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▶ A No Woman's Place: Employers' Discrimination and Hiring Challenges in Less Feminized Sectors in Egypt

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This study is the result of a collaborative effort between the ILO Egypt Country Office and the Economic Research Forum (ERF) document the overt practices pertaining to discriminatory views against hiring women in certain sectors in Egypt, and seeks to understand their context, relying on in-depth interviews with 32 employers in such sectors. The analysis shows that discriminatory views are shrouded with a myriad set of barriers that employers themselves face in hiring women.

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▶ Abstract

There are overt discriminatory views against hiring women in certain sectors in Egypt, concurring with minimal to no presence of women in such sectors. This study documents these overt practices and seeks to understand their context by relying on in-depth interviews with 32 employers in such sectors. The analysis shows that discriminatory views are shrouded with a myriad set of barriers that employers themselves face in hiring women. These relate to poor access to transportation in industrial areas; the weak support that women workers receive in their care responsibilities, which supports perceptions about high absenteeism among female workers; weak labor regulations leading to decent work deficits in these sectors; and cultural norms pertaining to sex segregation.

Keywords: Women's employment, gender, Egypt, family, industry, qualitative methods.

▶ Introduction

The literature on women's employment has long acknowledged and shown that women and men have very different labor market experiences in terms of wages, career paths, and assignment of tasks. Gender-based discrimination has been one of the most debated issues within this literature (e.g., Fortin, 2005; Altonji and Pierret, 2001; Seguino, 2020; Elson, 2007; Binder et al., 2010; Olmsted, 2005). Many studies documented evidence of this bias, even in some of the most egalitarian contexts (e.g., Becker, Fernandes, and Weichselbaumer, 2019; Albrecht, Andres, and Vroman, 2003). Literature in the global North has grappled with the fact that despite policies set to punish overt discrimination, covert discrimination dynamics pave their way into the labor market based on workers' different characteristics (e.g., Guryan and Charles, 2013). A large body of research has also focused on the role of workplace organization in defining work options for women, specifically women with children (e.g., Williams, 2010; Damaske, 2011). These studies have reaffirmed the gender bias of seemingly gender-neutral organizational policies, a theme long highlighted by Acker (1990). Little research, however, has documented discriminatory dynamics in Arab countries (Said, 2012, 2015; Joekes, 1985). While gender disparity in labor market outcomes has been extensively documented (e.g., Assaad and Krafft, 2015), including the gender pay gap (e.g., Said, Majbouri, and Barsoum, 2022), little to no research has analyzed employers' perceptions in sectors where women have minimal presence.

Building on qualitative interview data with employers in a number of sectors in Egypt, this paper documents their views on women's employment and the challenges they perceive in expanding women's employment in their workplaces. Readers should be warned of texts of overt discrimination against hiring women in these sectors. The key purpose of the analysis in this paper is to explain this bias without providing an apologetic justification and without the easy compartmentalization of such forms of overt discrimination within patriarchal reification. This paper seeks to understand such discriminatory statements within the realm of policies to understand the different conditions that nurture and perpetuate such discriminatory practices. In

the workplaces included in this study, women's presence in the public sphere is non-normative. The data shows serious misogynist views held by some employers. However, these misogynist views shroud harsh and unacceptable working conditions in some of these workplaces, such as excessively long hours, heavy weight lifting, poor transportation infrastructure, and long commutes were commonly described. Neither men nor women should not work under these conditions. Women's participation challenges are also compounded by the weak support for their care responsibilities. The inspection and enforcement of workplace safety standards, improved transport infrastructure, and improved access to care support are key to improving women's labor force participation.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section provides some relevant details about the context of women's employment in Egypt, including governing regulations. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework to understand the data, the study findings and, finally, the conclusion.

▶ The women's employment context in Egypt

Women's ubiquitous absence from the labor market in Egypt, in Arab countries, and in the Middle East in general has been a central policy challenge and a key area of research focus in the region. The majority of women in the region are out of the labor market, with a regional participation rate of 25.2 percent, the lowest in the world (WEF, 2020). Egypt is ranked 129 out of 146 countries in the 2022 report (ibid.). Women's participation was estimated at 15.1 percent in 2021, which is down from approximately 20 percent in 2019 (CAPMAS, 2021, 2019). Some researchers have attributed this to the slow rebound following the COVID-19 lockdown (Hlasny and AlAzzawi, 2022; Barsoum and Majbouri, 2021). Among young women in Egypt, the unemployment rate is more than five times that of young men, at a high of 38.1 percent compared to 6.8 percent (Barsoum et al., 2014). Research also repeatedly points

to the “gender paradox” of Arab countries in the Middle East, where increasing levels of women’s education in the region do not match economic participation, in contrast to trends in other world regions (World Bank, 2013). Women’s presence in the labor market is also concentrated in a small number of occupations that are primarily care-related, such as teaching, healthcare, agriculture, retail work, administration, and domestic work (Assaad and Arntz, 2005). Women’s employment in manufacturing is particularly low, with only 7.9 percent of women working in this sector compared to 14.47 percent of men, as the analysis in this paper shows. Although Egypt has invested tremendously in building new industrial zones, the transport infrastructure gap persists in these areas (OECD, 2020).

Job quality issues and decent work deficits have also been highlighted as key challenges to women’s employment in Egypt. Roushdy and Selwaness (2015) show that only 42 percent of workers have access to social insurance. This is the key marker of informality as defined by the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2002). Barsoum (2019) documents job quality challenges facing working women, even the educated, in terms of low pay, long hours, and difficulty. Said, Majbouri, and Barsoum (2022) document the gendered wage inequality in Egypt. Dougherty (2014, 10) contends that young women in Egypt do not just have a high reservation wage but “restrictive reservation working conditions” as a result of the poor working conditions in the country. In terms of wages, Egypt did not enforce a minimum wage for the private sector until recently. In 2018, 30 percent of informal wage workers and 11 percent of formal wage workers earned less than EGP 1,200, the minimum wage for public sector workers that prevailed in 2018 (World Bank, forthcoming).¹

While the Egyptian constitution stresses gender equality and denounces discrimination on any basis, the legal framework for women’s employment in Egypt has historically had some gender-discriminatory regulations. Until 2021, women’s work was prohibited by law in a number of occupations/workplaces that were deemed inappropriate (such as bars and gambling clubs, furnaces or glass melting factories, electric battery

manufacture and repair, and many others, as listed on Decree 155 of 2003). Similarly, women’s work at night has long been illegal in Egypt despite many raised concerns.² As of April 2021 (two months before conducting these interviews), Resolution 43 allowed women to work without hourly restrictions (except during pregnancy). Also in 2021, Decree 44 removed the prohibition of women’s work during the night shift. Although these are significant legal reforms, the Egyptian legal system does not provide clear provisions to criminalize discrimination, therefore weakening enforcement. The Labor Code stipulates 90 days of paid maternity leave in the private sector, which is less than the ILO recommended standard of 14 weeks and less than the 120 days guaranteed to women working in the public sector. However, employment informality compromises access to this guaranteed right. The law also requires employers with more than 100 female staff members to set up or share the cost of childcare. These provisions can be counterproductive because they are only applied to women.

Inequitable views about gender roles and rights are quite common in the Arab region (El-Feki et al., 2017). Of particular relevance is the resistance to women’s work outside the house and their participation in aspects of political and public life (ibid.). A staggering 98 percent of men and 88 percent of women responding to a survey conducted in three countries in the Arab region agreed to the statement that when work opportunities are scarce, men should have access to jobs before women (ibid. 50). Corresponding with these results, women’s share of household chores remains quite inequitable, as the same study finds that only six percent of men in Egypt report taking part in washing clothes (ibid., 71). Similar results were shown by Hendy and Yassin (2022). Marriage also negatively impacts women’s participation in the labor market (Assaad, Krafft, and Selwaness, 2022). Selwaness and Helmy (2020) show that married women spend seven times as much time on unpaid care work as married men. In fact, women are considered the ones responsible for household duties, including childcare (Assaad et al., 2020). Like many countries in the Global South, women in Egypt also have limited access to affordable early childcare support, which inhibits

¹ In 2019, the monthly minimum earning was raised from EGP 1,200 to EGP 2,000.

² https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100_COMMENT_ID:3300900

poor urban women's participation in paid work (see Clark, 2019 on Africa).

► Employers' discrimination and masculinity: Theoretical framework

Becker's (1957) *Economics of Discrimination* led the way to a line of economic research that sought to account for discriminatory practices in the labor market and their outcomes. Becker aimed to provide a theory for discrimination in the marketplace with a particular focus on the consequences of discrimination (Becker, 1971, 11) and the difference between individual tastes for discrimination and market discrimination, showing that markets might tolerate or even incentivize discriminatory tastes in the absence of perfect competition. Becker's work was criticized for taking discriminatory tastes as a given (Arrow, 1972). Instead, Arrow (1973) and Phelps (1972) propose the notion of statistical discrimination, where, due to a lack of information about the applicant, employers predict an applicant's productivity based on the average productivity of workers in the same demarcated group according to race, gender, or ethnicity. Guryan and Charles (2013) note that both notions of taste and statistical discrimination informed a bifurcated body of research where studies either used taste-based discrimination models that start with the notion of animosity toward group outsiders (e.g., Charles and Guryan, 2008), or statistical discrimination models that focus on group stereotyping due to imperfect information (e.g., Altonji and Pierret, 2001; Knowles et al., 2001). A general observation is that the former predominantly focused on discrimination based on race and ethnicity and the latter focused on gender discrimination.

In feminist economic research, Seguino (2020) highlights the dynamics by which the defeminization of higher-quality jobs occurs, despite narrowing gender education gaps. This further augments a rigid gender division of labor. Focusing on gender wage inequity, Elson and Cagatay (2000) highlight the "male breadwinner

bias," which reflects the stance of employers and policymakers that men should get the better jobs while working women are seen as providing supplementary income. Many studies documented evidence of this bias in different fields. For example, Binder et al. (2010) discuss the "gender penalty" for female faculty members in terms of wage structure compared to their male counterparts in the same fields. Literature in the context of the Global South has generally argued that gender discrimination is a key driving force for the gender wage gap (e.g., Deininger, Jin, and Nagarajan, 2013; Akhmedjonov, 2012). Figart, Mutari, and Power (2002) argue that gender wage gaps are the outcome of historical circumstances, institutional arrangements, labor market conditions, and societal norms. Stereotyping about female manual dexterity and male physical strength abound in the data from interviews with employers (Elson, 2007) have been highlighted.

Literature on the gender gap in Arab countries has focused on explaining women's low labor force participation. Patriarchal norms have been highlighted as key factors affecting women's labor supply and reinforcing a gendered division of responsibilities of men as breadwinners and women as caretakers (Diwan and Vartanova, 2017; Solati, 2017). Other studies looked at the impact of macroeconomic policies of the Middle East region and their impact on women's employment. With a focus on the labor supply side, it has been argued that the "social contract" in Arab countries, with its focus on subsidies and public employment, has dampened the need for women's participation in the workforce and hence augmented the role of a male breadwinner (World Bank, 2013). Moghaddam (1998, 2005) explains that oil revenues and the remittances from male migrant workers in non-oil producing countries raised what economists describe as the "reservation wage" of female workers and augmented the image of a male breadwinner. Karshenas, Moghadam, and Chamlou (2016) highlight the reservation wage thesis along with issues of discrimination, internalized gender roles, and economic policies. Specifically, they argue that the advent of neoliberal policies made it harder for women to work with the retrenchment of jobs in the public sector. On the labor demand side, Michael Ross (2008) argues that oil is to blame. With its emphasis on non-traded goods, an oil-based economy may contribute to lower numbers of women in the paid labor force. These sectoral policies have persisted beyond the oil boom years of the 1970s. A similar

argument has been postulated by Assaad (2014), who notes that oil production did not affect the supply of women's labor but the demand for their work, particularly in view of the diminishing role of the public sector in hiring women (Assaad and Barsoum, 2020).

Barsoum (2019) highlights the role of social policies in supporting women's employment decisions. She particularly refers to care policies pertaining to accessible early childhood care and education modalities, paid maternity and other care leaves, and flexible work arrangements. Childcare support remains expensive, and when accessible to the poor, there are serious concerns about quality and even the safety of children (*ibid.*). The very sparse literature on childcare services in developing countries vouches for the weakness of research and policies on this topic in these contexts. Access to affordable and dignified means of transportation is an equally important issue. There is very sparse literature looking at the role of transportation in supporting women's employment. Lei et al. (2019) show that investment in transportation infrastructure can provide employment opportunities for rural women in non-agricultural work by connecting them to labor markets beyond the immediate community.

Employers are the least studied group in analyzing women's barriers to entry into the labor market. "Employer discrimination" is one of the readily thrown assumptions in much of the literature mentioned, with little substantive evidence to support it. In one of the very few studies on the context and nature of discrimination in Egypt, Osman et al. (2021) use list randomization (also known as the item count technique), to inquire about the preference for hiring men over women. The study shows that discrimination against hiring women in Egypt is overt and widespread.

► Methodology

By relying on interview data with employers, this study offers a unique methodological contribution to this body of research. Qualitative data are strong on validity and trustworthiness because they allow the researchers to probe, validate, and seek clarification from respondents at the point of data collection (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Quantitative studies that rely on regression-based methods to isolate the portion of disparities that can be attributed to discrimination often present the discrimination hypothesis as "potential" (see Said, Majbouri, and Barsoum, 2022 for a similar analysis in Egypt). Quantitative studies, for this reason, have shifted to audit (where individuals of matched qualifications but of different attributes, such as race or gender, are sent to interview for a set of jobs, and then comparisons of outcomes are made) and correspondence studies (where fictitious resumes are sent in response to real job openings, and then the results and outcomes are compared). These types of studies have come to address this challenge (Guryan and Charles, 2013) in order to detect such discriminatory practices.

This qualitative study started with a quantitative data analysis exercise using survey results from the 2018 round of the Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS, 2018). The purpose of this data analysis stage was to identify sectors and employers where the proportion of working men was disproportionately higher than that of women. The following table illustrates the results of this exercise, which was used to guide the sectoral focus of this qualitative study. The table also lists the final sample reached within each economic activity. The manufacturing sector is very diverse, which is why we disaggregated the data to engage with factories within sectors that include a small proportion of women in their workforce.

The following stage was to identify employers in these sectors based on available online directories. Employers in these fields were contacted by the team of collaborating researchers, which included four females and one male. In total, 32 employers were included in this study. These were geographically dispersed in Cairo, Fayoum, the Tenth of Ramadan Industrial City, the Sixth of October Industrial City, and Damietta. Home-based enterprises were not considered for this sampling frame as these primarily engage

► Table 1.

Economic activity codes	% of working men in this sector	% of working women in this sector	Ratio of men to women in the sector	Interviewed employers in this sector
I: Accommodation and food service activities	3.67	1.11	3.31	3
H: Transportation and storage	10.26	1.38	7.43	3
F: Construction	18.76	3.58	5.24	4
C: Manufacturing	14.47	7.9	1.83	22
Total				32

Source: Author's calculations based on ELMPS 2018.

women as unpaid family workers. The sample size in each sector was primarily informed by data saturation, where interviews in certain sectors showed obvious challenges that are included in the analysis. For example, there were fewer respondents in accommodation, transportation, and construction due to the uniformity of these industries. The diversity of the manufacturing sector invited the inclusion of many employers within this sector. The manufacturing sector included factories in electrical and mechanical industries, cosmetics, textiles, glass, ceramics, electronic waste recycling, the paper industry, the feed industry, tire manufacturing; plastics, food and flavoring industries, and plastics.

The researchers all wrote analytic memos after the interviews, describing the location and the trip to the factory. They also documented the workspace and road by taking pictures (with permission from the employers) that were saved on a shared drive. The female researchers were particularly attentive to issues of safety on the road and the challenges of transportation. All interviews were transcribed and shared with the research team, and all research procedures were reviewed for ethical considerations by the institutional review board.

The analysis plan relied on the identification and coding of emergent themes from the data through analytic induction approaches (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Team meetings, constant comparative analysis triangulation, and inter-coder

reliability were followed to validate the data and results.

► Discrimination and the rigid gender division of work: "There is no benefit in hiring women"

Instances of discrimination and gendered division of labor are numerous in the data. Misogynist comments of "what can I do with a woman here?" and "there is no place for women here" are too numerous to count throughout the interviews. Like other social actors, private sector employers, the creators of job opportunities, are subject to the constraints/filters of gender norms and reinforce them through their actions. These ideals of patriarchal bias lead to discriminatory hiring practices. Patriarchal norms can actually influence employers' perceptions and override objective information about the non-wage costs of employing women.

One factory manager starts the interview by noting that there were no benefits to hiring women, as the following quote shows. Ironically, the factory

is owned by a woman, but out of 300 workers, only one woman works there as a sales officer, with no women on the shop floor at the factory. He notes:

"There is no benefit to hiring women. Aside from work in this factory, a woman's place is in the house. I don't really support women's work. You can make your career in your house, this is your kingdom. I have two daughters that I have raised with these principles. You can't do two things. If she works, this will impact her house and her husband. She will also not work at full capacity. It will be a loss to me, to her family, and to her health." - Factory Manager, Aluminium Factory

The gender stereotypes of women's role in the house have long been highlighted as prevalent in the Middle East (e.g., Solati, 2017; El-Feki et al., 2017). As cultural agents, employers internalize these stereotypes and readily use them to justify hiring decisions. Childbearing is an often-highlighted issue in hiring women. A human resource manager notes:

"The factory owner refuses to hire women in the administration who are married so they do not take leaves for pregnancy and childbearing. He doesn't like to hire women in the administration in general for this reason. We only hire women in packaging because it is not a skilled job and if a worker is absent, she can be replaced by another...but we hire married men, it is fine that they are married, which means that they will be responsible for a family." - Human Resource Manager, Plastics Factory

Gendered division of work and tasks were a very common theme in interviews. Women are commonly hired in packaging. This task is often described as repetitive, requires attention to detail, and is still low skilled. This last trait is often associated with the issue of women's high turnover and absenteeism. The second field is administration, although the manager in the above quote does not support that. Women are commonly hired in sales, accounting, and other administrative tasks. These are generally educated women and they can be located in the head office in the city and not at the factory, although, in

some interviews, they were located at the factory premises. One respondent notes:

"We are a plastics factory. Men do all the tasks of plastic production and injection. Men also carry the product and put it in front of the woman responsible for packaging. She puts the logo and piles one row after the other. If there are small parts that need to be assembled, we ask the woman to do that because she is capable of mentally focusing and assembling little things together. When done, men carry the boxes to be ready for delivery. A woman can take care of the follow-up (on delivery and payment) because she can think of many things at the same time and can be more administratively capable. Men cannot; they focus on one task at a time. A woman can follow up, but she cannot do more." - Factory Partner, Plastics and Metal Production

The above quote was said by a female engineer responsible for managing the production process. Her quote reflects her own role as the one who has to take care of "many things at the same time." Still, she internalizes a rigid gendered division of responsibilities that is exhibited in the factory setting, with men producing and carrying and women packaging and following up administratively.

Women can also be hired at times of a work crunch. For example, an electronics disposal factory owner notes:

"At one point, I had a job to remove the SIM cards from mobiles; 40 million cards had to be removed and it cannot be automated; one part had to be dislodged by hand. Women were faster than men in this." - Owner and Manager, Electronics Disposal Factory

The women in this case were hired as day workers. They were last-resort laborers, only brought in for a specific task. Even in sectors that are more hospitable to women, such as the hotel industry, a manager also describes a rigid division of responsibilities. He notes:

"Men here work in many more departments than "girls." Men work in all departments

including the departments where “girls” work, such as room service, the reception desk, and quality. Men also work in security, accounts, and the kitchen, and they work at the hotel for 24 hours, unlike women.” - Human Resource Manager, Hotel

and if I ask a woman to stay, she will not be able to do so. Besides, women cannot carry heavy loads. Only men can handle heavy loads. Women will not do the same job and will not give me the same result.” - Human Resource Manager, Electro-Mechanical Engineering Company

They are “girls” because they are all young, right off secondary education. Ageism came out very strongly as a key discriminatory issue. The qualitative data collected as part of this study on discrimination is not just based on gender, age, marital status, and even religion. According to the above informant, as he notes in the same interview, female workers should be of a certain age. He notes:

“We prefer the age to be between 20 and 40 years old. This way she would be healthy and capable of working, and will not seek time off because she is sick or wants to see a doctor. That’s why we choose young people. Working in the hotel is hard, especially during the summer season when all the rooms are booked and room service has to work very hard in cleaning rooms.” - Human Resource Manager, Hotel

Another employer notes:

“In terms of age, we prefer those who are less than 35 years old, whether men or women. Older than this age, they get sick too often and they are absent a lot.” - Manager, Plastics Factory

Religious identity is easily discernable in Egypt, with most Muslim women in low-income areas wearing headscarves. Preference for the religion of the workers was stated quite openly in some interviews.

The decision on the minimal need to hire women is reflected by other employers within this sample. However, the following quote illustrates a more work-specific explanation for this decision not to hire women away from their gender ideology. He notes:

“The problem is that when I hire a woman, and after I train her, she gets married and leaves the job. This will cause a problem for me and I will have to find someone else. That’s why the man is better. And of course, if I want to quickly add another shift at night

The above quote packs a number of issues that can be a springboard to discuss several matters pertaining to women workers’ lived experiences as told by employers in the following sections. The first issue pertains to women’s quitting upon marriage and the challenge of care work that is solely the burden of women, leading to an impossible work-life balance among working women in these sectors. The second pertains to night work and its legal regulations, which have been recently changed (as discussed above). However, challenges to working at night persist, particularly due to safety on the road and the challenges of safe transportation for women, as well as the cultural censorship of late work, which will be discussed in the following section. The third pertains to the need to carry weights and the issue of job quality and decent work deficits in these workplaces, as discussed below.

Women quit upon marriage: The unmet need for care support

Hendy (2015) shows that female workers are likely to drop out of the labor force upon marriage. Qualitative research also confirms this. Amin and Al-Bassusi (2004) interview young women working in factories, and these women note that they work to save for marriage and that they do not intend to continue working after marriage.

Interview data with employers as part of this study shed light on the lived experiences of these working women as they aim to strike a balance between their family and work demands. One employer notes:

“The trouble with female workers is that they are always late, and they often ask for an excuse to leave work early. If a woman is not married, she leaves work upon marriage.

I had many workers who left when they got married as they moved away, and some traveled with their husbands (abroad).” - Factory Owner, Plastics Factory

Women's work is also seen as of less importance, which can be related to issues of pay and low productivity associated with the jobs of women in these sectors. Another employer notes:

“I will not tell you that work is hard and that women cannot do physical work like men. This is not true. Women are as good at work as men. The problem is in their time commitment. They are always late. They would tell you “my son is sick” or “my husband is sick” or “my husband has hit my son, so I had to take care of my son.” This is why we go rid of all the working women and had men instead.” - Manager, Food Production Factory

The lack of empathy aside, the quote sheds light on the challenges that women at this level of factory work face. It is obvious that women are the sole caretakers in these households. Research illustrating the number of hours women have to put in household work is numerous (Hendy and Yassin, 2022). The quote refers to more than just regular household work. When a child or a husband is sick, the woman is the one expected to be late for work. Gendered physical abuse and domestic violence are also common challenges that further add to women's heavy burden of care work (El Feki et al., 2017). The decision to quit, the delay to work, and absenteeism are all related to cultural norms that see a woman's place in the house, with their work perceived as less important. Moreover, research has repeatedly provided evidence that limited access to affordable early childcare inhibits poor urban women's participation in paid work (e.g., Clark, 2019 on Africa). Social policies (Sanchez-Mangas and Sanchez-Marcos, 2008), particularly those concerned with the care economy (UN Women and ERF, 2020) can play a role in supporting low-income working mothers to continue in the labor market.

Transportation is crucial

Transportation is an issue that was repeatedly discussed by employers. The possibility to hire women is conditional on having private transportation organized by the workplace. This is not a luxury; most of the employers were in industrial zones located in areas remote from the city, and public transportation is not accessible. Factories are often located away from the main road, which requires special rides to the factory itself. Although Egypt has invested tremendously in building new industrial zones, the infrastructure gap is especially high for road and transport infrastructure (OECD, 2020).

Asked about the challenges of hiring women in his factory, a factory owner notes:

“First and foremost, it is the transportation, which is really bad in this industrial zone and specifically my area. No means of transportation come here except early in the morning, and not at the door. Workers have to walk for long to get to the factory. I have been asking the municipality for public transportation for workers so that they can come to work at a cheaper cost and with less effort.” - Owner, Marble Cutting Factory

Another employer highlights the difficulty of reaching the factory and explains how workers have to ride on trucks to come to work, noting:

“I would not accept for a woman to go through the marmatat (humiliation) of coming to the factory without having factory-provided transportation (they do not have that). It is difficult and exhausting to come to the factory. We are not like other countries where there are bus terminals for each industrial zone. Unfortunately, we don't have that here.” - Manager, Food Additives and Preservatives Factory

Some of these employers are well-traveled and connected to international markets. The above quote from the owner of a factory highlights the

logistical difficulty of hiring women in the factory due to its remote location.

An employer in a hotel, where there is a relatively higher presence of female workers, notes:

"The working conditions here are conducive for women because the hotel is not far from where most of the girls live, and this makes things much easier." - Manager, Hotel

Another factory manager in a textile factory notes:

"Women are never late to work here because we have buses that take them from where they live to the factory. I don't care where they live, because in all cases she will arrive on time, unless the bus is delayed or there is a mechanical problem, but this is rare." - Manager, Textile Factory

The discussion on transportation further illuminates the earlier complaint by employers about delay, which they attribute to women's low commitment and family pressures.

Men can carry heavy weights

A repeatedly highlighted key issue in the interviews pertains to workers' need to carry heavy loads in many of the workplaces included in this study. One interviewer notes a figure of 60-70 kilograms of weights to be carried (animal feed factory). This is much higher than the maximum weight regulations set by the ILO, which should be no more than 55 kilograms for an adult male worker providing that it does not jeopardize his health.³ Of course, the resolution acknowledges that women should carry lighter weights. Safety issues are highly compromised in many of the workplaces that have very few women and were included in the qualitative sample. One interviewer who manages an aluminum rods production factory notes:

"Work here requires physical effort. We carry heavy weights. Look at this; it is an aluminum rod that is eight meters high. We weld it from both sides. Do you think two women can

carry this rod, which weighs 250 kilograms? It is really hard work, and do you think a woman can handle the sound of the welding machine? You'd find your mother or sister staying away from the sound." - Manager, Aluminum Factory

Another factory owner describes the workplace, noting:

"As you can see, we are a tiles factory. We require a lot of heavy lifting. (Researcher pointed out that they saw a lifting machine)... no, we use this for very heavy weights. The workers carry the tile boxes and stack them in large piles, then we use the machine for lifting. Women cannot physically do this work." - Manager, Tiles Factory

Workplace safety issues have been repeatedly highlighted by researchers. For example, Beheary et al. (2020) show that workers are commonly dissatisfied with occupational health and safety measures and that there is a serious need for inspection and the enforcement of such measures.

Excessively long working hours were also described by employers do not have women in their factories. For example, one employer notes:

"I hire men instead of women because men have higher productivity. For example, he can stand on the machine for longer than one shift. He can work overtime to increase his salary. Men can also handle heavier loads and tasks, which is well known. They can stand for longer hours, unlike women." - Manager, Weaved Plastic Bags Factory

Heavy loads are described in the context of longer working hours. These difficult working conditions are seen as a reason not to hire women, and by no means as a serious violation of workers' rights. With most of these factories in the small and medium size range, workers have no mobilization

³ Resolution 128 (Session of 7 June 1967), available at https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEX_PUB:12100:0:NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312466, accessed November 2022.

power and are pushed by their poverty to accept conditions that can threaten their health.

working conditions, given their competing care responsibilities.

Job quality and decent work deficits relate to much more than unsafe heavy weights, which is a major serious concern by itself. The following quote is from a hotel manager who discusses how they hire and retain women:

"First of all, the hotel is close to where they live, and this is important. The second factor is salaries. Girls who work in room service get around EGP2,500⁴ (per month). Girls working in the kitchen and dry cleaning get a bit more. Those who work at the reception desk get around EGP 5,000. This is a good salary and those in IT or quality get even more. We treat them with respect and provide training. We also offer social and health insurance. Girls and boys who work in the morning get a breakfast meal and the men who work at night get dinner." - Hotel Manager

The ageist notion of "girls" (discussed above) aside, the hotel offers most of what every workplace included in the sample of factories did not have in terms of working conditions: proximity, income security, respectful treatment, workplace safety, and social protection. It is worth noting that the above salaries were all above the minimum wage, which was set at EGP 2,000 per month in Egypt in 2019.

These conditions need to only be compared to the situations of difficult transportation, low pay, difficult working conditions, and poor access to social protection that were observed in most factories that had no or few women. This confirms the discussion by Barsoum (2019) and Daugherty about women's high reservation

► Sex segregation and the tension of having a few women around

Sex segregation is an outcome of the clear division of responsibilities discussed earlier. For example, in an interview with a company providing delivery services to businesses and homes, the employer notes that when he hires women, he hires them to deliver products that are delivered to women, such as makeup or head scarves. Another employer who hires for a ride-sharing company outside Cairo hires female drivers who are required to drive female clients.

When women venture into fields or even workplaces where their presence is non-normative, they face many challenges. One manager notes:

"I hired a woman supervisor on the production line. The workers treated her so badly and so many problems occurred. These workers (unskilled male workers) are very difficult to deal with, no woman can handle them. I should not have gotten myself into that. We are better off." - Manager, Aluminum Bars Factory

While management challenges are bound to happen, the challenges faced by the first woman venturing into the field of factory supervision in this factory were surmounted. Her gender, education, and supervisory role made her a target of harassment, not necessarily sexual. It is also obvious that she received very little support from

⁴ Around USD 150 at the time of the interview in the summer of 2022

the management, who decided to sacrifice her to appease her male subordinates.

Fear of sexual contact among male and female workers is another concern voiced by a factory owner who notes:

"We had a woman working upstairs (in the factory) in bottling detergents and cosmetics. I refuse to let her stay alone upstairs with the chemist. Even if the chemist is not there, I cannot send one of the young men upstairs to fetch anything. It is not appropriate for her to be alone upstairs. I got her to work downstairs where I can see her to prevent any threat. My business partner believes that she should be upstairs bottling cosmetics, but I cannot allow that for her safety. You can't put one woman in the middle of 20 men." - Manager, Liquid Soaps Factory

The discussion on where the woman should sit reflects the tension surrounding her presence in this workplace and the culture of sex segregation in the workplace. The concerns about her safety and the appropriateness of who should be with her in the same room are real and impact employers' hiring decisions. Another employer gives an illustrative case of what he believes could go wrong with the mingling of sexes in the workplace. He notes:

"We had girls working here in the factory. Problems happened between the boys and the girls. I am sure you understand what I mean. We make it easier for them and for ourselves by not having girls. I am sure there are good girls, and many are doing fine in administration, but the contact between the male and female (shop floor) workers was causing many problems. We saw pictures on mobiles and many disgusting things that I should not talk about. It is easier and better not to have girls here." - Manager, Food and Dairy Products Factory

Gender propriety rules are taken very seriously in these contexts. Patriarchal norms do not only affect women's supply, as many argued (e.g., Diwan and Vartanova, 2017; Solati, 2017), but it also affects the demand for their labor. Interestingly, women who are educated and working in administration were not seen as a source for concern and have relatively escaped the stigma of working in workplaces that

are not sex segregated. Only machine workers were seen as a menace to the production process for fear of sexual impropriety according to this informant. The novelty of the presence of these women on the shop floor in these workplaces creates an environment of sexual harassment and intimidation, a pattern that has been documented elsewhere, as men interpret women's presence as a threat to their power (Chamberlain et al., 2008).

► Conclusion and the way forward

Employers in sectors that have very few women entertain discriminatory and sometimes misogynist views about women's employment. As they explained these views, challenges that are systemic and reflect serious challenges were discussed. Internalized cultural norms of gender stereotypes reveal serious challenges to hiring women. These include deficits in care support provided to women, which compromises their labor supply and builds up a reputation of compromised performance quality, tardiness, and absenteeism. These also include a serious challenge in the transport infrastructure in some of the industrial zones, which renders access to the workplace a difficult task. While more productive female workers can be offered transportation, the transport infrastructure gap negatively affects low-productivity female workers. Their labor productivity does not cover the cost of transportation and other needed working conditions.

Excessively long working hours, heavy weights, and other challenges related to decent work deficits push women out of these workplaces due to their other competing reproductive chores and care responsibilities. This is particularly the case given the gender norms pertaining to the division of these care-related tasks in the household. The concern about the presence of women in these sectors should not dilute the original concern about job quality in these workplaces. The poor inspection and enforcement of labor regulations remain the key challenge for these sectors to hire and retain women. The key challenge identified by research in these sectors is not the misogynist

views, but the serious deficit of decent work. In fact, these misogynist views can be seen as a cultural adaptation to less-than-ideal labor market conditions.

Sex segregation in the workplace reflects both the cultural norms of gender propriety and the rigid gender division of responsibilities in the workplace. Women are seen as only fit for a specific set of tasks in most of the workplaces included in the study. The situation goes beyond stereotypes about men's physical power and women's dexterity. The heavy lifting described by some employers is real and should not be allowed for both men and women. When poorer men concede to carrying such weights, threatening their own health and pushed by poverty and the need for work, women are deemed incapable of such tasks. These weights comprise a serious work safety challenge hidden behind ideological terms about women's weakness and men's physical capabilities. Further, sex segregation subjects women venturing into men-dominated sectors to discrimination, harassment, and awkwardness, at the very least. Gender propriety rules and patriarchal norms also affect the position of women in the workplace and impact the demand for their labor.

From a policy perspective, the misogynist views expressed by employers conceal harsh and unacceptable working conditions in these workplaces. Neither men nor women should work under these conditions. The inspection and enforcement of workplace safety standards, improved transport infrastructure, and improved access to care support are key to improving women's labor force participation.

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