of women in the informal sector in the near term and empowering them in the long run. The key issue, i.e., changing the conditions and circumstances leading to the expansion of this sector and marginalizing women in it, remains an inherently political one, and thus requires reconsidering development patterns adopted by governments on one hand, and encouraging civil society to advance these governmental policies to change or amend them by proposing alternatives on the other.