

# Gender Briefing | Economy Labor and Social Justice

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## 1. Introduction (Background and Objectives/ Methods)

FES commissioned this particular Gender Briefing focusing on “Economy, Labor and Social Justice” as part of a broader set of thematic Gender Briefings. Building on previous and ongoing efforts around gender mainstreaming within the MENA regional and country offices it was felt that there is need for a focused review of gender relations in existing strategic objectives or thematic areas set by FES for the MENA region. There is also perceived need for a set of concrete recommendations for gender sensitive approaches and concrete tools that can be used for the strategic integration of gender justice into the planning of projects within the thematic area of “Economy, Labor and Social Justice”.

This particular briefing is therefore concerned with briefly evaluating the work of FES MENA around the integration of gender equality objectives across its programmes and based on these findings, making clear and tangible recommendations on how FES MENA can move forward to ensuring its programmes in the area of “Economy, Labor and Social Justice” are truly addressing issues of gender justice.

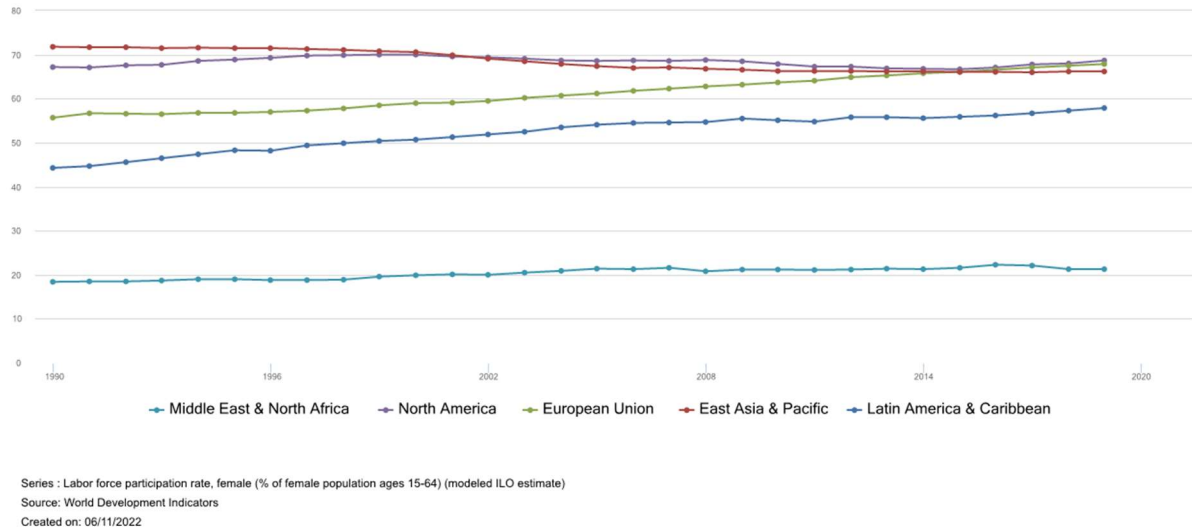
This research took place in Spring 2022, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic with many countries, including those in the MENA region, emerging from the pandemic only to be confronted with stark economic and social challenges. It was undertaken by researchers from SOAS University of London and involved a combination of desk-based research and consultation of FES policy materials as well as interviews with key FES stakeholders across FES MENA region. In total 10 interviews were conducted with a variety of FES staff across the organisation, from Gender Focal Points to Country and Regional Programme Managers and Directors. These interviews and informal conversations, combined with the desk-based research, form the basis of the evaluation of FES’s work to date in section 4 below, and inform the recommendations discussed below. Before moving on to this evaluation, it is necessary to establish some principles for a gendered approach to economic and social justice, including labor market justice.

## 2. Key issues and trends regarding gender justice in the economy and labor markets in the MENA region

When considering why a gendered lens matters to FES’s work in relation to the economy and labor markets, some key issues stand out in relation to the MENA region. The first and perhaps most frequently cited in academic and policy circles relates to the low levels of female labor force participation in the region, especially when compared with the rest of the world (see figure 1). Rates of women’s economic participation have remained persistently and starkly below any other region in the world over time, with very little progress in this regard. Furthermore, despite dramatic improvements in girls’ access and achievements in

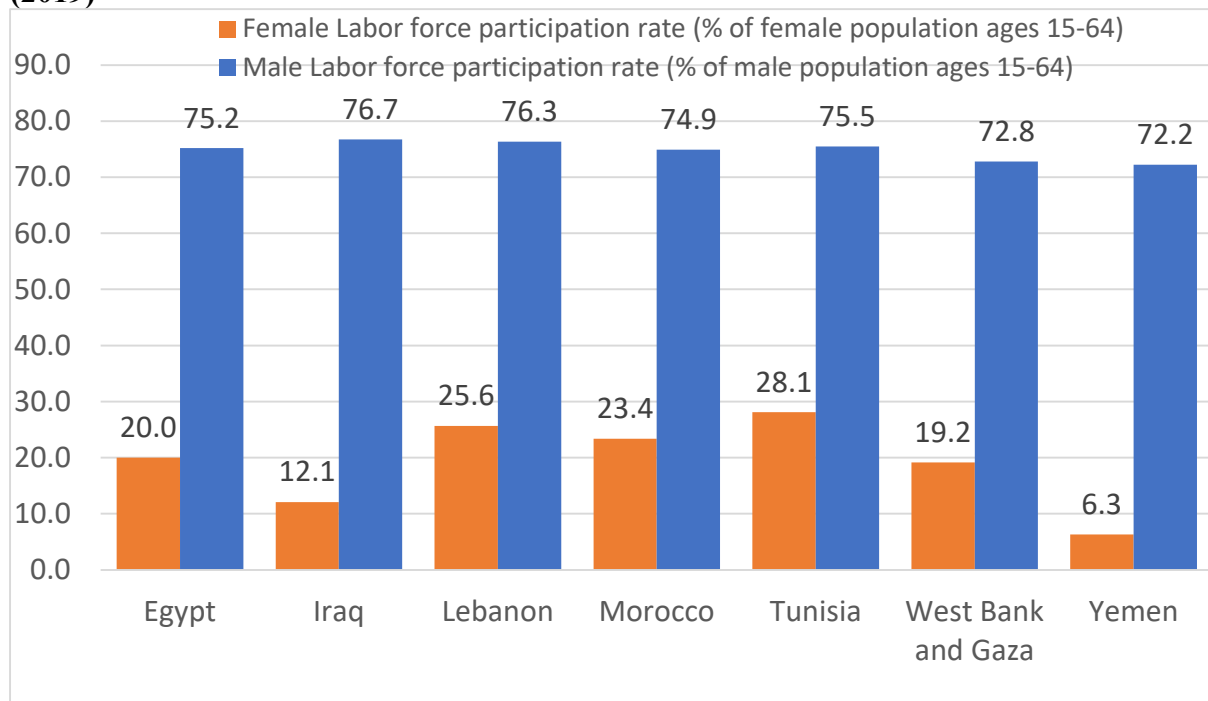
terms of primary, secondary and tertiary education over the last 60 years, with women more educated than men in many MENA countries, such progress has not translated into greater economic participation among women (Karshenas and Moghadam, 2021).

**Figure 1: Labor force participation rate for women across world regions**



When zooming in further to individual countries in the region, some differences can be identified (see figure 2) but a similar picture of large gender gaps in paid work emerges.

**Figure 2: Labor force participation rate for men & women in selected MENA countries (2019)**

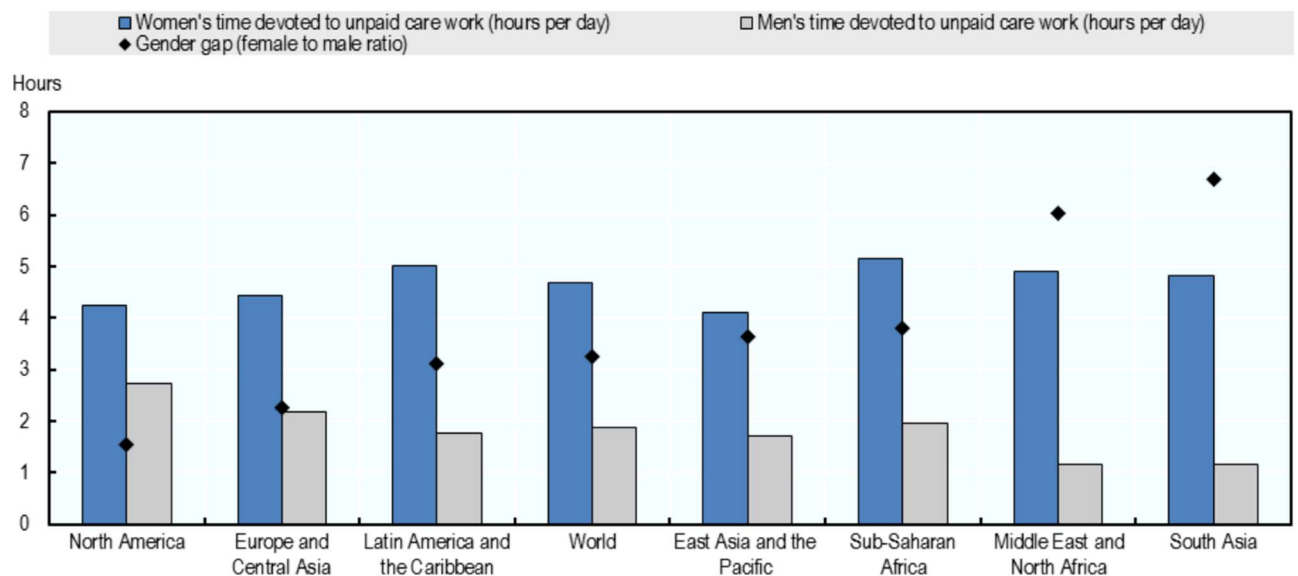


Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2022

Figure 2 masks a problem of severe unemployment and underemployment, among both men and women, and most severely for young people. We will return to this later in the context of the nature of economic growth in the MENA region.

In addition an important aspect often overlooked in discussions around work and employment in the MENA region, relates to the highly gendered division of labor between paid and unpaid work (Charmes, 2019; OECD 2020). Figure 3 below, relying on time-use data for those countries that have this available, highlights how countries in the MENA region have some of the highest gaps between men and women’s contributions to unpaid care and domestic work. On average, women spend around six times as much time on unpaid care and domestic work when compared to men in the MENA region.

**Figure 3: Gender Gaps in Unpaid Work across the World Regions**  
**Time spent in unpaid care and domestic work by gender and world regions**



Source: OECD 2020, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134\\_134470-w95kmv8khl&title=COVID-19-crisis-in-the-MENA-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134470-w95kmv8khl&title=COVID-19-crisis-in-the-MENA-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses)

Those women that do work in paid work are often employed in the informal sector, which is frequently not accurately captured in official labor market statistics. However, the picture on informality is far from straightforward in the MENA region. Data on the informal economy in MENA is quite limited, with most recent publications citing a 2018 ILO report (ILO, 2018) as their data source for MENA informality statistics. The report shows that males are more likely to work in the informal economy in Arab states compared to females (66.5% of employed men compared to 49.6% of employed women when excluding agriculture) (see table 1).

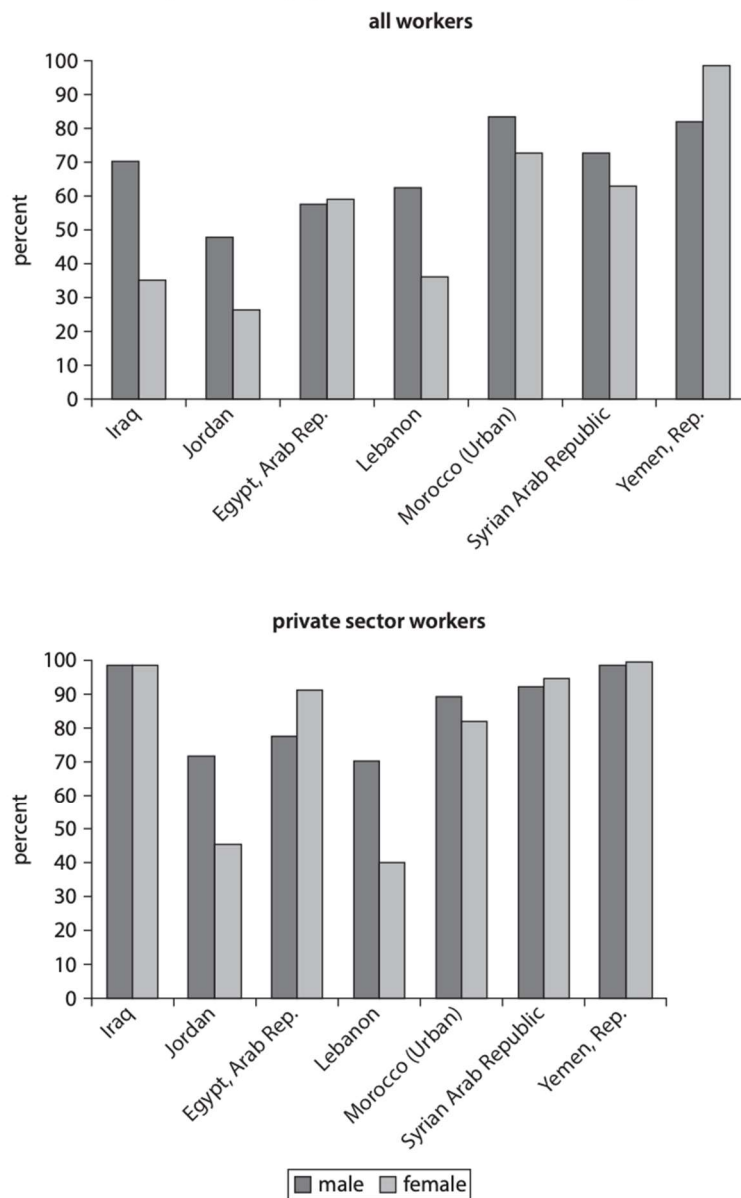
**Table 1: Share of informal employment in total employment by sex across world regions**

World						
	Africa	Americas	Arab States	Asia and the Pacific	Europe and Central Asia	Total
<b>4</b>	<b>Share of informal employment in total employment by sex</b>					
Male (including agriculture)	82.7	40.5	70.2	70.5	26.4	63.0
Female (including agriculture)	89.7	39.2	61.8	64.1	23.6	58.1
Male (excluding agriculture)	67.7	35.4	66.5	62.0	22.6	53.1
Female (excluding agriculture)	78.6	36.9	49.6	53.9	18.8	46.4

Source: (ILO, 2018)

However, the report does not provide an in-depth statistical picture of the state of the informal economy in MENA countries as it does for other regions, due to insufficient regional and subregional data coverage. A previous break-down of informality by country in figure 4, highlights the large differences to be found across MENA countries when it comes to informality and gender. Generally, a greater proportion of informal workers are found in the private sector. Beyond this the gendered informality picture is quite mixed across the region (see figure 4).

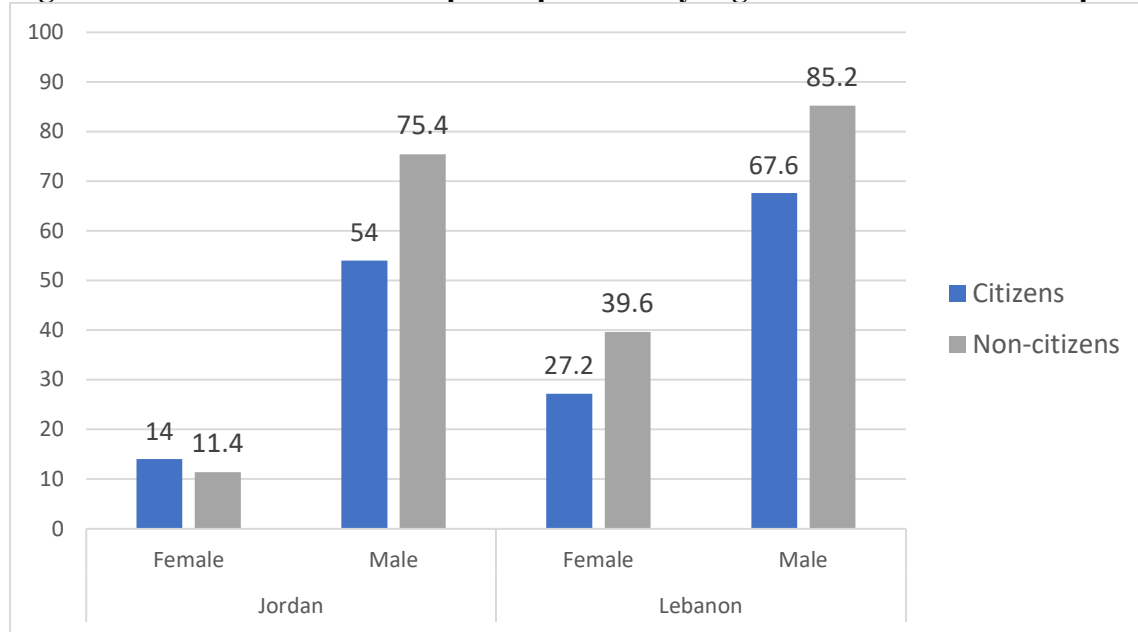
**Figure 4: Informality rates by gender in the MENA region**



Source: Gatti et al 2014

Breaking down the labor market picture further for the MENA region, to obtain a richer intersectional picture, is tricky for some reasons – a lack of sufficiently granular data. A brief comparison of two countries, Jordan and Lebanon by citizenship status already reveals some of the differences between countries and other axes of inequality beyond gender. While the gender gap is obvious in both Lebanon and Jordan, non-citizen women are much more likely to participate in the labour market in Lebanon than citizen women. The opposite is the case in Jordan, where rates of participation among non-citizen women are even lower than those for citizen women.

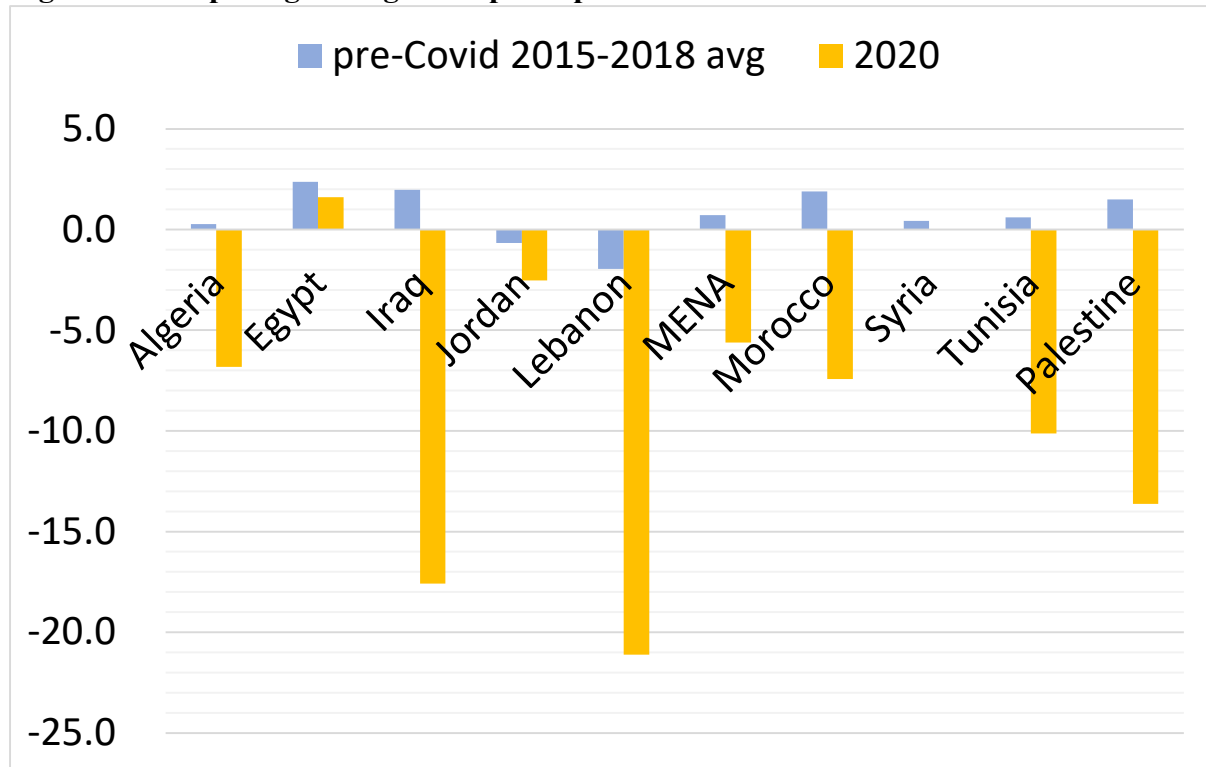
**Figure 5: Labour force participation by gender and citizenship status**



This is an area of work that requires some further analysis and richer data collection, particularly in the wake of Covid-19 and the economic crises facing particular countries and groups within the region.

The above picture of labor markets and the particular gender issues that emerge within them in the MENA region, needs to be understood as part and parcel of a broader economic context in the region. Economic growth in the MENA region has been weak for some time. Considering GDP growth rates for 2020 for selected countries in the MENA region is indicative of the contrasting impacts of the pandemic and its economic aftershocks across the region. Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine have been particularly detrimentally impacted while countries such as Egypt and Jordan appear to have (at least temporarily) weathered the storm somewhat better. However, what is important to note here is that rather dismal growth picture across the region, prior to the pandemic. Taking the period 2015-2018 as indicative, we can see from figure 6 that GDP growth rates were unimpressive across the board, with only Egypt, Iraq and Morocco witnessing growth per capita of roughly 2% per annum in this period.

**Figure 6: Comparing GDP growth per capita between 2015-2018 and 2020**

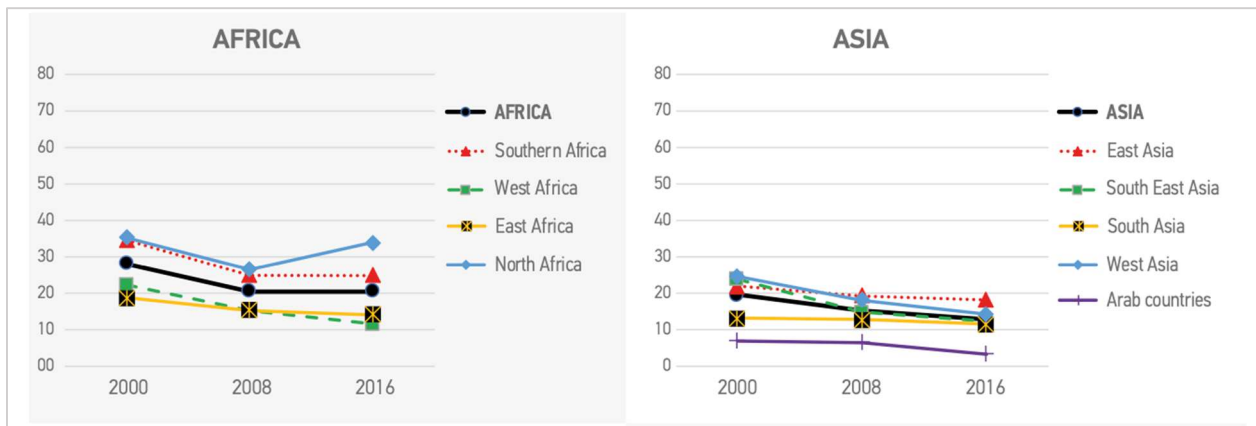


Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators

Going one step further it is also evident that growth in the region has not always translated into the creation of jobs, and particularly not in sectors or industries that have traditionally employed women and young people. We have already discussed the high rates of informality in the region, but an additional issue relates to the lack of well-paying jobs for educated young people in the formal labor market, resulting in high rates of unemployment and underemployment. Around one in three young people are not in education, training or work in the MENA region and youth unemployment remained the highest in the world across the MENA in the last 2 decades (Islam et al 2022). The job-losses in the public sector have not been replaced by job creation in the private sector and this has been exacerbated further by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Such a shift in the labor market also has implications for membership of trade unions as well as their continued representativeness and relevance as partners for FES. While in countries in North Africa, trade unions have historically absorbed a higher proportion of workers from the public sector, in other MENA countries, including Jordan and Lebanon, “public sector and government employees are not permitted to organise”(ILO, 2022a). The generally higher trade union density in North African countries is also reflected in figure 7 below. ‘North Africa’ (the blue line on the left hand side) has historically maintained rates of trade union membership around 30% while that the ‘Arab Countries’ (the purple line on the right hand side) has averaged just 5%.

**Figure 7: Trade Union Membership by World Regions, 2000-2016 (proportion of the working age population that are members of a trade union)**



Source: Visser 2019

Furthermore, the rise in trade union density in North Africa has been at odds with other world regions, and especially Asian countries. “Since the 2008 world recession, union membership has grown in absolute terms in each of the four African regions, with spectacular growth in North Africa (Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria) during and since the Arab Spring of 2011.” (Visser, 2019)

In addition, a gendered telling of the trade union story is far from straightforward in the MENA region. Even prior to the Arab Spring women have often been instrumental to grassroots organising and in some countries this is reflected in high female trade union membership (e.g. Morocco according to Visser 2019). Furthermore, since the Arab Spring such involvement and organising has increased among women, although not always through traditional trade union channels (Al-Ali 2012).

Such a contrasting fortune for trade unions in the region as a whole matters for labour market outcomes themselves, given that trade union members tend to be rewarded with, on average, higher wages and better working conditions than their non-unionised counterparts. However, these contrasting trade union narratives also matter from the perspective of FES’s work and the representativeness of its partners.

One final aspect worth highlighting in this review of the gendered economic and labor market issues confronting the MENA region relates to the persistently low public spending and investment in social health, education and care-related services. This is pertinent for this study, as the remaining sections rely on making the case for increased investment in this area in particular. In most countries in the region consumer subsidies (most notably food and fuel) have been the pillars of social protection, with limited alternative welfare mechanisms in place. Comparing, in table 2, the health and social spending for different world regions, highlights the concern for the MENA region. Compared to other regions, the MENA region has the lowest spending on children for example, lower even than Africa. Removing Bahrain and Qatar from the data reduces this figure even further.



Not only is there a need, from a social provisioning and wellbeing perspective, to increase social spending and investment in care, education and health, but there are also important gendered job-creation reasons for doing so. There is now mounting evidence to show a robust positive relationship between governments' social spending and women's economic participation (Detraz and Pekson 2018) as well as reduced unpaid work burdens in countries with higher social spending (Lightman and Kevins, 2021). When child and elder care (via increased social spending) are taken out of the responsibility of the household and are instead supported by the state, women are naturally more able to participate in activities outside the home, including paid work. Furthermore, these sectors (health, social care and education) have traditionally been sectors that have attracted more women into paid work, partially resolving the demand-side issue that is so crucial in the MENA region (Ilkcaracan 2018, De Henau et al 2016, UNRISD 2016). And the jobs that these sectors generate bring women who have previously been on the margins of the labor market into more formal employment, with which come a host of other benefits (Kabeer 2011). And finally, the poverty and inequality-alleviating impacts of investing in the care economy cannot be understated, through both direct and indirect channels.

The MENA's woeful performance in relation to social spending should therefore also be seen in the context of the broader gendered labor market picture.

**Table 2: Public health & social protection expenditure as a % of GDP, 2020 or latest year**

Region	Total expenditure on social protection (excluding health) <sup>a</sup>	Expenditure on social protection systems including floors, by broad age group			Health expenditure	
		Children	Working-age population	Old age	Domestic general government health expenditure (GGHE-D), WHO	
Africa	3.8	0.4	1.1	2.2	2.0	
Americas	16.6	0.7	2.6	6.6	7.6	
Arab States	4.6	0.1	1.4	3.8	3.2	
Asia and the Pacific	7.5	1.1	1.7	5.1	4.0	
Europe and Central Asia	17.4	1.5	7.7	10.7	6.7	
World	12.9	1.1	3.6	7.0	5.8	

Country/ territory	Total expenditure on social protection (excluding health) <sup>a</sup>	Expenditure on social protection systems including floors, by broad age group			Source	Sector	Health expenditure Domestic general government health expenditure (GGHE-D), WHO
		Children	Working-age population	Old age			
Bahrain	6.3	16.0	1.1	5.2	ILO/National	General government	2.8
Jordan	9.0	0.1	1.2	0.9	IMF	Budgetary central government	3.6
Kuwait	7.0	0.0	0.6	0.4	IMF	Central government (excl. social security funds)	4.6
Lebanon	6.2	0.8	0.2	5.2	IMF	Budgetary central government	4.1
Occupied Palestinian Territory	3.3	0.0	0.6	2.3	IMF	Budgetary central government	...
Oman	2.2	0.0	0.2	2.0	IMF	Budgetary central government	3.4
Qatar	0.9	8.5	0.1	0.8	ILO/National	General government	2.1
Saudi Arabia	5.3	0.0	2.0	3.3	ILO/National	General government	3.4
Syrian Arab Republic	0.4	...	...	...	ILO/IMF	General government	...
Yemen	0.7	...	0.0	0.7	IMF	General government	0.2

Source: ILO, 2022b

This relatively partial review of the issues in relation to the economy, labor markets and gender equality in the MENA region has outlined the major challenges the region faces. Low rates of economic participation among women need to be understood as part and parcel of the broader economic context shaping these countries. Even prior to Covid-19 MENA countries have faced numerous economic challenges, and at the heart of this lies the persistent lack of job-rich growth in sectors that can support women and young people to gain employment. In some countries this gap has been filled by informal jobs, although the gender break-down of those working informally differs greatly between countries. Finally, and crucially for this study, the gender disparities in paid work need to be matched by an acknowledgment of the very significant gender disparities in unpaid work, further exacerbated by the lack of public investment in care and social spending. These are areas that require urgent attention and where FES could make significant contributions to challenging the status quo. The remaining sections will explore how this could be achieved in more concrete terms.

### 3. Key entry points for FES action on Economy, Labor and Social Justice in MENA

Before turning to a set of recommendation in terms of HOW FES MENA can take on the challenges presented above, it is worth clarifying the major themes or entry points that FES MENA can build on moving forward.

While the concept of ‘gender mainstreaming’ as outlined below by Diane Elson is widely accepted, including by FES, this requires some further elaboration and specification in relation to the theme of economic and social justice in the MENA region.

“Gender mainstreaming means moving gender equality concerns from the backwaters and side streams into the mainstream. Instead of having separate policies for gender equality; or adding-on gender equality concerns to already formulated policies, programmes and procedures- a gender perspective is introduced from the beginning into all policies, programmes and procedures.” Diane Elson 2016 - <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/gender-mainstreaming-and-budgetingelsonEU2003.pdf>

For the purpose of this particular report and the work of FES in relation to gender equality and empowerment in relation to economy, labor markets and social justice, we identify three central themes where FES MENA can help to bring both new issues to the table as well as change the ways in which existing issues have been addressed.

In outlining these three areas, we will draw on interviews with country office staff to highlight particular examples of good practice as well as areas in which particular challenges present themselves to country and project teams. This will set the basis for a deeper discussion of HOW FES can approach these themes in the future.

#### 3.1 Contributing to a modified understanding of the economy, labor markets and social justice

Overcoming the binary division of paid and unpaid work is central to understanding the challenges of gender inequality in the MENA region in relation to economic and social justice. Policy-makers globally have tended to focus on formal paid work because of the way this feeds into broader measures of the economy, most notably via formal labor market

participation feeding into measures of GDP. This is also reflected in the policy advice of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, as the ways in which their notion of economic success is measured and conceived.

Economic and labor market policies across the Global South and North have, however, frequently been ineffective, precisely because a large portion of work that is conducted informally or not for pay is ignored. ~~Instead~~Instead, policies have tended to focus on ‘moving women from the unpaid care economy into the market, in a way which treats care work as a hindrance, rather than as essential to society and economy.’ (Van Heemstra, 2013: 11). They have also ignored the fact that a growing proportion of women (and to a lesser extent men) are being incorporated into paid work via informal work that is also excluded from standard macro-economic measures.

Given that one of FES’s central objectives is to build a gender-equitable, sustainable, socially just future, it will be crucial that this starts with putting unpaid care work at the centre of how the ‘economy’ is understood. This requires a solid appreciation of why and how care matters to economic decision-making across a range of domains as well as a commitment to the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work (Elson 2017) in the MENA region.

A more comprehensive framework such as the social provisioning frame proposed by Marilyn Power (2004) argues for a broader envisioning of economic and social progress where unpaid care work is properly integrated. Building this further, more recent contributions have also highlighted the need for such a social provisioning approach to embed ecological sustainability alongside unpaid caring labor. Jennifer Olmsted (2021) proposes a framework that centres three sustainability pillars (social, environmental and economic). We outline the details of this further in section 4 below.

Interviews with FES staff across MENA country offices reveal a shared vision of elements of such a framing of the ‘economy’, but mixed progress in achieving or implementing such a vision on the ground. This is not a problem unique to FES and the organisation’s willingness to address these gaps offers a real opportunity to set the agenda on how a modified understanding of the economy, labor markets and social justice might become a reality in the MENA region.

Across FES offices (and not uniquely so), men and women’s roles are still largely seen in economic terms, putting *paid work* relationships, hierarchies and challenges at the centre of projects and programmes. For example, there is a shared concern about the low levels of women’s economic participation compared to men’s in the region. And while there is some understanding of how the interplay of paid and unpaid work results in particular challenges for women in the workplace, this is articulated through *women’s* roles as wives, mothers and caregivers more generally, and seen as a challenge for *women* rather than for the wellbeing of families and society as a whole.

In addition, and this is understandable given the nature of FES’s mandate and historic partnerships with trade unions in the region, many projects focus on ways in which paid work issues and challenges identified by these trade unions can be researched and addressed. Evidently trade unions have a very diverse history across the MENA region – in some countries, such unions are deeply socially embedded with a rich historical and social base to draw from; in other countries such unions are seen a highly politicised and represent a very

narrow segment of society. This can create challenges for FES staff, particularly in relation to introducing new ideas and concepts, including those that challenge the centrality of formal sector paid jobs and propose an alternative vision of the economy.

This is particularly relevant since the nature of the labor market has changed dramatically over the last 20 years, with a steep rise in informality and platform working as well as the particular phenomenon of unemployment and underemployment among educated young people in the region (Gatti et al 2014). However, the roots of informality and its ties to migrant labor in key sectors in some countries (particularly domestic labor in the countries of the Arab Gulf but also in evidence in other countries such as Jordan and Lebanon) are as historic as they are gendered. Any real analysis of gendered labor markets in the region must therefore start with a richer understanding of these labor market features. Interviews with FES colleagues in the region indicate that trade union partners have not always found it easy to adapt their work to incorporate these labor market changes, relying instead on traditional channels and groups in the work they do. A number of FES offices have therefore sought to work with other, newer organisations and groups. We will return to this in section 4 below.

Translating the social provisioning framework proposed above, or some version of this appropriate for the MENA region, relies on a shift in thinking within FES and within the broader policy-making sphere. Ultimately it requires a shift in policy-direction away from centring economic growth and paid work. Such a policy-shift is not always straightforward if those policies end up contradicting each other e.g. policies fostering green economic growth may generate additional unpaid labor within households, or vice versa, policies that reduce unpaid labor time through the expanded use of technology may result in higher emissions and be more harmful to the planet (see Perkins 2007 p. 230-231). At this point it is, nonetheless, useful to outline particular policy and research areas that would support a move towards a social provisioning approach for the MENA region in the hope that these can provide FES offices with concrete areas of engagement with other organising and lobbying groups.

- 1) Collecting better data - Time-use surveys are one way both information on unpaid work can be better understood as can aspects of informal or platform work. In some instances such surveys exist for countries in the region although their coverage is often patchy. One important task is to lobby for more consistent capturing of such data both across countries in the region and over time, including for migrant workers and those that might traditionally be excluded from such surveys ([above, we pointed to the differences in employment between citizens and non-citizens, for example](#)). FES projects could also support the collecting of smaller scale time-use surveys where this could help to illuminate particular gendered or care-related divisions.
- 2) Analysing the organisation of care in individual countries in the MENA region – For example the use of “care diamonds”<sup>1</sup> (Razavi 2007) can be a useful starting point to consider who is involved in the provision of care. Time-use surveys are an additional tool that can help to illuminate some of the gendered nature of the organisation of care within the household. ~~However~~ ~~However~~, a comprehensive assessment of care work in the MENA region needs to consider demographic changes as well as changing social norms and funding of institutional care. Particular attention will need to be placed on understanding the care needs in relation to those with physical and mental disabilities

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<sup>1</sup> Care diamonds simply frame who out of the public sector, households/ families, the private sector and non-profit (including community) actors are involved in the provision of different forms of care. They can be a simple and useful tool for making comparisons across countries in relation to the organisation of care and can be used to make claims for shifting the ways in which care is provided.

resulting from past and ongoing conflicts. A good example of the mapping of care work includes an Oxfam study by Rost et al (2015). This could be expanded for the MENA region.

- 3) Expanding the concept of infrastructure beyond physical infrastructure – An important area of work FES can contribute to relates to traditional conceptions of ‘infrastructure’ within the MENA region. There has been a tendency to focus on physical infrastructure, especially when it comes to post-conflict reconstruction and public investment (Goenaga 2017). Interviews with FES staff demonstrated an understanding of how current investments in infrastructure in the region have been skewed towards male-dominated sectors as well as the need to invest in public transport and other areas of ‘hard’ infrastructure in order to facilitate women’s greater economic participation. The lack of investment in *safe* public transport e.g. limited trains/ buses that women feel safe enough to use, is one of the barriers women face in participating more fully and actively in economic life, including in paid work outside the home. Recent FES work has highlighted the need to address this (SADAQA and FES 2019, Attari et al 2021). However, there is growing scholarly work that questions the categorisation of infrastructure in the way it has been traditionally understood, inviting us to broaden our notion of what infrastructure investment could look like.

“Gender bias in economic thinking: Under the UN-mandated System of National Accounts, investment in physical infrastructure counts as capital stock, whereas investment in social infrastructure is considered as government annual current spending. While expenditure on predominantly-male construction sector is counted as investment, support for the mainly-female care economy is seen as a cost.” De Henau et al 2016

There is further space for FES and its partners to lobby for an expansion of investment in both physical and social infrastructure, on the back of ITUC research (De Henau et al 2016) that has demonstrated the multiple impacts on both job-creation and gender equality from investing in social infrastructure (health, education and care) in particular. This is even more acute in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and gender-blind response of most countries, including in the MENA region. A recent UN Women report (Salti and Haddad 2021) confirms the urgent need to invest in the care sector and early childhood education in the region, as one of the most effective ways of contributing to growth and job creation, especially for women.

### 3.2 Establishing and disseminating a notion of women’s economic empowerment (WEE) that fits (the challenges of) the MENA region

Two main issues can be identified with most current approaches to WEE, including those of FES, that are problematic in the MENA region in particular.

- i) the notion that women as individuals need to adapt or be given greater resources/ rights and opportunities, in order to achieve their own empowerment, instead of putting an onus on the structures and social relations that underpin the status quo;
- ii) the preoccupation with the supply-side of the labor market – the factors that are keeping women out of full(er) economic participation, rather than investigating the demand-side and the limited economic opportunities available to men and women in the MENA region. There is a need to continue to question the economic (especially macroeconomic) policy paradigm (and the advice given in this regard

by IFIs) but through a gendered lens. This also requires FES to propose alternative (macro) economic policies that centre sustainable, green and decent job-rich growth that both men and women can participate in and benefit from.

Let us discuss each of the above in relation to existing work with FES and ways FES can work with partners to address WEE in a more holistic and fundamental way.

### *3.2.1. Achieving WEE by moving beyond targeting women*

Traditionally, many policies that have attempted to tackle economic gender inequalities have focused on women, either as a group or individually. This has been the case in the MENA region and for some FES projects to date.

The origins of such an approach to targeting women is not new and is inherent in the attempts of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to address gender inequality as well. The World Bank (2012) and IMF (Revenga and Shetti, 2011) view the contribution women can make via their participation in labor markets or other mechanisms for economic inclusion (e.g. through microfinance initiatives and ensuring women have equal access to resources, including financial resources). However, by targeting individual women to increase their participation and ownership of resources without any adjustment (and specifically without recognition, redistribution and reduction) in the unpaid work women disproportionately conduct, many such well-meaning initiatives end up increasing women's double burden.

Interviews revealed that the dominant tools FES projects rely on to address gender inequality involve hitting gender quotas for attendance at events or on panels, inviting more women to workshops or running specific workshops with trade unions or other partners that focus on "women's issues". Particularly in relation to economic questions, there was a shared sense that more could be done to understand how questions of gender inequality might be relevant to broader macroeconomic issues or how to move beyond participation and women's inclusion in terms of activities FES projects could engage with.

One area that a number of FES offices have highlighted as a focus area for them and their partners is that of social protection (in particular the lack of funding and coverage of social protection schemes in the MENA region). Such work is an ideal place to take an alternative gendered perspective as a starting point. One way of doing so is by interrogating existing and proposed mechanisms for social protection, including conditional cash transfers that have been expanding in the region (Alijla et al 2022).

Conditional cash transfer (CCT) programmes<sup>2</sup> in the MENA region and elsewhere have replaced other more universal systems of welfare provisioning. These CCT programmes frequently target women or mothers within households for both efficiency and equity rationales (Almås et al 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> For more detail on CCTs in the MENA region, this UN ESCWA study of 2017 provides a thorough overview: [https://archive.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/page\\_attachments/conditional-cash-transfers-arab-region-en\\_0.pdf](https://archive.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/page_attachments/conditional-cash-transfers-arab-region-en_0.pdf) However, this does not capture the more recent expansion of such programmes, particularly since Covid-19.

Feminist literature (Cookson, 2018 and a summary of this research here <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2019/Policy-brief-Family-oriented-cash-transfers-from-a-gender-perspective-en.pdf>) has questioned programmes, such as CCTs, that specifically target women, highlighting the potential danger that they may reinforce unequal gender norms and responsibilities rather than addressing them. More broadly programmes that target women in terms of increasing their involvement via participation may generate additional work, and, unless other unpaid care work is redistributed alongside this, may make women's lives more complicated and time-poor. In relation to FES's own projects clearly the issue is less about interventions that target women and more about the introduction of gender quotas. FES encourages the participation of women as authors of reports and studies as well as their attendance at public debates, workshops and events sponsored by FES. While these are quite different from the more targeted interventions such as CCTs, they can still put the onus on the women themselves to participate in initiatives, especially those concerning topics relating to gender equality. While the introduction of such quotas has been an important step towards gender equality for FES, and their removal is not being advocated for here, it is equally important to acknowledge that such participation may come with additional challenges.

An alternative, more comprehensive gender-aware approach would recognise that gender implies a set of social relations in which both men and women are involved, and which are governed by broader societal norms and power relations. One way forward would be to encourage women's participation by making free childcare available during such meetings and events as well as consulting on the time and venue for meetings to ensure these do not create additional constraints for women.

An additional, more gender-aware intervention, may involve more men in training sessions about issues that might be traditionally seen as related to women or gender equality. Therefore, rather than targeting women only for discussions on topics such as gender and climate change or on gender and social protection, men should be encouraged to also participate in these sessions. Else, individual sessions or presentations on gender issues could be integrated into events that typically have a majority of male participants. In addition, in the context of the discussion on social protection, the pressure should be on robust coverage for all, resisting targeting and conditionalities in favour of universalism and investment in public services and social infrastructure (Cookson, 2018). Here, the language of social provisioning discussed above and away from 'gender equality' as over-arching themes may assist in the inclusion of men in these debates and discussions.

### *3.2.2. Where are the jobs? Tackling the demand-side in the MENA region*

In most countries in the MENA region, the challenges of conflict and economic crises, years of job-less growth and the upcoming challenges of the climate emergency and energy transition need to be acknowledged as the backdrop to understanding women's economic empowerment (or lack of and limits to). This is an aspect that is often forgotten in discussions on women's economic empowerment in the MENA region. For example, a recent UNICEF (2021) report, when analysing the barriers and opportunities for women's

employment and greater formal economic participation, focuses on the social and legal norms that hold women back. The report also rightly highlights the enormous burden of unpaid work women perform as an additional barrier.

“The challenge of unpaid labour, especially in the region, is one that brings together socio-cultural norms, legal and structural challenges, and economic opportunity. Women face challenges at each level, from working with her family on expectations to finding a job within her skillset that is within the bounds set by labour laws in her country.” UNICEF, 2021: 187.

However, like many studies and policy reports advocating for women’s greater economic empowerment, there is a crucial lacuna in relation to unpacking the nature of economic growth in the MENA region and the labor market context in which women’s economic participation is being sought. FES colleagues raised an awareness of this analytical gap in conversations about the barriers to women’s economic participation, highlighting the urgent need for economic growth that creates decent work for both men and women and that women’s economic empowerment should not be seen in opposition to men’s access to economic opportunities. Given the high rates of unemployment among men and women, and especially young men and women across the MENA region, the focus on labour market equality can seem misplaced.

“Youth unemployment in the region is almost twice as high as the world average and has grown 2.5 times faster than world average between 2010 and 2021.” Unicef 2022 - [Young people address challenges and explore opportunities of transition from learning to employment in the Middle East and North Africa/Arab States region \(unicef.org\)](https://www.unicef.org/young-people-address-challenges-and-explore-opportunities-of-transition-from-learning-to-employment-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-arab-states-region)

It is evident that historically, women’s greater economic participation (both in the region and outside) has been associated with both economic expansion and contraction- (Karshenas and Moghadam 2021, Seguino and Braunstein 2018). In relation to the latter, recessionary moments have, in some contexts, seen ‘cheaper’ women replace ‘more expensive’ men in traditionally male sectors, as employers take advantage of gender pay gaps. More frequently, however, women have been pushed out of the labor market in moments of economic crisis unless they have been protected by being employed in more recession-proof (public sector) occupations (Rubery and Rafferty 2013).

There is some further work to be done to understand how much strong job-rich growth in general could support women’s economic participation in the MENA region and how much the lack of such growth has contributed to the low participation of women so far. What is clear is that growth in general has been low in the region and where jobs have been created these have not been in sectors that have traditionally recruited women. Even the growth of the informal economy has not always drawn in women, unlike in other contexts. Instead, there are large differences in the share of women in informal employment in the MENA region (see section 2 above).

For most countries in the MENA region the challenge, however, remains one of making progress on women’s economic empowerment alongside inclusive and sustainable economic growth and transformation. In particular there is a need for the expansion of economic opportunities for women and men, rather than finding themselves competing for scarce and poorly paid jobs in a poorly performing labor market.



The challenges described above offer an opportunity for FES and its partners in this area. Linking back to point 3.1 above and the need to place a social provisioning frame at the centre of the FES economic justice agenda, there is scope to further build a case for policies that support such a move. In particular investments in care and social infrastructure (including health and education) have an important dual role to play in generating both inclusive, job-rich growth and generating jobs in sectors that are more likely to attract women.

Evidently such a transformation of priorities for many MENA governments will require some persuasion and there is a role for FES to support such a movement. However, the challenge in moving towards job-rich, caring jobs is one of macroeconomic context, especially in the wake of multiple overlapping crises in many MENA countries.

The second pillar of work FES should therefore engage in, together with its partners, relates to developing a deeper critical and gendered macroeconomic perspective. Interviews confirmed a demand for this among FES staff and their partners, particularly as many countries in the region are entering new arrangements with IFIs, most notably the IMF, with issues of debt sustainability and policy conditionality firmly back on the agenda. The urgency of this will only grow as countries face growing economic pressures of shortages of foreign exchange reserves and rising inflation, driven in many countries by sharp food prices increases as well as limited fiscal space following the Covid-19 pandemic (Masry 2021).

There are roles for FES and its partners in both questioning the gendered impact of the policy conditions proposed by various loan agreements as well as in demonstrating the need for more gender-equitable alternative policy frames. In fact, a gendered analysis of World Bank and IMF programmes and loan conditionalities would make for an important piece of work that could be undertaken by FES at the regional and national level.

While the World Bank (World Bank 2015) and IMF (Stotsky 2006) have for some time now heralded the importance of gender equality in their research-related work, this has, unfortunately, not translated into their programming work in relation to macroeconomic policy advice and economic conditionality (Bretton Woods Project 2017). Instead these are often at odds with each other. Fiscal policy advice is focused on reducing expenditures, especially social spending and, where revenue-raising has been targeted, this has been via regressive indirect taxation e.g. raising sales or value-added taxes. Feminist economists (Elson and Cagatay 2000, Buenaventura and Miranda 2017) have argued for some time now about the regressive and gendered nature of such fiscal policy advice. However, making this concrete in the context of the MENA region and in relation to the post-Covid context remains an important piece of work.

Since the last round of structural adjustment programmes in many low- and middle-income countries, including many MENA countries in the 1990s and 2000s and the last global financial crisis of the late 2000s, feminist economists (Elson and Cagatay 2000) and women's organisations have developed toolkits and frameworks that can assist with the gendered analysis of fiscal policies. The UK Women's Budget Group has, for example, developed a 'Gender-responsive budget' toolkit that can be accessed here:

<https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620429/gt-guide-gender-responsive-budgeting-280218-en.pdf?sequence=13>

This hands-on approach to assessing whether fiscal policy is designed in a gender-equitable and fair way across society and whether resources are allocated fairly is a useful entry point for a critical assessment of IMF and World Bank programmes in the MENA region.

### 3.3 Gender as a category in relation to other axes of economic and social inequality in the MENA region

While gender inequalities are pervasive in the MENA region, when we are discussing the economic and labor market-related dimensions of gender inequality it is important to consider these alongside other societal dynamics that result in unequal outcomes for particular groups. A focus on indicators such as female labor force participation, gender pay gaps or gendered occupational segregation may mask underlying issues or features of labor markets and the economies of the MENA region. Within the labor market, the dramatic growth of informal employment, pervasive underemployment and high levels of unemployment need to be centred in an analysis of gender issues, as does the segregation of the labor market by public/ private; refugee/ non-refugee status/ migrant/ home status; rural/ urban; youth/ non-youth.

It is worth noting that inequalities across vertical (income or wealth), horizontal (gender and other identity markers such as race, age, ethnicity) and space (both within and across countries) usually overlap and intersect, often with one form of inequality exacerbating another (Kabeer 2016). This can make the work of FES, in hoping to address gender inequalities particularly challenging.

When interrogating inequalities in the MENA region in relation to economic and labor market features, the following issues, in addition to gender inequalities, stand out: i) nationality or migrant/ refugee status, especially in GCC countries but increasingly also outside of these countries; ii) labor market status with formal/ informal or employed/ unemployed being particular analytical features (Hanieh, 2016).

For FES these particular axes of inequality may not always feature as priorities when working with traditional partners, especially trade unions that largely favour formal sector, older, male employees in the public or large-scale private sector. Interviews with FES staff demonstrate a willingness to a) encourage existing trade union partners to broaden their remit, working explicitly with women's committees, for example; and b) reach out to new partners that broaden the base for FES, including organisations that work with domestic workers or those representing informal sector workers. It is clear that such a movement towards new partnerships is not always straightforward and throws up tensions for FES colleagues and their trade union partners. However, there is also a clear recognition and willingness within FES to promote a transformation of trade unions from within. One additional area that could be explored here relates to building bridges between trade unions and new partners, encouraging them to form alliances on the issues discussed here.

## 4. HOW can FES work on these topics?

This report has provided suggestions for FES in relation to the specific areas covered above. This section therefore focuses on summarizing some of the ways forward as well as addressing the potential challenges FES offices in the MENA region may face in attempting

to do so. An important message to be conveyed here relates to the fact that these recommendations should not be seen as additional work for FES colleagues but that they should rather replace or modify existing ways of working, helping also to improve the effectiveness of research and analytical work as well as direct interventions, projects and events.

These recommendations have been organized under 4 headings.

#### 4.1 Shifting language and integrating new concepts and frameworks fit for a sustainable, socially-just future

Perhaps one of the most fundamental recommendations from this report, relates to language and the replacement of frequently used but deeply biased terms and concepts with ones that are more able to truly integrate issues of sustainability and equality, including gender equality. Measures such as GDP and labor market participation give a skewed and stunted view of how societies and economies are organized and how they may evolve into the future. The lack of consideration and systematic integration of unpaid care and domestic work lies at the heart of feminist critiques of economics. For FES a more useful frame that could be deployed is a social provisioning frame such as the one developed by Jennifer Olmsted (2021) where social, environmental and economic pillars interconnect. Her framework can be summarized as follows:

1. An explicit linking of social reproduction, care labor, gender equality and social sustainability;
2. A recognition of the limits of market-based solutions to addressing the challenge of sustainability;
3. An acknowledgment that balancing the rights of individual care *recipients* and care *givers*, as well as societal needs is difficult;
4. Recognition, reduction, redistribution, reinforcement and reward (5 Rs) are essential to addressing women's particularly heavy unpaid work burden;
5. An acknowledgment of the interconnectedness between the three sustainability pillars, and the need for integrated approaches whereby trade-offs and synergistic links are better addressed.

But issues of language do not end here. There is important work that FES can integrate that shifts the use of language around investment away from purely physical infrastructure towards making the case for investment in social infrastructure as well. Furthermore, framing discussions around demographic change, ageing populations and social care can be an important way of moving such conversations out of the domain of the domestic and the gender-specific and instead placing these at the centre of FES work with its partners, independent of whether these are male or female-dominated spaces.

Finally, an important recommendation for FES in relation to the MENA region relates to the need to place decent, sustainable job-creation at the centre of frameworks of gender equality, moving away from pitting the genders against each other when it comes to economic opportunities. This then feeds into the work that FES can and should engage in in relation to the (macro)economic policy advice emanating from the IFIs, particularly in the wake of

Covid-19 and the subsequent economic crises facing countries in the region. Here the frameworks of gender-responsive budgeting outlined in section 3.2 could be useful anchors for FES's work moving forward.

#### 4.2 Filling the data voids

A second major recommendation for FES relates to the need to not be stymied by the limits of poor data in relation to many of the issues discussed. As this report makes clear, there is still a long way to go in drawing particular regional and country-level conclusions because the data that is available is patchy, at best, or not available at all, at worst. This is both the case for data by gender as well as other axes of inequality (such as by income groups or by nationality/ resident status).

On the one hand, there is work that FES and its partners can contribute to in lobbying for the collection of more and better data – particularly data that is disaggregated by gender and other characteristics. This might include more systematic collection of time-use data as part of national labor force surveys for example. On the other hand, FES itself can help to fill the data gaps by working with its partners to look into the particular challenges in each of the countries in the region. This could include small pilot time-use surveys, ~~or~~ more qualitative research that could illuminate difference in outcomes (such as labor market outcomes) for particular groups, or action-oriented research that would offer the added benefit of capacity development of FES partners.

#### 4.3 Expanding alliances

FES has a long history of building progressive alliances and its relationships with trade unions is unrivalled among NGOs in the region. It will be crucial that the connections to trade unions are not weakened by reaching out to new partners and by building new coalitions. There is clear awareness among FES colleagues where further alliances could be built around the area of gender equality and social and economic justice within each of the partner countries. For regional projects, umbrella organisations such as the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC) still have an important role to play.

But, as was recently suggested in the evaluation of the regional trade union project (Banse 2021), more could be made out of building alliances between regional trade unions across specific sectors, such as domestic workers organisations, both to inform and compare and to ultimately build progressive regional campaigns. In addition, in some instances, FES country teams have established long-standing connections with organisations and think-tanks on particular themes but are aware that they may not have the capacity to conduct full gendered analyses. In these instances further work to strengthen these organisations and build their capacity would be worth exploring.

Organisations with a progressive agenda that FES could partner with on topics of the economy, labor markets and gender justice, include the following:

Kvinna till Kvinna (Iraq, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Tunisia) - [The MENA region | The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation](#)

Oxfam (global)

Arab Work Coalition (regional)

Arab Network for Development (regional)  
Daleel Tadamon (Lebanon) - [About Daleel Tadamon](#)  
No2ta (regional) - [Home | NO2TA](#)  
Doria Feminist Fund (regional) - [About us \(doriafeministfund.org\)](#)  
CIDDEF (Algeria) - [CIDDEF – Information and Documentation Centre on the Rights of the Child and Women \(ciddef-dz.com\)](#)  
Women’s Affair Technical Committee (Palestine) – [www.watcpal.org](#)  
Palestinian Working Women’s Society for Development (Palestine) – [www.pwwsd.org](#)  
FTDES (Tunisia) – [ftdes.net](#)

This is an indicative list of organisations that some FES country offices are already working with or have indicated as having particular expertise in this area. It should be seen as a starting point that can and should be built on further, to help foster knowledge exchange and collaborations in this emerging area of research and campaigning.

#### 4.4. Overcoming challenges for FES

Some of the recommendations outlined here might seem easier to achieve than others, and different FES projects and country offices are at different points in the journey towards gender mainstreaming. However, it is important to acknowledge and consider how to overcome some of the challenges FES teams will face (or are facing) in attempting to implement the suggestions made here.

In many countries, there remains a political challenge for FES to engage with partners on these topics, especially where these are seen to be Political with a capital P. This clearly emerged as a concern during interviews with FES colleagues in some countries. Here, building some of the regional alliances in the short to medium-term may allow for greater country-level engagement in the longer-term. Furthermore, given the interest in issues of gender equality among donors and IFIs (even if this may be narrowly understood), working on some of the topics suggested above may actually offer a way forward that is seen as less politicized than other more contentious topics.

In some instances, country and project teams would benefit from further training, particularly in relation to unpacking the gendered macroeconomy. Here some focused training on gender budgeting and gender impact assessments would be beneficial, especially given the renewed need to enter into a critique of IFI programmes and macroeconomic policy advice. This is also true for FES’ partners, particularly trade unions, where further knowledge and capacity building around IFI policy advice and its implications for labor market and social justice outcomes would be beneficial.

Gender Focal Points (GFPs) have worked particularly well in some countries and for some projects, especially when they have been brought in to a project’s development at the very early stages, helping to shape what and how the project is conducted. The role of GFPs within projects relies heavily on both the appetite of the country or project directors and the knowledge and capacity of the GFP themselves. There is some further work that could be done here to make this process of feeding back and feeding forward more systematically across all [FES](#) projects.



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