

Understanding the Egyptian Paradox: Why the gender gap is closing in education but not in employment?

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I- Introduction

Women's economic empowerment and her participation in labor force have significant positive impact on the children's health and education and on the growth of the whole economy. Education is considered as a major determinant of female's economic participation. However, it was observed that women's achievement in education was not translated into higher female labor force participation.

In Egypt, the female labor force participation is among the lowest worldwide with only 22 percent. Moreover, when employed, women are more likely to be in low-earning job with poor conditions and limited opportunities for career advancement and vulnerability to sexual harassment and different types of violence (World Economic Forum, 2016). Women present human capital potential in Egypt; closing gender gap and increasing women's access to economic opportunities are highly needed for increasing growth, decreasing poverty and achieving sustainable development goals.

II- The Egyptian paradox

Women's education is considered as a necessary condition to raise women's economic participation significantly. According to the literature; highly educated women have higher opportunity cost of staying at home (Mincer, 1975; Becker et al, 1990 and Ganguli et al, 2011 and Spierings et al, 2010). However, it was found that in Egypt



closing the gender gap in enrollment in almost all education levels, was not sufficient for closing the gender gap in employment. This is known in the literature as a “Paradox” (Chamelou et al, 2011; Dandana and Marques, 2017 and Assaad et al, 2018).

In an attempt to understand this paradox; the literature shows that not only education matters for female labor force participation, but the level of education matters as well. Chamblou et al (2011) show that post-secondary education or higher has a positive significant impact on female labor force participation, while lower level has no significant impact. Additionally, in Egypt, education is not considered only as an investment for getting job and higher earnings in the future; families support their daughters’ education as a way to meet a good husband rather than a mean to find a job (Moghadam, 2004 and Markle, 2013).

Other determinants of female labor force participation that may explain this paradox include social norms, country’s economic situation and the structure of the labor demand. Conservative gender norms, customs and traditions in a patriarchal society as Egypt, is considered a significant determinant of the low rate of female’s economic activity (Verme, 2014; Esfahani and Bahramitash, 2015; Diwan and Vartanova, 2017; Nazier and Ramadan, 2018). Moreover, jobless growth, lack of economic opportunities in the society and the segmented labor market (Pettersson, 2013; Verme, 2014; Assaad et al, 2018) may explain the low participation of women in economic activities in Egypt.



On the supply side, women from societies where there are conservative gender norms concerning female labor force participation tend to participate less in economic activities. Although education matters for increasing women's participation in the labor market, personal values and cultural norms related to patriarchy, may explain the low female participation rate (Chamlou et al, 2011; Diwan and Vartanova, 2017; Nazier and Ramadan, 2018). Norms and traditions define the gender roles and labor division inside and outside the household. According to the tradition, women's main role is reproductive and she is the main responsible of unpaid work inside the household, while men are the main breadwinners. This unequal division of the unpaid household work and the feminization of family care decreases the time available for women to participate in economic activities, which explains the gender gap in the labor force (Seguino, 2016 and Hendy, 2018).

While on the demand side; the structure of economic opportunities is another determinant for women's economic participation. When women participate in the labor force, they are more likely to be unemployed or concentrated in service sectors as nursing or teaching or in informal and vulnerable employment such as agriculture sector. This is understood given that some types of employment are considered socially acceptable and some employment are more family friendly than others (Assaad et al, 2014). Sectors that provide flexible hours and child care services are more family friendly than others. So, women



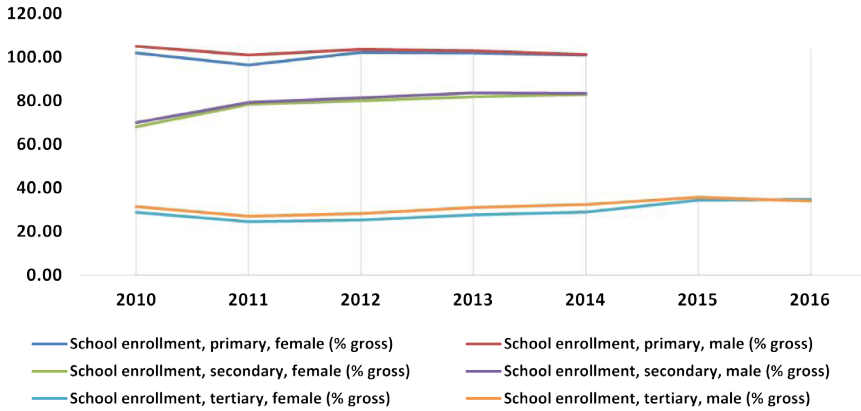
who decide to enter the labor force, they search for jobs that correspond to her double burden and they may find themselves constrained by the types of the employment opportunities available in the market (Spierings et al, 2010). Additionally, some employment opportunities in non-traditional private sector may be perceived as inappropriate and make them more vulnerable to sexual harassment. This later is a significant barrier that constraint women from the effective participation in the labor force (Assaad and Barsoum, 2007; Bahramatish and Esfahani, 2016). This explains the importance of the public sector in female's employment in Egypt, considered as more family friendly and less prone to sexual harassment (Hendy, 2015; Bahramatish and Esfahani, 2016; Assaad et al, 2018).

III- Education, employment and social norms in Egypt

Since 2010, the gender gap in school enrollment is almost closed for all levels. For the primary and secondary education levels, the gap is reversed with higher enrollment rate among girls compared to their male counterparts. However, the enrollment rate at the tertiary level is very low for both female and male with only 34.85% and 34.04 percent, respectively, in 2015 (Figure 1).



Figure (1): Gross school enrollment rate (Primary- Secondary and Tertiary)-2010-2016

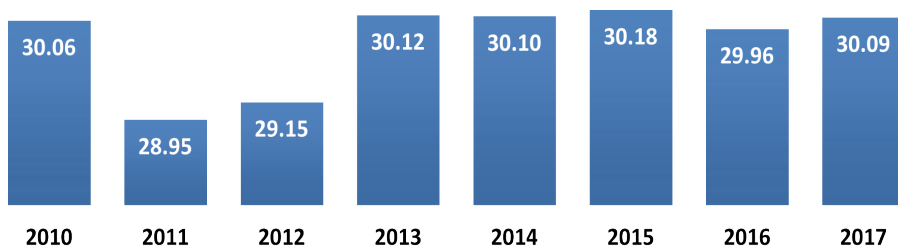


Source: World Development Indicators -2018.

Despite the closing gender gap in education, female labor force participation remains almost the third of the male labor force participation. In 2011, the ratio of female to male labor force participation rate decreased because of the uprisings the macroeconomic stabilities in Egypt that affected both men and women (Figure 2).



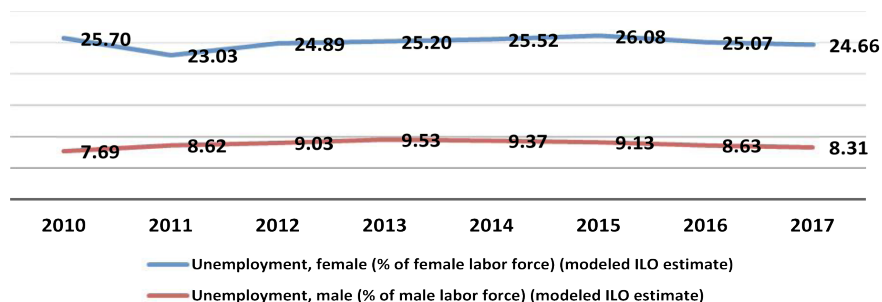
Figure (2): Ratio of female to male labor force participation rate (%), 2010-2017 (modeled ILO estimate)



Source: World Development Indicators -2018.

Additionally, when Egyptian women enter the labor force, they suffer from high rate of unemployment, especially among youth. In 2017, female unemployment rate reached 24.7% while unemployment among male is only 8.3% (Figure 3). Female youth unemployment decreased from 50.7% in 2010 to 45% in 2017. However, this rate is almost 1.5 times the male youth unemployment rate (Figure 4).

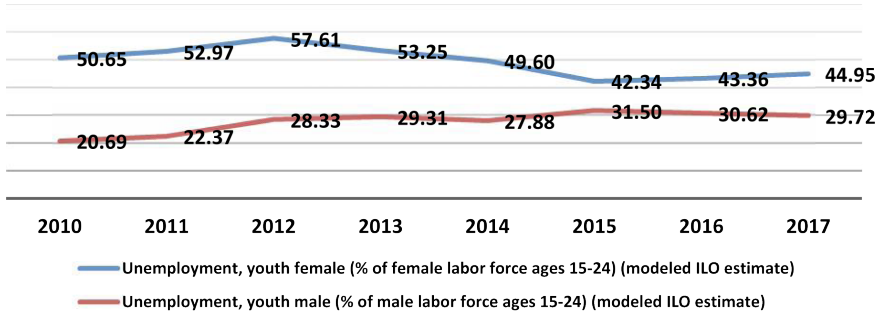
Figure (3): Unemployment rate, 2010-2017



Source: World Development Indicators -2018.



Figure (4): Youth unemployment rate, 2010-2017

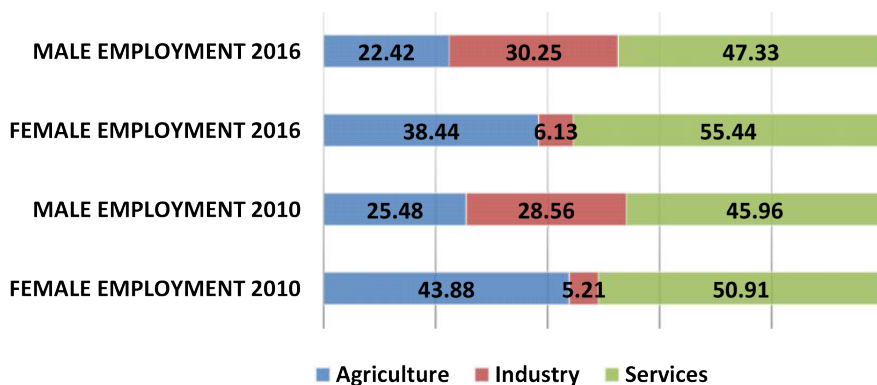


Source: World Development Indicators -2018.

The employed women are mainly concentrated in the informal sector in vulnerable jobs with poor conditions without access to social protection. Egyptian employed women are mainly concentrated in agriculture and services sectors. Women employed in agriculture sector decreased from 43.9% of female employment in 2010 to 38.4% in 2016. While employed male in agriculture sector represent only 25.5% and 22.4% of male employed in 2010 and 2016, respectively. And for the industry sector, the share of employed women is less than 7% of female compared to 30% of male employment in 2016 (Figure 5). Moreover, Women are less likely to be in top managerial positions or own enterprises. In 2016; only 18% of firms have female participation in ownership and only 5% of firms have female as top managers (WDI, 2018).



Figure (5): Distribution of male and female employment among different sectors



Source: World Development Indicators -2018.

For social norms and cultural values, it is difficult to measure it. However, the literature uses some indicators as a proxy for the norms and cultural attitude in an attempt to explain the impact of these informal institutions on women's economic activity. For instance, the polygamous marriage is used by Spierings et al (2010) as proxy for the culture from PAPFAM and Demographic and Health Survey data for six Arab countries, including Egypt. They found that polygamous marriage reduces women's economic participation. Bahramitash, Esfahani and Lin (2015) use the World Value Survey to measure the share of respondents who (strongly) agree on the following statements: "When jobs are scarce; men should have more right to a job than woman". They found that 64.9% of the MENA region respondents agree on that



statement and such rate has negative significant impact on women's economic participation. While, Nazier and Ramadan (2018) used the Egyptian Demographic Health Survey (2008) and the Egyptian Labor Market Panel Survey (2012) to study the impact of social norms on female labor force participation and type on employment she chooses once she enters the labor force. They found that the higher the likelihood of acceptance of violence against women in the community where the woman lives, the less likely she participates in the labor market. Such variable reflects the gender roles implied by the patriarchal societies.

Using the application of 'Nes2alak'¹ provided by Baseera, the Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research, and in a collaboration with the UN-Women, a survey was launched concerning women situation in Egypt during the period from January 2018 to July 2018. According to the results, only 12% disagreed on the statement that education is important for shaping an independent personality of women. This shows the importance of female's education in the Egyptian society. However, 83% of the respondent agreed that female education is a mean to have a good husband and improve her marriage opportunities.

In an attempt to measure the gender roles in the society and the dual burden faced by women, there was a question about the ability of Egyptian women to make a balance between her job outside the household and her household's responsibilities. The results show that 45% of the

¹ <http://www.enow.gov.eg/PapersDetail/58>



respondents think that Egyptian woman cannot do such balance, while 55% agreed that she can do the balance. And for the reluctant role of private sector in providing equal job opportunities for female as for males; 39% of the respondent think that private sector prefers to hire men than women even if they are equally qualified compared to 26% who disagreed. And 40% of the respondents think that firms in private sector prefer to promote men than women even if they are equally efficient, compared to 30% who disagreed (Baseera, 2018).

IV- Policy implications and recommendations

The “Egyptian Paradox” may be explained by social norms and the gender roles in the society on the supply side. While on the demand side, this paradox is explained by the fact that the economic opportunities available to women are not family friendly and do not take into consideration the double burden of Egyptian women. Especially in a context where the role of public sector has diminished over the years and the private sector is unwilling in hiring women and investing in their training given the perceived high cost.

Therefore, closing the gender gap in employment requires tackling the barriers at both supply and demand sides through:

- Raising awareness of boys and girls in primary and preparatory schools on the importance of women’s participation in economic activities



- Use of social media and drama to enhance the importance of the role of women outside the household as a significant participant in the labor market.
- Providing affordable childcare and paid parental leaves.
- Providing incentives to the private sector to afford more family friendly work environment with flexible hours.
- Ensuring access to safe public transportation and work environment against the possibility of harassment and any type of violence against women.
- Encouraging and facilitating women's access to training and finance for entrepreneurship opportunities.
- Providing job opportunities for women with secondary education or lower as they are the less likely to be employed.

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