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A2K4D's Webinar Series: Women & the Future of Work: The Urgency of Inclusion

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By Nagla Rizk and Farah Ghazal

Gender inequality has been a longstanding issue both regionally in the Middle East and North Africa and globally for decades. Central to that issue is women's work – from the wage gap, to the 'double shift' and harassment at work. Recent advancements in new technologies such as artificial intelligence have raised important questions about the future of work, and with that, naturally, the future of women's work. How can we expect the future of women in the workforce to look like in light of the accelerating pace of digitization and the pervasiveness of new technologies? What has been the impact of the pandemic on women in the workforce specifically in light of these technological developments? And what kind of policies are needed to ensure a digitally inclusive environment for working women in the region?

These were some of the questions discussed during the Access to Knowledge for development Center's (A2K4D) 'Women, Youth & the Future of Work: Inclusion in Challenging Times' webinar, as part of the center's 10th Annual Workshop, titled 'Beyond COVID-19: Data, AI and the Future of Work: Global Issues and Local Challenges'. The webinar, which was held on November 24, 2020 in partnership with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Egypt (<https://egypt.fes.de/>), featured a diverse panel of speakers from academia, civil society and the business world.

Gender and the Future of Work

In her opening remarks, Social Democratic Party (SPD) member, board member of FES, and ex-minister of Family Affairs North-Rhine-Westphalia, Christina Kampmann highlighted the importance of inclusion for women in conversations about the future of work and the digital economy, emphasizing the need for rules and regulations to ensure the protection of women in light of recent advances in technology. This emphasis on the inclusion of women is especially pertinent to the MENA region, despite the well-established fact that the region has one of the highest percentages of women enrolling in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics-related (STEM) fields of study.

For some perspective: while in certain oil-rich gulf states 70% of university science students are women, only 12% (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/index.php/wje/article/view/12619/0>) of STEM-related positions are occupied by women. Additionally, while this spike in enrollment rates translates as a sign of progress in the field of gender, it is often the case that graduates do not go on to widely participate in the workforce, with concerns over safety and mobility, cultural norms, and unfavorable and unaccommodating working conditions, as well as the general lack of employment opportunities all cited as factors hindering wider and more active participation. As for the aforementioned lack of job opportunities, according to ILO estimates, total unemployment in Egypt as of the year 2020 is at 10.1 percent, while men's unemployment is 6.6 percent, the number for women is considerably higher at 21.4 percent (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=EG>). The numbers are

also not improved for those with advanced education: for the year 2018, the total was at 22 percent (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=EG>). As for women with advanced education, the unemployment rate was at 35 percent (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=EG>).

As such, the inclusion of women in the field was the subject of the Action Plan to Close the Digital Gender Gap developed by the Conference on ICT for Women Empowerment in the Arab Region (<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regional-Presence/ArabStates/Documents/events/2018/Women/WomensDigitalInclusion-ESCWA.pdf>), which aims to 'prevent, mitigate and respond to threats that arise from ICTs and address inequalities that hinder girls and women from fully participating in and benefiting from the information society'. The conference has similarly identified gaps in policy and regulations 'around ethics, privacy, security and forms of cyber-related violence that pose significant risks for girls and women' (<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regional-Presence/ArabStates/Documents/events/2018/Women/WomensDigitalInclusion-ESCWA.pdf>).

On her part, Nagla Rizk, A2K4D founding director and Professor of Economics at the American University in Cairo, highlighted the ways in which 'multidimensional inequality' is a reality for women, in which poverty 'translates into other types of marginalization for women'. In that regard, Rizk noted how data issues can exacerbate existing inequalities, stating that 'top-down data collection techniques are biased by classical theories and do not capture the reality on the ground, further blurring the data'. For Rizk, these issues are examples of data limitations which have prevented women from receiving welfare during the pandemic. Most recently, for example, the application form for a welfare handout during the crisis was posted online, despite the facts that 'more than half of Egyptians do not have Internet access', and '26 percent of Egyptian women and 14 percent (<https://knowledgegemaze.wordpress.com/2020/06/29/vulnerabilities-exposed-covid-19-and-informal-livelihoods-in-egypt/>) of men are illiterate'. As a result, according to Rizk, a negligible percentage of the women who managed to fill in the forms required managed to receive the handout. Rizk therefore advocates for a context-sensitive lens that accurately captures on the ground data to properly inform inclusive development and gender policies (<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190067397.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190067397-e-40>).

Similarly, for Nada Shousha, Regional Advisor to the International Finance Corporation, the pandemic simply amplified the already existing inequalities behind why women do not join the workforce. Indeed, studies have pointed to intensified challenges faced by women during the pandemic (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>). For example, while working mothers around the world continue to work a double shift (full-time labour at both the office and household), the pandemic eliminated support, in the form school and childcare, which was vital to the sustainability of the double shift (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace>). On a more local note, Shousha stated further that 'women's jobs' are more threatened by the COVID-19 crisis, with women in Egypt already having less than a quarter of the jobs available: 'when they do participate, they are stuck in lower ranking and lower paying jobs'. It should be noted here that, alongside unemployment, informal labor features heavily in the country. Informal jobs entail workers lacking access to social security and the protection of labor laws, and make up a staggering 60 percent (<https://knowledgegemaze.wordpress.com/2020/06/29/vulnerabilities-exposed-covid-19-and-informal-livelihoods-in-egypt/>) of Egypt's total labor force.

Future prospects

The panelists presented multidisciplinary approaches to both further the inclusion of women in the workforce and mitigate the feminized impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rizk, for example, noted the potential significance of feminizing entrepreneurship through the creation of opportunities for inclusion. Towards this goal, she said, partnerships between governments and civil society as well as investments in sectors that employ women are invaluable: 'it is through collaborative and agile policy changes that it becomes possible to close the gender gap and include marginalised groups in the current workforce'.

Ayman Ismail, Associate Professor of Business at the American University in Cairo, emphasized the potential benefit of redesigning the digital workplace to appeal to more women in the workforce: 'jobs are designed for a male lifestyle, and so, we force women to change the way their lives look'. Here, Ismail speaks to a phenomenon in which programs by international financial institutions which are intended to connect youth with digital jobs 'fail to address women's constraints in accessing and utilizing ICTs' (https://www.s4ye.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/S4YE%20Digital%20Jobs%20for%20Youth_0.pdf).

Indeed, a study conducted by A2K4D examining a gendered perspective of the ride-sharing economy in Egypt in light of the rise and popularity of platforms such as Uber and Careem found that women specifically face challenges when it comes to mobility in cities. Constricted by concerns over safety on the road, women would often experience exclusion 'from...economic opportunities that may be located far away from residential areas'. The study (https://www.cippecc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/UrbanTransport-completo-web_CIPPEC.pdf) (analyzing women's mobility both as drivers and passengers) highlights how, with the introduction of ride-sharing platforms into the Egyptian market as an economic opportunity, women drivers using these platforms experienced but were also able to navigate social stigma and re-negotiate gender norms, despite their constituting a small percentage of drivers on both platforms. One significantly incentivizing factor for women drivers interviewed for the study is flexibility, or '...the ability to manage other, mainly household, responsibilities with the ability to earn income in a way that allows women to conduct themselves based on their own preferences...not working at night, for example' (https://www.cippecc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/UrbanTransport-completo-web_CIPPEC.pdf).

In a 2018 study conducted by the World Bank, it was recommended that practitioners and policy-makers redesign programs and their implementation strategies in order to 'generate optimal employment outcomes for young women' (<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/861491551113547855/pdf/134846-WP-PUBLIC-march-2-WB-Women-Study-EN.pdf>). In the same vein, Shousha noted how opportunities in the time of the pandemic became increasingly limited and working conditions increasingly inappropriate. In this regard, she cited lack of childcare, transport, support infrastructure and social barriers as examples of obstacles to women's inclusion in the workforce.

The panel as a whole recognized the need to acknowledge benefits of inclusion not just for women, but for society as a whole. Cooperation from the public sector towards this goal was emphasized by Rizk, who noted that governments must find innovative ways to 'engage the informal economy or gig economy without necessarily formalizing them, but adapting policy to make it more inclusive and gear it towards sustainable development goals (SDGs)'. She further highlighted the fact that there are 'already initiatives by women who are working and who want to work but are not captured by policy or government, or traditional views of formal versus informal'. Similarly, Shousha drew attention to a McKinsey Global Institute report titled, 'The Future of Women at Work: Transitions in the Age of Automation' (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/the-future-of->

[women-at-work-transitions-in-the-age-of-automation](#)), which highlights women as powerful drivers of economic activity. As Shousha stated during her concluding remarks, 'every single additional dollar spent or invested in closing the gender gap, will bring a lot more economic benefit to the whole society'.

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