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- ▶ **No Place for a Woman:  
Employers' Discrimination  
and Hiring Challenges  
in Less Feminized Sectors  
in Egypt**

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Ghada Barsoum

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## ► Acknowledgments

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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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## ▶ In a nutshell

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- ▶ Interview data shows that there are overt discriminatory views against hiring women in certain sectors in Egypt, concurring with a minimal to no presence of women in such sectors.
- ▶ The analysis of this qualitative data shows that these discriminatory views shroud a myriad set of barriers that employers themselves face in hiring women
- ▶ Poor access to transportation in industrial areas is one major barrier that renders women's employment in these areas too costly due to the need to provide private means of transportation to workers. Safety issues aside, the distant locations and the long commute further lengthens the work day for working women making it difficult for women with children to work in these industrial areas.
- ▶ The weak support that women workers receive in their care responsibilities in the family realm perpetuates commonly held perceptions about high absenteeism among employers, leading to what is termed as statistical discrimination against female workers
- ▶ There is also serious decent work deficit in some of these workplaces, with reported long hours, double shifting, and heavy lifting that exceeds the maximum weights allowed by international labor conventions.
- ▶ Cultural norms pertaining to sex segregation and the fact that there are very few women in these sectors further limit the potentials of women's employment in these workplaces

## ▶ Introduction

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The literature on women's employment has long acknowledged that women and men have very different labor market experiences in terms of wages, career paths or assignment of tasks. Employers' 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; and Olmsted 2005). Notions of taste-based discrimination (Becker, 1957) and statistical discrimination (Arrow, 1973 and Phelps, 1972) have long informed these debates. 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; and Damaske, 2011). These studies have reaffirmed the gender bias of seemingly gender-neutral organizational policies, a theme long highlighted by Acker (1990).

Women's ubiquitous absence from the labor market in Egypt, and in Arab countries in the Middle East in general, has been a central policy challenge and a key area of research focus. The majority of women in the region are out of the labor market, with a regional participation rate of 25.2 %, the lowest in the world (WEF, 2020). Women's labor force participation in Egypt was estimated at 18.5 per cent in 2021, which is down from approximately 20 per cent in 2019 (CAPMAS, 2021; 2019). Some researchers have attributed this to the slow rebound post the COVID-19 lockdown (Hlasny & AlAzzawi, 2022; Barsoum and Majbouri, 2021).

While gender disparity in labor market outcomes in Egypt has been extensively documented (e.g. Assaad, Krafft and Selwanes, 2022; Barsoum, 2019; Karshenas and Moghadam, 2016), including gender pay gap (e.g. Said, Majbouri and Barsoum, 2022), little if no research has analyzed employers' perceptions in sectors where women have little presence. This study seeks to address this gap.

## ▶ The research findings

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Data from 32 interviews with employers in sectors that have very few women (as identified based on the analysis of available survey data) show that some of these employers entertain discriminatory, and even misogynist, views about women's employment.<sup>1</sup> Comments of "what can I do with a woman here" and "there is no place for women here" were quite common throughout interviews. Private sector employers, the creators of job opportunities, are, like other social actors, subject to the constraints/filters of gender norms and reinforce them through their actions. Patriarchal norms can actually influence employers' perceptions and perpetuate discriminatory practices, overriding objective information about the potential benefits of employing women.

As they explain these views, however, challenges that are systemic and policy-related emerge. Internalized

▶▶ 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 got rid of all the women and hired men instead (Manager, Food production Factory)

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<sup>1</sup> The qualitative sample was identified based on the analysis of sectors with the least presence of women using data from the Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey (round of 2018). These sectors included manufacturing, transportation and construction. The qualitative sample also include a number of employers that hired a relatively large number of women to allow for comparison.

cultural norms of gender stereotypes compound other challenges to hiring women. These can be summarized from the interview data as follows:

- ▶ 1. There is a deficit in care support provided to women. This negatively affects their labor supply and contributes to building up a reputation of poor performance among employers due to tardiness and absenteeism. 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).
- ▶ 2. There is also a serious challenge with transport in some of the industrial zones. Interviews show that higher productivity female workers are often offered transportation. For low-productivity female workers, access to transport is a serious challenge due to increasing cost and lack of safe gender-appropriate means. In some areas, riding atop of a truck is the only affordable means of transportation. Interviews with employers in factories that hire a large number of women show that they go to the extent of arranging women only buses as incentive for women workers. Lei et al. (2019) show that investment in transportation infrastructure can provide employment opportunities, particularly to rural women in non-agricultural work by connecting them to labor markets beyond the immediate community.
- ▶ 3. Excessively long working hours, heavy weights and hazardous work environments are behind some employers' conceptions that women are not the ideal type of workers for jobs in these sectors. The concern about the poor representation of women in these sectors should not dilute the fact that the physical demands of some of these jobs are too high, including for men, leading to incidences of injury and incapacitation. This goes beyond stereotypes about men's physical power and women's dexterity. When poorer men concede to carrying heavy weights, they are pushed by poverty and the need for work. Employers describe women as incapable of such tasks. These ideological conceptions about women's weakness and men's physical capabilities should not dilute concerns about the hazardous conditions and serious decent work deficit in some of these factories. Misogynist views against hiring women in these contexts conceal the serious deficit of decent work.
- ▶ 4. Sex segregation in the workplace reflects both cultural norms of gender propriety and 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. Sex segregation subjects women venturing into men-dominated sector to discrimination; harassment; and awkwardness at the least. Gender propriety rules and patriarchal norms also affect the position of women in the workplace and impacts the demand for their labor.

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▶▶ First and foremost, it is the transportation, which are 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)

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▶▶ Work here requires physical efforts. We carry heavy weights. Look at this, it is an aluminum rod that is eight-meter 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? (Manager, Aluminum Factory)

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▶▶ We had a woman working upstairs (in the factory) in bottling detergents and cosmetics. I refused that stays 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 that she would 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 twenty men (Manager, Liquid Soap Factory)

## ▶ The policy relevance of this data

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While the Egyptian constitution stresses gender equality and denounces discrimination at 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 about that.<sup>2</sup> 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. These are significant legal reforms. However, the Egyptian legal system does not offer clear provisions to criminalize discrimination, therefore weakening enforcement.

From a policy perspective, the misogynist views expressed by employers conceal harsh and unacceptable working conditions in these workplaces. Inspection and enforcement of workplace safety standards. Improved transport infrastructure is similarly key. Although Egypt has invested tremendously in building new industrial zones, the infrastructure gap is especially high for road and transport infrastructure (OECD, 2020).

Like many countries in the global South, women in Egypt have limited access to affordable early childcare support, which inhibits poor urban women's participation in paid work (see Clark, 2019 on Africa). Social policies, particularly those concerned with the care economy, play a role in supporting low-income working mothers to continue in the labor market. Investment in social services and infrastructure to spare some of the time of women creates 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. 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.

## ▶ Key recommendations

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- ▶ 1. There is need to open channels of communication and advocacy to openly discuss and combat discriminatory practices in hiring in Egypt. Supported by constitutional guarantees of equality, the Egyptian legal system should include clear provisions to criminalize discrimination and enforcement mechanisms.
- ▶ 2. There is a strong need for improved inspection and enforcement of workplace safety standards, for both working men and women.
- ▶ 3. Improved transport infrastructure is key to women's labor force participation, this is particularly the needed in newly established in new industrial zones.
- ▶ 4. Investment in the care economy, with focus on affordable early childcare support, is key to supporting low-income working mothers to continue in the labor market.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100\\_COMMENT\\_ID:3300900](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:13100:0::NO:13100:P13100_COMMENT_ID:3300900)



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International Labour Organization  
Route des Morillons 4  
1211 Geneva 22  
Switzerland