

# Why is Women's Labor Force Participation So Low in the Middle East and North Africa?

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It is well known that women's labor force participation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is lower than in other world regions. Rates of female labor force participation (FLFP) have fallen everywhere, but MENA rates remain lowest, despite increasing educational attainment and declining fertility. In 2019 the MENA average was just 20%, compared with a world average of 48%, according to World Bank data. By way of comparison, the FLFP rate was 52% in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 26% in South Asia. Explanations have focused on culture and Islam, as well as structural, institutional, and sociodemographic factors. This policy brief draws on findings from [a recent international research project](#), Moghadam (2019) and Karshenas and Moghadam (forthcoming) to explain the factors and forces behind low FLF supply and demand in the MENA region.

One unique feature of FLFP in some MENA countries, notably Tunisia and to a lesser extent Turkey, is that the participation of women with tertiary education is on par with comparator countries (in Latin America for example); it is low participation rates among women with intermediate education that pushes down the overall female rates. However, while FLFP of those with tertiary education is higher than those with secondary schooling or less, the unemployment rates among university educated women are very high – between 20 and 35 per cent across different countries in the region. In Saudi Arabia in 2013, fully 70 percent of unemployed Saudi women had college degrees.

Moghadam (1995), Karshenas (2001), and Ross (2008) highlight the propensity of oil economies to favor imports rather than productive and diversified domestic investments, the presence of high wages for male workers, and generous social benefits. Others find that neither Islam nor oil income is directly associated with lower rates of FLFP, arguing for the significance of culture. I compared MENA oil economies with oil-producing and exporting states elsewhere and found that the MENA FLFP rates were far lower (see Figure 1). This led me to the region's legal frameworks and the realization that gender inequality was inscribed in family law, as it denies women equal inheritance of family wealth and informs other laws and practices, such as unequal nationality rights and the absence of laws prohibiting violence against women and workplace sexual harassment. Laws and norms are as important as the oil economy in impeding progress on women's economic participation and empowerment.

But what of LFPR differences between highly-educated and less-educated women? Class-based social norms matter. MENA women from educated and liberal-minded families are more likely to delay marriage, enroll in university, seek employment, and have fewer children. In other words, Muslim family law and the attendant social norms play less of a role in the socialization of such young women, helping to increase their labor supply. On the demand side, however, MENA economies have remained largely stagnant and unproductive, with less hiring in the public sector, long favored by women graduates. Employment conditions in the private sector are not attractive to most women, especially mothers, and employers too might prefer to hire men. Hence the high unemployment rates of college-educated women, and the low participation rates of women from lower-income and conservative families.



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IN the MENA region, women with tertiary education have high levels of labor force participation but also face high levels of unemployment due to falling employment opportunities, especially in the public sector. Less educated women, on the other hand, are constrained by unfriendly family laws and attendant social norms.

The MENA region is hardly homogenous in natural resources and national income. Only in the smallest Gulf countries can oil be regarded as the principal explanation in the perpetuation of patriarchy and low FLFP, as those countries feature small populations, high wages, continued labor importation, and cradle-to-grave social benefits. In the large MENA countries, declining oil prices, internationalized civil conflicts, failing states (Libya), and international sanctions (Iran), mean the end of generous state benefits and subsidies, rising income inequality, the persistence of poverty, stagnant economies, and high unemployment rates. In such an environment, women with less than university education see little incentive to seek jobs, although many do labor informally to bolster the family income. The interaction of unfavorable macroeconomic conditions, conservative family laws, employer bias, and the absence of maternal employment policies perpetuates the low levels of MENA FLFP.

Policy recommendations: Immediate policies to encourage women's employment in the region include paid maternity leaves financed through general revenues (rather than a tax on the employer), along with affordable and good-quality nurseries and pre-school facilities (Ilkkaracan et al 2015). The International Monetary Fund, long a promoter of free markets, now recommends targeted fiscal policies such as child care provisioning and subsidies to employers to help overcome reluctance to hire women. In a region where marriage and the family matter, women will require such support structures and incentives if they are to contribute to national productivity, development, prosperity – and their own empowerment.

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