

ERF Policy Brief

The Pandemic and Care Policies: A Good Crisis that Should Not Go to Waste

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In a nutshell

- *Women's subjective well-being (SWB) in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia during the COVID-19 pandemic has been less than men's SWB. This is the opposite of the findings in the literature that women's SWB is generally higher than men's.*
- *About 40% of women in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia reported that they spent more hours caring for children during the pandemic than before. A similar rate (about 35%) reported that they spent more hours doing Housework.*
- *Reduction in household income during the pandemic is the most important factor in reducing women's and men's SWB.*
- *More housework during the pandemic reduced SWB for women in urban areas and women out of the labor force.*
- *There needs to be a gendered policy response to the pandemic that accounts for the fact that women bear the burden of work and the economic pressures during the pandemic.*

Introduction

The repercussions of the COVID-19 lockdown are becoming increasingly documented in research in the Middle East thanks to new data that were made available to the research community.¹ Besides a substantial increase in unemployment-to-population ratios for women, we find that women consistently reported lower subjective wellbeing (SWB) than men. While a decrease in the household income has been identified as a key contributing factor to lower reported SWB among both men and women, women's SWB was also negatively affected by an increase in the time spent on housework and child care, particularly urban women's. Our research findings point to the need for a care-focused gendered policy response to the unfolding crisis of this pandemic that would take into account women's productive and reproductive roles.

These results point to the importance of focused policies pertaining to the care economy and the need for further investments in the care economy.

The Research Findings

Our analysis shows that women consistently reported a lower level of subjective well-being than men in all four countries. Women not only experienced worse labor market outcomes, but also more burden of work at home. The analysis focused on determinants of men and women's subjective wellbeing during the pandemic and found that the most important factor was a decline in household income. Men and women whose households experienced an income decline reported about 0.26 and 0.14 standard deviation lower subjective wellbeing than other households. A larger share of poorer households experienced a decline in their income due to the pandemic (compared to their income in February 2020), which shows the unequal impact of the pandemic on households. We find that unemployment was negatively related to men's subjective wellbeing but not women's. More importantly, we find that the burden of work at home, particularly the rise in housework during the pandemic, was negatively associated with women's subjective wellbeing. Our analysis shows that the pandemic has significantly intensified women's unpaid care work and increased their domestic workloads,

which had an aggravated negative impact on their reported subjective wellbeing.

The Policy Response to COVID-19 in the Four MENA Countries

The policy response to COVID in the four countries under study followed a similar pattern. By the third week of March 2020, all four countries under study imposed partial lockdowns following varying hours. Despite the relatively relaxed lockdown measures in the four countries compared to countries in the global North, the impact on the labor market has been quite strong. National statistics in all four countries showed a clear pattern of increased unemployment and detachment from the labour force. In Egypt, the unemployment rate increased to 9.6 percent in the second quarter of 2020, up from 7.7 percent in the first quarter and the labor force contracted from 29 million to 26.6 million (8%) at the same time (CAPMAS, 2020). In Jordan, the unemployment rate reached (24.7%) during the fourth quarter of 2020; representing an increase by 5.7 percentage points of the fourth quarter 2019 (DOS, 2021). In Tunisia, unemployment increased from 15% prior to the pandemic to 17.8% by the end of the first quarter of 2021. In Morocco, the unemployment rate rose from 8.1 percent to 12.3% between 2019 to 2020. In all four countries, women fared much worse in terms of increased unemployment and labour force detachment.

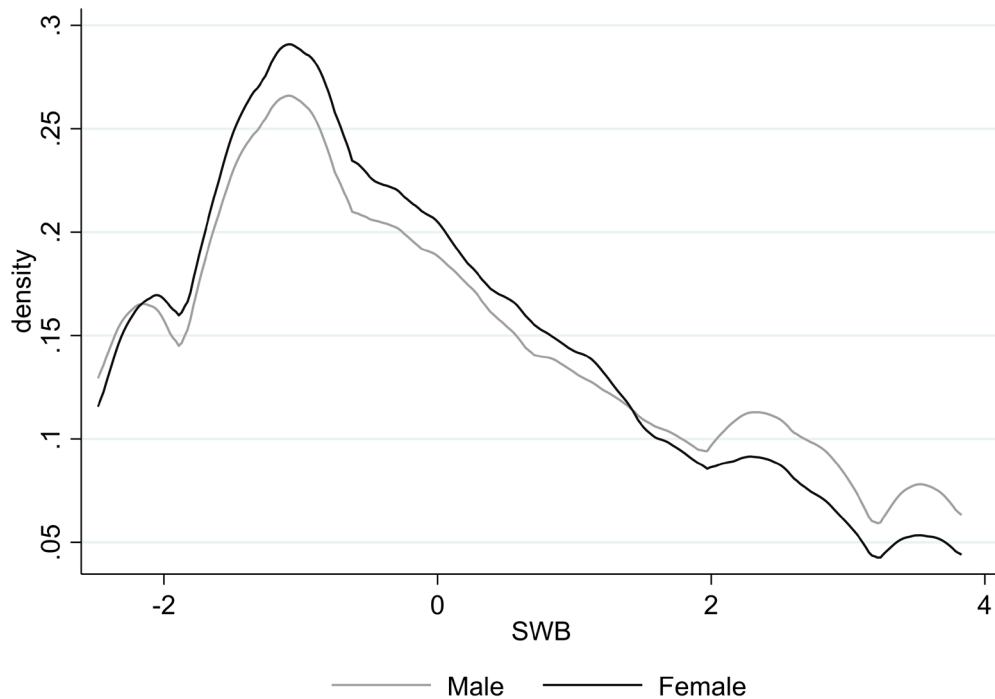
All four countries have also responded with mitigation policies to support vulnerable workers. In Egypt, the country provided a special scheme for 1.5 million irregular workers with social transfers, increased regular pensions by 14%; and expanded the Takaful and Karama cash transfer program. In Jordan, the government provided social transfers to vulnerable households and also reduced social insurance contributions to encourage the formalization of workers. In Morocco, informal workers received cash transfers and health insurance. The country also offered a scheme of cash transfers to workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic. In Tunisia, households eligible for subsidized health care received cash transfers and the country offered a one-time additional pension payments, temporary unemployment payments, and temporary cash transfers to the self-employed.

These policy responses were particularly important because women's (and men's) SWB is significantly associated with the decline in household income during the pandemic.

¹ The analysis in this Policy Brief is based on the forthcoming ERF working paper by the authors "A Time of Great Intensity: The Pandemic Effect on Work, Care work, and Subjective Wellbeing in MENA Countries"



Figure 1: Subjective Well-being of Women and Men in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, during the COVID-19 Pandemic



Note: Author's calculations. Based on the Combined COVID-19 MENA Monitor Household Survey, CCMMHH- Nov-2020, Feb- 2021 (OAMDI 2021).

The Missing Link: A Focus on the Care Economy

The policy approach to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in all four countries, like most countries in the world, missed the gendered nature of the pandemic impact. Our research confirms a global pattern that shows that women in particular had to bear the brunt of the economic pressures; the increased household demands and the ensuing psychological toll of the pandemic. There is now a sobering recognition that a gendered approach to mitigating the impact of the pandemic was gravely missing. The parameters of this approach would entail the following three-pronged approach:

1. The recognition of the importance of the care economy as constituting essential “life-making” activities across generations and as central for social reproduction: Sociologist Diane Elson introduced the now commonly cited RRR framework, which is to ‘recognise, reduce and redistribute’ care work. To “recognize” unpaid care work, this does not necessarily involve counting it as part of GDP, although some advocates do call for that, but for a policy approach that would value all those who

undertake such work and integrating them into social protection measures. The call to “reduce” care work involves a conscious investment in social services and infrastructure to spare some of the time of women in order to create the space for productive activities. This includes investment in child care facilities, pre-primary education, transportation and other services that particularly impact women’s time use. Finally, the call to “redistribute” unpaid care work does not only seek to shift more tasks/time allocations to care from women to men within the household, but also redistribution from households to the state and market in the form of well-financed and high quality gender responsive public services and infrastructure. There is increasing recognition of the economic gains of investing in the care economy with strong returns to the economy and society in the form of a better educated, healthier and better cared for population. Investment in social infrastructure such as schools, day-care facilities among others is pivotal in this area. A recent UN Women study found that investing in care sectors yields significant fiscal returns stemming from increased employment and earnings (rates and bands). (De Henau and Perrons, 2016).



2. The protection of women and care workers from violence: While our data did not include the issue of violence against women, care responsive policies are cognizant of the threat of violence, which was repeatedly documented in different contexts globally in the context of the pandemic. For this reason, a care-focused policy response adds two more elements to the “recognize, reduce, redistribute” framework that emphasize the need to “reward” and “represent” care work (UN High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment).

3. A renewed focus on the decent work agenda with its four pillars: as defined by the International Labour Organisation decent work encompasses opportunities for work and job creation; protection and promotion of rights at work; access to social protection; and freedom of association and social dialogue, with gender equality as a cross-cutting. This is central for increasing women’s attachment to the labour market and explains the continued preference among women to public sector jobs in the Middle East, particularly given the decent work deficit in the predominantly informal private sector (Barsoum, 2020).

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