



Palestinian Women in the Labor Force

Realities, Challenges, and Aspirations

By Mounir Kleibo



The labor markets in the Arab region have some gender characteristics that are similar to those in practically all other world regions. For example, fewer women work than men, many of them work in different jobs than men, and when they work in broadly similar jobs as men, they tend to be in lower positions and are paid less. In a study on gender inequality in Jordan and the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Zafiris Tzannatos commented in late 2015: “In the Arab region, the female labor force participation is remarkably very low, and when women are employed, they tend to be employed predominantly in “feminized” industries and occupations in relative isolation from men. More or less as a direct result of these two characteristics, the gender gap in education tends to be highest, this time favoring women.”ⁱ

The oPt occupies a rather extreme position, the third lowest with respect to the female labor force participation rates.ⁱⁱ Women employment trends in the oPt indicate systematic gender disparities in the labor market, and the government’s labor-sector strategy for 2014–2016 acknowledges that the previous sector strategy for 2011–2013 failed to meet its goals of reducing unemployment and increasing women’s labor force participation.ⁱⁱⁱ Low female labor force participation has considerable impact both on women’s empowerment and on the national economy. It hinders women’s economic advancement and status and impedes the Palestinian economy from capitalizing on an untapped pool of educated human capital. As such, it represents a critical policy issue.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) Labor Force Survey for the fourth quarter of 2015, the number of persons

who actively participated in the labor force in the oPt was 1,325,000; with 844,300 working in the West Bank and 480,700 in the Gaza Strip.^{iv} Using ILO standards, the number of unemployed in that same period totaled 342,200, with 184,500 in the Gaza Strip and 157,700 in the West Bank. Thus, the labor force participation rate in the West Bank was 46.4 percent and 45.7 percent in the Gaza Strip. However, the gap in the participation rate between males and females was huge: it reached 72.5 percent for males compared with 19.1 percent for females in the labor force, while correspondingly the unemployment rate for males was 22.3 percent compared with 39.7 percent for females.^v The unemployment rate in the Gaza Strip amounted to 38.4 percent compared with 18.7 percent in the West Bank for the same period.

The high unemployment rate in Gaza reflects the dire economic situation due to the impact of the Israeli-imposed blockade on the Gaza economy. Women not only suffer from a higher unemployment rate than men, on average they also tend to be unemployed for a longer duration than men (16.4 months compared to 11.8 months).^{vi} As reported by ILO, this is especially detrimental to unemployed youth because the longer the unemployment period, the more

likely prospective employers are to harbor negative perceptions of the young jobseeker, whom they may start to see as unemployable.

The fact that Palestinian women are highly concentrated in two sectors of the economy – agriculture and services – and virtually nonexistent in the important sectors of construction and transport creates another serious impediment. This concentration implies that women do not have equal access to all sectors compared to men.^{vii} Although this is a worldwide phenomenon, the situation in Palestine is more extreme and, as a result, Palestinian women experience a higher degree of marginalization in the labor market compared to women in other economies.^{viii} In order to provide a strategic solution to the problem of women’s low participation and high unemployment, policies have to aim not only to expand the size of the productive sectors (agriculture and manufacturing), but also to incite them to absorb women.

The expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank is among the factors that negatively impact the engagement of women in the labor force: The geographic, physical, and social ruptures created by Israel’s checkpoints and permanent closures of entrances and exits to residences in many areas seriously impact the mobility of

Palestinians, which particularly affects women. The uncertainty with respect to commuting time that comes as a result of Israel's movement restrictions makes it more difficult for women to seek employment outside their local communities, thus reducing their work chances even more compared to men.^{ix}

Palestinian workers in Israel and in the settlements have always been predominantly male, whereby 12 percent of male workers were employed in Israel in 2014, compared to less than 1 percent of working women. Thus, the labor market in the oPt has become

have made in terms of education and work experience. It appears that the gender-pay gap in the oPt is driven more by their lower pay for work of equal value than by women's lower pay for the same work, which underlines the importance of gender-neutral job evaluations.^{xi}

Occupations more frequently filled by women, such as clerks, administrative assistants, nurses, and teachers, generally receive lower remuneration, but for the same occupation men and women access the same wage in Palestine. This phenomenon is

delicate issue that is difficult to solve without sound comprehension of its concepts and consequences, both in the workplace and in society in general.

In 2011, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics conducted a study in the occupied Palestinian territory on gender-based violence (GBV) in the workplace in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Institute of Women's Studies at Birzeit University. Out of the 853 women who responded to the survey, 78.2 percent said that they had not experienced any form of violence at

understanding the causes can quantify the costs and make solutions more feasible. On the community level, the cost of violence at work has a negative impact as it requires rehabilitation or reintegration of the victims, retraining costs for those who lost their job, disability for victims who lost their capacities, and legal consultation expenses. Hence, achieving the implementation of women's rights in the workplace is a responsibility of the state, of employers, and of women themselves. The ILO works with governments and social partners



even more competitive for women in past years, which partially explains the extremely high unemployment rates for women in the post-Second Intifada period.^x

Added to all the above is the existence of a significant gender-based wage gap and significant wage discrimination between the sexes in the oPt: women's median daily wage is 84 percent of men's, with a 20 percent gap among recent graduates in their first private-sector job. This pay gap persists despite the significant gains women

also prevalent in the public sector. The low wages for occupations that are usually filled by women negatively impact women's labor force participation, particularly if they have children in need of day-care, given the prevailing perception that children are the responsibility of women. The introduction of a minimum wage in the private sector (at the rate of NIS 1,450/month) in January 2013 had significant positive effects on low-paid workers, particularly women. However, unequal remuneration is a chronic and

work, whereas 22.8 percent said they had experienced some form of violence during the last 12 months. Young women aged 25 to 29 were the most vulnerable age group, with 29 percent reporting that they had experienced some form of violence at work. They were followed by women aged 24 and under, of which 18 percent had experienced some form of violence in the workplace.^{xii}

Gender-based violence can affect the organization of work, productivity, and working environment. Hence

to develop the knowledge base on gender equality in the workplace; promote representation, advocacy, and a voice for women workers; and build the capacity of constituents to promote gender equality.

During the past decade, the ILO has been active in promoting women's economic empowerment in the oPt through a series of tripartite interventions that involve government, employers, and workers at the policy and institutional levels, as well as at the grassroots level. In 2011, a major achievement

was the establishment of the National Committee for Women's Employment (NCWE) with a vision to promote social justice by advancing gender equality in the world of work by ensuring that legislation, policies, programs, and actions adequately respond to the different needs of women and men. The NCWE has continuously been building its capacities to actively perform in the policy-making arena. It has developed a strategy with a clear objective on promoting a favorable environment for the provision of decent work for

lack of knowledge among women about their equal rights as workers. Working women and new graduates are not exposed to labor-rights topics, and this is a major constraint that hinders women from effectively acquiring their labor rights that are enshrined under both national legislation and international standards. Dissemination of information about the labor rights of women and non-discrimination is therefore considered an important instrument and a primary step towards improving the working

Currently, the ILO is implementing a project in the oPt that focuses on violence-free workplaces and explores care infrastructure and provisions for victims of such violence. In this endeavor, cooperatives will be strengthened both as a part of the delivery of care provisioning and as a stand-alone effort. The project aims to promote non-discrimination in the workplace, enhance women's economic empowerment through innovative cooperatives, and improve the capacity of national institutions to

to men raises questions about the role of political and institutional factors that keep women's participation rates well below the regional average. In addition, the exclusion of young women from the labor market, as well as the low percentage of female entrepreneurs point to demand-side obstacles. The human security challenges facing Palestinian women and men are multiple and cannot be resolved through a piecemeal approach. Improving women's access to decent work in the West Bank



women with a focus on the application of the principles of non-discrimination in occupation and equal remuneration for work of equal value in line with ILO conventions (No.111 and No.110).^{xiii}

The NCWE is also engaged in organizing women in the informal sector and combating gender-based violence. Recently, the ILO has proposed to support the NCWE in the development of practical guidelines on "The Rights of Palestinian Women at Work" because of the widespread

conditions of women in the labor market and for the protection of their labor rights. The distribution of such knowledge will eventually help advance women's economic empowerment and ensure women's access to vocational and technical training. Such advancement will also affect women with disabilities and include sectors such as information and communication technology, and enhance the competitiveness and profitability of rural producers.

address structural barriers that impede female labor force participation. It hopes to create more jobs of higher quality at the grassroots and community levels by strengthening viable member-controlled cooperatives to work as social and economic enterprises.

To sum up, although women's participation trend has been rising during the past 15 years, it remains very low. The fact that more women experienced unemployment compared

and Gaza Strip needs to take into account the ramifications ensuing from continued Israeli occupation, the limited employment opportunities generated by the Palestinian economy, and the inadequate provision of social protection, in addition to the social norms that prevail in Palestinian society. As noted in the ILO 2012 report, the participation of women in the labor market is positively growing and the call for women's empowerment is getting stronger.

While the employment rate of women has been rising in recent years, women still face more difficulties than men in finding employment and are exposed to a significant gender-based pay gap in Palestine.

Women workers' voices and representation is increasing in the unions' movement with an average of 17 percent of women joining the unions. For working women and men and their families, it is of utmost importance that this process encompass institutions and policies for job creation, social dialogue, gender equality, social security, and fair incomes. The solutions have to be realistic and pragmatic. Coordinated efforts will be required to strengthen Palestinian institutions towards sovereignty, economic viability, social justice, and gender equality. Policy coherence around the target of full employment and decent work for all will be key, as will be the introduction of special measures to ensure that women and men workers enjoy equal opportunities and treatment.

On February 16, 2016, the Palestinian Cabinet endorsed the first-of-its-kind Social Security Law for Palestine. Once enacted, this law, built up in accordance with ILO standards, worldwide-agreed social security principles, and international good practice, will cover old age, employment-injury benefits, disability as well as survivors' pension, and funeral grants. It will also cover maternity benefits, which the Social Security Fund, once established, would pay instead of the employer; hence further encouraging the employment of women. According to the most recent ESCWA report on

the Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women and Girls, the continuation of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and its policies in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem adversely impacted the rights of women and girls during the reporting period. Nevertheless, the accession of Palestine to various international treaties during the reporting period represents a significant opportunity for women. Human rights organizations in general, and women's rights organizations in particular, need to capitalize on these developments to better advocate for the promotion and protection of women's rights.^{xiv}

Finally, the higher the participation and employment of women under decent conditions the greater the prevalence of social justice and economic growth; and more so in the case of the oPt where the male labor force participation rate is extremely low.^{xv} This makes the Palestinian female human capital even more precious: its underutilization implies that the economy is smaller than it could be and grows slower than its potential with concomitant effects on family incomes and women's prosperity.

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The period during which this article was written witnessed advances in efforts to align national legislation with the standards of international women's rights, including those set out in Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace, and security. The accession of the State of Palestine to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was a historical step for Palestinian women's rights.^{xvi}

ⁱ Effects of gender inequality in employment and pay in Jordan and oPt: Three Questions Answered, Zafiris Tzannatos 10 December 2015

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (Escwa) Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women and Girls (July 2012 – June 2014).

^{iv} According to the The Labor Force Survey Results Fourth Quarter (October– December, 2015) Round, main results indicated that the labor force participation rate of persons aged 15 years and above was 46.2 percent.

^v The numbers do not add up to 100 percent of the population as not all persons outside the labor force are seeking employment.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Samia al-Botmeh, *Unlocking the Labor Market for Palestinian Women*, July 22, 2015.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Alpha International, 2009, A Public Opinion Survey on Palestinians' Attitudes towards Women's Labor Force Participation.

^{xii} ILO fact sheet, Women's Participation in the Palestinian Labor Force, 2011–2012.

^{xiii} ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111) and Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100).

^{xiv} Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women and Girls (July 2012–June 2014).

^{xv} According to the Ministry of Labor, there are nearly 425,000 Jordanians working in the GCC alone: 265,000 in KSA, 100,000 in the UAE, 33,000 in Kuwait, 17,000 in Qatar, 3,120 in Bahrain, and 4,912 in Oman.

^{xvi} Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women and Girls (July 2012–June 2014).