



The “Motherhood Penalty”: Can Social Policies Help Achieve More Sustainable Economies and Inclusive Societies?

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This paper is published as part of the Arab Institute for Women's *Aqlam* Series. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Arab Institute for Women, the Lebanese American University, nor its partners.

Introduction

Over the past 27 years, the gender gap in the field of work has not witnessed any significant improvement—less than two percentage points, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2019). Meanwhile, studies continue to point to the huge economic advantages of including women in the labor force. As Woetzel et al. (2015) note that if women play an identical role in labor markets to that of men, as much as \$28 trillion, or 26 percent, could be added to global GDP [gross domestic product] by 2025. Similarly, Purfield et al. (2018) stipulate that if the gender gap in labor force participation in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA) had narrowed over the past decade, the MENA's GDP growth rate would have doubled or increased by about \$1 trillion in cumulative output. Despite those facts, the MENA region continues to have the lowest rate of women's participation in the labor force (Assaad, 2020; ILO, 2019).

This situation is likely to worsen (Beghini et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic downturn have greatly exacerbated entrenched gender inequalities that have compounded with other inequalities (UN Women, 2020). Specifically, women workers are overrepresented in the informal economy and in the economic areas most affected by COVID-19 such as the service sector. Women are being laid off first from employment and it is expected that their return to work will be harder (ILO, July 2020). Additionally, the unequal distribution of care work between men and women due to the gender division of labor, already a problem before the pandemic, was made worse by government-enforced “stay at home” orders, which have effectively tripled and quadrupled the amount of unpaid work women, in particular mothers, are doing in their households, leading to a “third shift” for mothers (UN Women, 2020).

Women's unpaid labor in the household has been a significant issue of feminist concern. Working age women cited unpaid care work as the primary cause for being outside the labor force (ILO, July 2020). Globally, women perform 12.5 billion hours of unpaid care work daily; this includes tasks such as childcare, care of elderly family members, cooking, and cleaning, and tending to the household more broadly (Oxfam, 2020). This labor remains invisible and is not considered part of a country's GDP. However, when evaluated at the minimum wage, this represents a contribution to the global economy of no less than \$10.8 trillion annually, more than three times the size of the global technology industry (Oxfam, 2020). Further, this invisible labor reduces women's ability to participate in the labor force on equal footing with men (Elborgh, 2013). Globally, approximately 42% of women, compared with only 6% of men, cannot find jobs because they are responsible for providing most of the care work in their households and for their families (Oxfam, 2020).

Although women in the MENA region are highly educated (Assaad et al., 2020), countries in the region exhibit the lowest rates of women's labor force participation while female unemployment rates are estimated to be as high as 3 times the global average (ILO, 2019). Moreover, patriarchal, social, and religious tenets, myths, mores, ethos and taboos shape norms and culture around parenthood and the gender division of labor. They emphasize mothering and motherhood: they restrict women's work, especially mothers, to the private sphere where they are confined to childbearing and care giving, leaving little time for paid work which is considered secondary and mostly incompatible with their nurturing role (ILO, 2019, Shalaby, 2014). This comes with a high cost for women, especially mothers who are trapped on the "mommy track" due to sticky social norms. This penalty incurred by motherhood is exacerbated by discriminatory and gender-blind institutions, laws, and policies (Shalaby, 2014). This include what Mottaghi (2019) calls "discriminatory

fiscal measures, family laws including marriage and divorce, labor laws, the education and religious systems, sectoral services, traditional institutions (local community), the media, and the labor market” are contributing factors. Once a woman in the MENA has a child, her workforce participation drops below her global peers and she never catches up (ILO Regional Office for Arab States, 2016).

Knowing that women’s economic empowerment leverages the economy and drives the realization of more gender equitable and sustainable societies, this paper looks at whether social policies can mitigate the “Motherhood Penalty” and support women’s economic empowerment. This paper investigates the motherhood penalty and its causes and effects on women’s labor force participation using secondary data. To gain insight into this topic, scholarly articles and specialized socio-economic reports and data are analyzed. Moreover, this paper highlights the successful results of the Nordic welfare system and a potential model for mitigating the motherhood penalty and advancing gender equality.

The Motherhood Penalty

The “motherhood penalty” is defined as the economic impact and cost that a mother incurs in her professional life as a result of her role in the family (Kelley et al., 2020). In other words, the motherhood penalty refers to the impact of the gender division of labor on mothers, who are often forced to leave paid work, or to remain outside of the formal economy completely, in order to take care of their children.

A comparative study from Jiao (2019) indicates that cultivating the awareness that motherhood is a social and cultural inscription, rather than a biological one, is central to female agency, and that a mothering consciousness, opposed to patriarchy and colonialism, is essential to empower women. This takes us back to second wave feminism which concentrated its efforts mainly on realizing equality by abolishing all types of gender

discrimination, including the effects of the gender division of labor, the second shift, and unpaid care work on women's inequality. At the times, the women's movement advocated for formal childcare services and for the right of women to have control over their bodies, such as access to contraceptives and sexual and reproductive rights including the legitimate right to safe abortion. Therefore, when in the 1960s the birth control pill was developed, it drastically changed women's lives and even led to improved economic outcomes (Bernstein & Jones, 2019). It was thought that if women had power over their reproductive capacities, they could choose when they would be mothers, invest more in their education, and control their careers, which were often cut short because of pregnancy and motherhood. However, this pro-choice wave was deceptive, as choice alone cannot replace the socio-economic, political, and legal rights-based approach to gender equality (Rampton, 2015) as the latter are still dominated by patriarchal structures and institutions.

The motherhood penalty is not limited to biology but can be linked to many societal theories and perceptions mainly related to the gender division of labor, which will be discussed in the following sections. Among the causes of the "motherhood penalty" are time dedicated toward unpaid care work; the shortage and poor quality of available childcare services; and finally, work interruption and a broader lack of social policies. The consequences of the "motherhood penalty," as will be discussed later, include gender-based discrimination in recruitment, retention, and promotion standards in the workplace; the opportunity gap and lack of women's representation in leadership positions; and finally, the wage gap.

Time in unpaid care work

The most important impediment to women's paid work is the time women spend on unpaid work (ILO, July 2020). In MENA countries, women are seen as primary caregivers, responsible for parenting children, caring for the elderly and disabled, building family relations and supporting the husband, who is traditionally considered to be the breadwinner (Oxfam, 2019). As a result, the "male breadwinner—female caregiver" family paradigm remains the most common in the region, followed by "male breadwinner—female part-time earner." In the region, the dual-earner model is still uncommon (ILO, 2016).

Over the past twenty years (1997-2012), the time spent by women on unpaid care and housework barely decreased by 15 minutes, while the time spent by men only increased by eight minutes per day worldwide (Gammarano, 2020). This contrasts with the MENA region, where the average daily amount of unpaid care work is 329 minutes, or about five and a half hours a day, for Arab women, the highest in the world. Meanwhile, on average, women conduct 36 minutes a day for paid work in contrast to Arab men who spend 222 minutes per day on paid work and only 70 minutes a day on care work, the lowest in the world (ILO, 2020). In Lebanon specifically, the ILO found that women spend around 303 minutes of unpaid work per day compared to 111 minutes by men (ILO, 2020). In research from Gallup, Inc. and the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017), 73% of working-age Arab women said they were outside the labor force for performing unpaid care work which was also identified as a top challenge for women's work-life balance. At this rate, it will take more than 200 years to equalize the time spent in unpaid care work.

Globally, Ferrant et al. (2014) found that unpaid care work and labor force participation are negatively correlated. Similarly, Ridgeway and Correll (2004) explain this negative correlation as a result of the devaluated social status associated with being a primary caregiver, which contributes to the motherhood penalty and to mothers' work

outcomes. In the MENA region, the persistent gap in performing unpaid care work and the lack of family friendly policies due to norms and patriarchal structures reinforce the gender division of labor and contribute to the low labor force participation of women (El Awady, 2018). This is part of what has been termed the “MENA paradox,” which refers to the high levels of women’s education in the region compared to the significantly low rates of women’s labor force participation (Shalaby, 2014).

Unpaid care work remains invisible and unaccounted for in decision making at the socio-economic and political levels and at the personal level. Although women with higher educational levels, income, employment status and couples with more egalitarian gender ideology tend to depart from the traditional gender division of labor (Fuwa, 2004), which has broadly translated into the increase in women’s paid work, this gender convergence, in most countries, was not coupled with a proportionate decrease in unpaid care work expected of women, leading to a “second shift” at home (Pailhé & Solaz, 2021) and to high burn out rates.

To empower women, and particularly mothers, unpaid care work should be recognized, reduced, and redistributed (Chopra, 2019; Ferrant et al., 2014). Fathers should engage with, and play their role in caring for their children for their own benefit and for the benefit of their families, and to share the load with their partners (Chopra, 2019). Unpaid work should be a social responsibility not only a women’s prerogative. Governments should recognize it and support it through their social policies. Societies should shift their perceptions to support and accept changing gender roles and masculinities.

The shortage, quality, and cost of childcare support

Traditional reliance on mothers to provide childcare coupled with the lack of access to high-quality, reliable, and affordable childcare services directly affect the employment behavior of mothers and their work-life balance (Hofman, J. et al., 2020). Broadly, this lack of childcare is one of the main factors impacting the motherhood penalty (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015). Studies from the ILO and UN Women, for example, show that mothers with children less than 6 years old, that is before school age, display the lowest labor force participation (Gammarano, 2020), reflecting that this is the age when childcare support is most needed. Similarly, challenges for working mothers to provide care for infants and toddlers, who are in a pre-primary school age, are increasing, especially that youngest children of 0-2 years old have the highest rate of care dependency ratio (Devercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020).

Most patriarchal norms and cultures expect women to be devoted to raising their children at home with some traditional support from extended family members, while men, the breadwinners, go to work (Oxfam International, 2019). In addition, resorting to paid formal childcare stigmatizes working mothers as being careless and selfish in many cultures, especially if their children suffer from chronic diseases or disabilities or have special needs. This psychosocial burden creates therefore an inhibitor to using care services, and consequently constitutes a barrier to mothers' return to work (Dempster et al., 2013; Vadivelan et al., 2020). Besides norms and culture, other variables influence parents' decision to enroll children in a childcare facility. This mainly depends on quality, geographical accessibility, hours of operation, and cost (Peyton et al., 2001, UN Women, 2021).

There is ample evidence that formal, affordable, and high quality childcare increases the recruitment, retention and engagement of talents and leads to higher maternity return

rate and higher productivity, incurring diversified benefits to everyone including mothers, children, employers, and economy (Devercelli & Beaton-Day, 2020; IFC, 2019). A recognized global consequence of the shortage of access to paid childcare services is professional career interruption leading many women to exit the labor force. Thus women who can least afford the costs, pay the largest maternity penalty (Budig, 2014). As one study noted, reducing the price of childcare by half can increase the total number of paid working hours of mothers by 7-10% (Budig, 2014; Munoz, 2015). Consequently, norms and culture should change and principles of universal childcare coverage for all families irrespective of socio-economic situation should be established (Chopra, D., Krishnan, M., 2019).



Caption: Image developed by author

Inadequate social and maternal protection policies

After the birth of the first child, women tend to interrupt their careers more frequently and for longer periods of time than their male counterparts. Research from Bächmann and Gatermann (2017) found several critical elements that determine the

duration of family-related job interruptions. Those include the mother's personal characteristics, the contextual factors at the company or institution, and the economic status of the family or household. Career interruptions, however, are linked to negative consequences for professional women. Their effects are directly related to the length of time out of the labor force and extend beyond effects on income. The long-term effects of career disruption can affect access to social security and end-of-service or retirement funds and women's life savings, all of which can expose them to poverty and higher dependency levels (Bächmann and Gatermann, 2017; Hinterhuber, 2019). Career interruption is also exacerbated when the provided maternity leave is short to care for the newborns, is not supported by a parental leave, and is aggravated by increased fertility of the mother (Chopra et al, 2019).

Consequences of the Motherhood Penalty

Without appropriate policies to allow them to return to work, mothers' career progression is often derailed, even in feminized occupations such as nursing (McIntosh et al., 2012). The leaking pipeline consequently affects the pool of women able to reach leadership positions (ILO, 2016).

Adequate maternity and parental leave policies can transform norms and support the retention of mothers in the labor force. Past reforms to expand the length of job-protected paid parental leave have proved to enhance women's economic outcomes (Nandi et al., 2018). Relatedly, Al Awady (2018) suggests that the availability of high-quality, accessible daycare together with family friendly policies will have the most success supporting working parents and will empower women to return to the labor force after giving birth. However, due to patriarchal structures, cultural gender stereotypes, and the low participation of women in decision-making positions who can advocate for gender

equitable reforms and policies, there remain many gaps in the legal and regulatory framework for maternity protection in the MENA region. and in the role of social security to guarantee maternity protection in the Arab region.

According to the World Bank (2020) and the Arab Trade Union (2020), all Arab countries provide paid maternity leave irrespective of service duration except for Lebanon and Palestine. Nine out of 22 Arab countries provide maternity leave aligned with international standards of at least 14 weeks, while only eight countries provide paid paternity leave that does not exceed 3 days. In only five countries (23%) the maternity benefits are administered by the government while in the remaining 17 countries (77%) the employer is the administrator of those benefits. To support mothers' return to work, most Arab labor legislation, apart from Sudan and Mauritania, enshrines the principle of prohibiting the dismissal of working women during maternity leave (Arab Trade Union, 2020). Labor laws in the region are also consistent with international labor standards in addressing the right of a working woman to obtain a period to breastfeed her child, with the exception of Lebanese and Palestinian laws (Arab Trade Union, 2020).

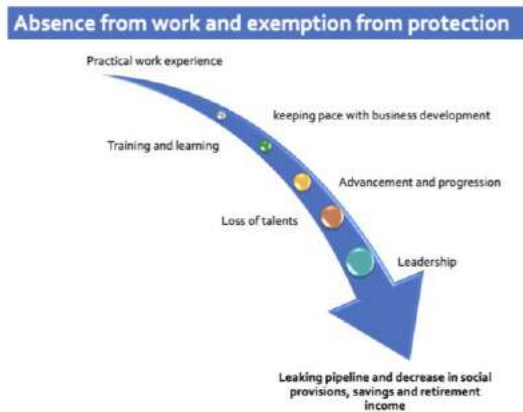
Some Arab countries stipulate the right of working women to obtain leave to raise her children. Some like Lebanon (Law 44/2017) have restrictions related to the age of the child, the duration of the leave, the frequency of benefit, or the compensation schemes. Limiting these benefits is mostly in relation to family planning strategies, to discourage working women from procreating, like in Egypt (Arab Trade Union, 2020), or for budgetary reasons as is the case in Lebanon.

It is worth noting that no Arab country other than Morocco has ratified the ILO Maternity Protection Convention 2000 (No. 183) that aims to ensure that the right to work and the rights of all women at work are adequately protected during maternity and beyond

while setting standards for health protection, maternity leave, benefits, nursing, employment protection and non-discrimination (ILO, 200-2022).

Amongst discriminatory practices widening the gender pay gap is maternity compensation. Some countries provide for a certain percentage of the basic salary instead of a full salary or set a ceiling for maternity compensation if the mother's salary is high. In Lebanon, the Social Security Law states: "Maternity compensation is equivalent to two-thirds of the average daily earnings of the insured employee...for the ten-week period during which the birth takes place" (Zaid Al-Din, 2015). The current application of maternity pension funds does not mitigate the impact of the motherhood penalty on end of service compensations (Hinterhuber, 2019).

Despite the many steps taken by the ILO (2013) to protect pregnant women and mothers, discrimination against maternity still exists in all countries. One ILO study (2014) estimated that 830 million female workers do not enjoy an adequate level of maternity protection, level of leave, or income security related to childbirth, as some groups of workers are exempted from protection legally and in practice from accessing social safety nets. This is the case for most self-employed workers, migrant women, domestic workers, informal workers and agricultural workers in temporary or seasonal work that are excluded from the labor law protection in Lebanon (ILO, 2010) and in many other countries (ILO, 2014). Formalizing informal work, abolishing discriminatory laws and providing adequate maternity protection at work will increase women's labor force participation, decrease women's poverty and dependency, and support their access to the social nets. This is an affordable and valuable tool to boost the economy and the wealth of this workforce (ILO, 2013).



The skill depreciation hypothesis

The expected gender roles, the motherhood ideology, and the design and remuneration of jobs imply that parenthood perpetuates gender inequality in the workplace. Motherhood comes with a high cost for women's work and the continuity of their professional career and therefore the accumulation of human capital (Kahn et al., 2014). This assumption of skill depreciation when mothers take leave and return to the labor force contributes to the low rate of employment of mothers and subjects them to double standards when employed. In fact, mothers' performance at work is evaluated more strictly: they are expected to demonstrate their commitment to work, their competence, and their professionalism more than other workers (Hewlett, 2002). This bias is known as the maternal wall and is attributable to how working mothers perceive themselves and are perceived by employers and colleagues, mostly influenced by norms and expectations of gender roles (Harris, 2017). The maternal wall is usually higher for younger mothers (Doren, 2019) and for those who have left their pre-maternal jobs and are looking to return to the labor market (Ogden, 2019).

While many employers dismiss pregnant women or mothers, studies have proved that the cost of training a new employee and the loss of production during that period is high and may exceed the cost of maternity leave (Boushey, 2012). Meanwhile, these discriminatory practices stem from unfounded assumptions rooted in gender stereotypes about a woman's ability to "chase, control and be independent," the gendered expectations of a "perfect mother" and the perception of the "ideal worker," who is an employee available and dedicated to the 24/7 job, a perception that is not appropriate for mothers and individuals who have caregiving responsibilities (Kahn et al., 2014). Consequently, young mothers achieve less than childless women who stay on track with full-time employment profiting from training and career advancement opportunities, or mothers who have delayed their motherhood until their mid-thirties to accumulate experience and forge an occupational status (Chopra et al, 2019; Harris, 2017; Kahn et al., 2014; Hofferth, 1984). To maximize their careers, and as many women are becoming more conscious about those consequences, they are increasingly tending to delay the age of childbearing, to decrease the number of childbirth or prefer not to have children at all (Kahn et al., 2014).

Tellingly, having children generally has the opposite impact on the employment rate for men who work for longer hours for higher pay and miss family life (IFC, 2017). Fathers receive a material and moral paternity merit called the "fatherhood premium" (Budig, MJ., 2014, Luhr, S., 2020). This premium increases with the number of children as fathers are expected to be the main breadwinners and therefore might be seen as more committed to securing household earnings by engaging in career progress. They therefore have a higher chance of being hired and promoted versus childless men (Sado and Daher, 2021; European Commission, 2017). The motherhood penalty and the fatherhood premium, therefore, further contribute to the gender wage gap.

In research from Azcona et al. (2020), mothers with a child under six years old in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) had an average labor force participation of 24.8%, the lowest rate among women in this region, compared to 97% for fathers in the same category, the highest rate among men.

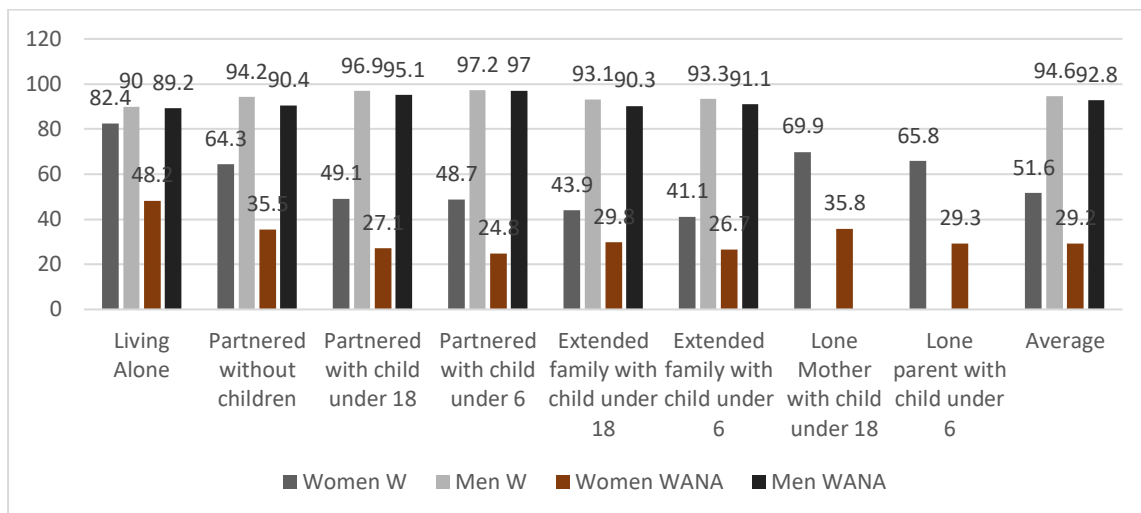
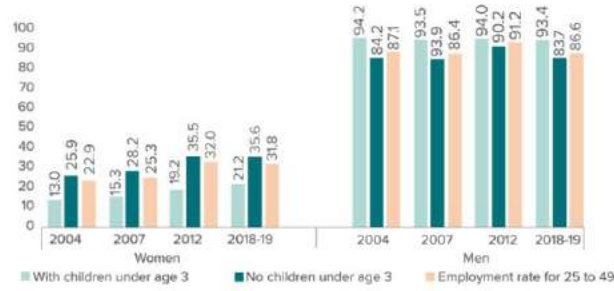


Figure 2. Source: Azcona et al., 2020

Sado and Daher (2021) captured the same trend in Lebanon. In fact, the report found an increasing trend in the employment rate of women aged 25 to 49 years old and a decrease in the gender employment gap from 2004 to 2019. This was variable with motherhood status as mothers with a child under the age of three years old living in a household exhibited the lowest employment rate and the highest gender gap (see figure below) compared to women with no child living in the household and to men with or without children. Consequently, we can conclude that parenthood not only increases gender inequality but also increases intersectional inequality among women of different ages, social classes, and family status.

Figure 4.4 Employment rate of persons aged 25-49 with a child under age 3 living in a household and with no children living in the household, by sex, 2004 to 2018-19

(In percentages)



(Gender Gap in percentage points difference)

Gender gap	2004	2007	2012	2018-19
Employment rate for 25 to 49	64.3	61.1	59.1	54.7
With children under age 3	81.2	78.2	74.8	72.2
No children under age 3	58.3	55.6	54.7	48.1

Source: CAS, LCS 2004, 2007, 2012 and LFHLCs 2018-19

Note: The employment rate is the share of employed persons aged 25-49 in the population of the corresponding sex and age group. Data are reported according to the number of children under the age of 3. Children living outside the household are not considered. Domestic workers are excluded.

Opportunity Gap

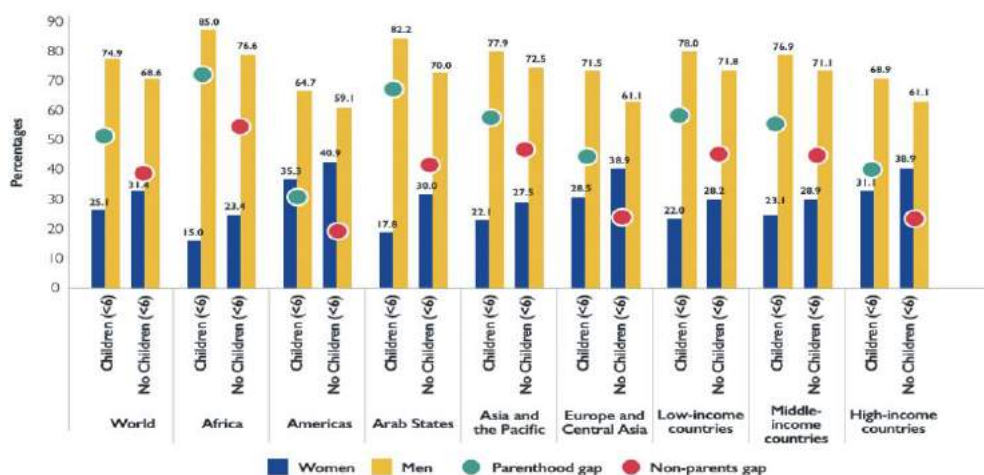
The opportunity gap refers to the ways in which race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, familial situations, or other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower aspirations, achievement, and attainment for certain groups of people. Women in general and mothers to a higher extent, face an opportunity gap in leadership positions due to barriers at lower management levels generated from structural factors within corporations, and from social and cultural constraints that prevent them from progressing in their careers like their male counterparts (ILO, 2016; StamarSKI & Son Hing, 2015). Women represent only 27% of all manager positions worldwide as most countries still have a significant gap to bridge in terms of integration of women into the economy and decision-making (WEF, 2021). The lack of women in leadership positions reflects the low rate of women's labor force participation rate.

Importantly, the OECD (2020) and McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2020) show that corporate profits and stock performance can be nearly 50% higher when women are well-represented in senior leadership positions such as

corporate boards of directors. When in leadership, women have a significant and targeted impact on the company's culture to adopt employee-friendly policies and programs and support ethnic and gender diversity. They are also more likely to sponsor and mentor other women colleagues than men do (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2020). Nevertheless, negative stereotypes about mothers and motherhood seem to affect women that seek senior and leadership roles. A report by ILO (2019) found that only 25.1% and 17.8% of managers who have children under the age of six in the world and in Arab States respectively, are women (see figure below). The proportion of women rises to 31% and 30% among managers who have no children worldwide and in Arab States respectively (ILO, 2019). Importantly, wherever men share unpaid care work more equally with women, there are more women in management positions (ILO, 2019). This clearly demonstrates that mothers of young children (<6 years) face a motherhood leadership penalty and an opportunity gap related to societal expectations surrounding parenting and care in the household.



Figure 5. Share of managers with and without children under 6 years of age, by sex, latest year



Note: See Chapter 1, figure 1.17. The age group for high-income countries is 25–54 years, for middle- and low-income countries 18–54 years (72 countries).

Source: ILO calculations based on labour force and household surveys.

Moreover, those societal expectations subject women in leadership to discrimination as to their work evaluation, higher performance requirements and unconscious biases exposing them to harsher judgments and criticism, and to frequently unappreciated and unrewarded efforts especially when decision making influencers are sexist (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2020; Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). This is particularly true for working mothers (ILO, 2017; Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities (WEF, 2021). Almost one in three women cite burnout as a main reason to consider downshifting their role or to quit the labor force. This rate is 1.5 higher for women in senior company positions than for men in similar positions (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2020). The prospect of losing so many women in high-ranking positions is worrisome as the financial consequences can be significant. McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org (2020) found that if female leaders leave the workforce, women at all levels may lose their strongest allies.

Women in the Workplace also argues that women in leadership positions tend to mentor

female colleagues more frequently than male colleagues do. Women leaders also directly influence decision making at the corporate level including diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, pay grades, and recruitment policies. Women leaders can contribute to reducing the gaps by eliminating discriminatory practices that harm mothers most and create an attractive environment to female talents (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org, 2020).

Wage Discrimination

Wage discrimination has been identified as the deepest perceptible consequence of the motherhood penalty (Budig, 2014). All the previously discussed causes and consequences of the motherhood penalty accumulate to influence the earnings of mothers. While the motherhood wage penalty is persistent and increases throughout mothers' working lives, fatherhood is associated with a pay raise (Budig, 2014; ILO, 2018).

Despite the ratification of various international legal conventions protecting against wage discrimination—including the International Convention No. 100 (Equal Remuneration Convention) concerning Equality for Male and Female Workers with Remuneration for Work of Equal Value and International Convention No. 111 concerning Discrimination in Employment and Occupation—the gender wage gap remains at an average of 20 per cent globally (ILO, 2018). Research on the wage gap between mothers and non-mothers in the workplace found a penalty amounting to between 4% and 6% for one child and to 13% for two or more children, even after controlling for differences in education, work experience, and full-time work versus part-time job status (Budig, 2014, Hewlett, 2002). This gap is caused by engrained expectations about gender roles rather than actual performance (ILO, 2018).

A study of microdata from 35 countries around the globe found robust indications that career breaks around childbirth cause loss of accumulated professional experience which was determined as the main reason mothers lag behind other women in terms of earnings (Dupuy and Fernández-Kranz, 2009). Other factors contributing to the motherhood pay gap include employment in more family-friendly jobs with lower wages and shorter working hours, predominant presence in the informal or in feminized sectors, or stereotypical decisions of promotion at the enterprise level (ILO, 2018). This discrimination has lifelong consequences as mothers are exposed to lose the benefits of decent retirement and career development opportunities (Kingsburry, 2019; Beghini et al, 2019; ILO, 2018).

While women are penalized, men are rewarded for their parenthood with a fatherhood premium (Yu and Hara, 2021). This penalty /reward dynamic leads to a widening gap in recruitment, retention, promotion and consequently pay (Budig, 2014). Not only do working fathers earn more than working women—with or without children—but also, on average, more than working men without children, implying that the parenthood pay gap is larger than the total gender pay gap. This is due to employers' expectations about the roles of the male breadwinner who works harder and commits more to their professional development as they become fathers responsible for providing for their growing families (Budig, 2014; Yu and Hara, 2021). Sexist and patriarchal expectations of employers are that mothers cannot balance work and family life (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). In Budig's case study of Germany and Sweden, it is clear that a country like Germany that reinforces gender roles and where new mothers are expected to be absent from work for prolonged periods (more than a year), the motherhood penalty is very high. Whereas, the gender pay gap is narrowing in countries like Sweden that have adopted more

progressive policies and incentives for new fathers to take shared parental leave (Budig, 2014).

Finally, it is worth noting that assigned gender roles may explain at least part of the parenthood gap. However, in countries that have been able to reduce the motherhood wage penalty through family-friendly policies, the paternal allowance has become the main driver of the wage gap between working fathers and mothers due to the family incentives and benefits the primary "breadwinner" receives (ILO, 2018; OECD et al, 2016).

How do we face the Motherhood Penalty and build a welfare state for sustainable development?

According to the previously cited and discussed studies, it can now be asserted that an increasingly large part of the economic gender gap between the sexes is due to childbearing and child-rearing, which cuts jobs for women—not men—and leads to a permanent decline in their earning potential. If the gender gap in the economic participation and contribution in some countries is greater than others, it is not only due to the country's inability to combat discrimination legally, but it is due to the failure to develop policies—in the workplace and in society as a whole—that support working mothers. While scholars have focused extensively on compensation levels, duration, maternity eligibility requirements, parental leave, and childcare policies, less attention has been paid to how these policies integrate with each other with the aim to move policies from the level of “protection” to the level of complementary and sustainable.

The International Monetary Fund said in its report (ElBorgh-Woytek et al., 2013) that the relative weak point of women's social outcomes in the Middle East and North Africa was not due to the level of social spending by governments, but the inefficiency and inadequacy of directing this spending.

In the following part of this article, we will try to answer a question about whether building welfare states might contribute to mitigate the motherhood penalty and consequently drive sustainable development in Arab countries in general and in Lebanon as the Nordic experience has been showing for decades.

The Nordic experiences

In the 1960s, the Nordic countries—Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and Finland—were faced with the challenges of an aging population and low women’s labor force participation due to motherhood career breaks although women’s education levels were increasing (Kinoshita and Guo, 2015). Today, however, Nordic countries have succeeded in raising their GDP per capita by 10-20% by implementing policies to attract and retain women in the workforce over the past decades (Kinoshita & Guo, 2015; OECD, 2018). The Nordic countries have taken progressive action to explicitly support gender equality in public and private life and in family policies (OECD, 2018). They have been leaders at the top of the world ranking, with some of the smallest recorded gender gaps (WEF, 2021). Across the region, almost three out of every four working-age women are participating in paid labor (World Bank, 1990–2019) including mothers (OECD, 2018). In fact, the region has done so well that it is often recommended by the IMF as a model for countries facing similar challenges (Kinoshita & Guo, 2015).

So, how did Nordic countries improve women’s labor force participation rates? To improve productivity gains, Nordic countries tapped into the “untapped” potential of talent pool of increasingly educated women. There reforms were based on promoting gender equality to promote social and economic benefits and “work friendliness” based on a

combined model of tripartite cooperation between the state, unions, and employers' organizations (OECD, 2018).

Three major and integrated reforms carried out led to a sustainable increase in female labor force participation, higher than any other OECD country (OECD, 2018). This increase was particularly strong among women with children under seven years old in Sweden (Gustafsson & Jacobsson, 1985). These reforms are described below in more detail.

1. **The shift from taxing second-income earners (or those who earn less between spouses) to imposing tax on the individual to reach “dual earner—dual career family model”:** Women represented most second-income earners and lower paid workers. They were subjected to higher taxations and were discouraged from paid work (OECD, 2018; Gustafsson & Jacobsson, 1985). A drastic narrowing of the gender wage gap occurred when women's real wages exceeded men's real wages due to the changes in the taxation system, and to the increase of low wages especially in feminized sectors. This was the most important factor in increasing the supply of women's labor (Gustafsson & Jacobsson, 1985) and to the shift to equal sharing of paid work within couples (OECD, 2018). These reforms were the outcomes of centralized collective bargaining and strong union policies (Gustafsson & Jacobsson, 1985). The increase in women labor force participation led to an increase in taxpayers and in overall taxes collected. Taxes were subsequently partially invested in actions to empower women and mothers, such as family leaves and childcare (Chalaby, 2017; Perry, 2018).
2. **The transition from maternity leave to parental leave,** well compensated and funded by the state for both fathers and mothers led to a change in the range of

acceptable social behaviors in relation to fatherhood, masculinity, and childcare (ElBorgh-Woytek et al., 2013). It supported the recognition, reduction, and redistribution of care work. This was without doubt a great step forward for gender equality and supported the continuum of full-time paid work for both parents (OECD, 2018). Iceland, Norway, and Denmark implemented a mandatory system of paternity leave, while in Sweden, paternity leave is non-transferable and lost if the father chooses not to take it (Valdimarsdóttir, 2006).

- 3. Providing childcare services in a comprehensive and affordable manner:** This policy aimed to transform care from a domestic (and individual) responsibility into a social service that the state is responsible for providing. It gave parents flexibility, provided children with equal opportunities for learning and growth, and created job opportunities (OECD, 2018). As such, Nordic countries have increased expenditure on childcare. Globally, Iceland, followed by Denmark and Sweden, lead the spending at 1.5% of GDP on early childhood education and care. In Sweden, national law supports general childcare for a full 25 hours per week, and municipalities provide complementary services. The highest rate in the world, about 97% of children in Denmark attend formal day care before going to school. Consequently, Sweden and Denmark now have the highest rates of maternal employment, with the average gap between men and women in the workforce of only 3% and 5% respectively while the gap is around 17% in OECD countries (Gunnarsson et al., 1999; Broom, 2019).

To conclude, reforms yielded high return on investment in Nordic countries marked by economic growth over the past 50 years. Women's labor force participation increased drastically and remains among the highest in the world. Economically, an estimate from the OECD (2018) suggests that in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, increases in women's

employment account for around 10-20% of the annual growth rate. This success proves that gender equality is a driver of sustainable development. It is good not only for women, but also for men, families, and societies.

Recommendations

Are Arab countries ready to make such significant changes in policy and legislation? Will they shift their perceptions about gender equality and the role of mothers in the economy? Will they recognize and tap into the untapped potential of the growing numbers of highly educated girls and women? The working population is ageing and there is a need and demand for employment. Will governments dismantle the patriarchal structures foundational to inequalities so that societies can experience growth and sustainable development?

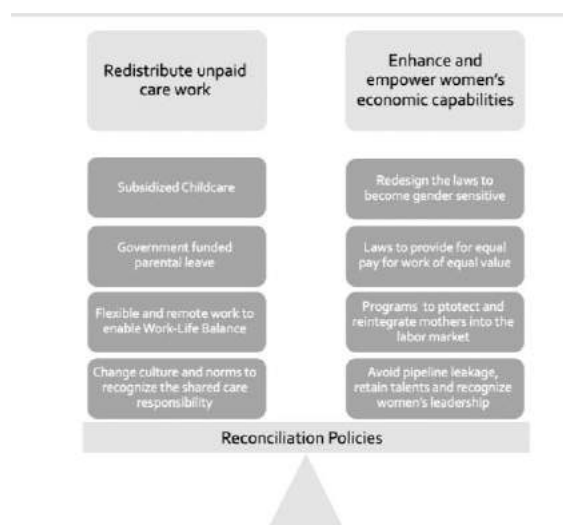
According to Mottaghi (2019), currently, around one in five women in MENA is in the labor force. Their contribution amounts to only 18% of total MENA GDP. “The GDP growth rate in MENA could have doubled or increased by about US\$ 1 trillion in cumulative output” if the labor force gender gap had been narrowed over the past decade (Purfield et al., 2018). Now, in light of COVID-19, the picture of gender equality and women’s labor force participation rates is dim, particularly in MENA where gaps are increasing (Mottaghi, 2019). This status quo is not sustainable and therefore it is about time to do things differently to accomplish the sustainable development goals, namely:

1. SDG 5.4 “Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate “

2. SDG 8.1 “Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries,” and
3. SDG 8.2 “Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification” (United Nations Statistics Division, 2021).

Designing and implementing innovative, evidence-driven policies and programs to ensure a permanent end to the many gender gaps in the region need collective, diverse, and inclusive efforts. The Nordic model with its proven advantages and economic effects should be inspiring to countries aspiring to leave no one behind and deliver on their commitments under international conventions and treaties, namely CEDAW.

In order to increase the labor force participation rates of women, and mothers in particular, the state and employers should reform labor laws to become gender-sensitive. New caring and social policies should be implemented to empower and strengthen the economic role of women and to redistribute the already unequal distribution of unpaid care work (IFC, 2017).



To remedy these issues, new social policies and legislation should be developed and implemented to include:

- Parental leaves funded by the state,
- Subsidized childcare policies,
- Flexible working time policies and remote work considering balance with family life,
- Programs for the reintegration of mothers into the labor market,
- Laws providing for equality and non-discrimination in wages,
- The definition of decent work and informal work,
- Acknowledgment of women's leadership capabilities,
- Appreciation, development, and preservation of female talents to stop leakage,
- Protection of female employees who return from maternity leave
- Family education to include a sound understanding of motherhood as a social function,
- Recognition that the upbringing and education of children is a shared responsibility between parents, and
- Change of the social and cultural patterns of behavior of men and women, with the aim of achieving justice on prejudices and customary, as stipulated in Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Investing in such policies can improve economic opportunities and equality by lifting restrictions, relieving pressures, and changing social norms regarding gender roles. They give mothers an opportunity to advance in the workplace while ensuring that their families receive appropriate care and support. Whether women are working in the fields, on boards of directors or through digital platforms, whether they are self-employed workers or managers, the problem of care and wage work must be addressed, otherwise the future of women's work will simply repeat the past.

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