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Economic Development and Barriers to (Decent) Work for Women in SSA and MENA

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Abstract

Gender inequality not only leads to poor labour market outcomes for women, both in terms of participation and the type of employment, but is also a constraining factor for economic development worldwide. While there is a sizeable pool of literature on the underlying barriers to female employment, it remains unclear how these barriers play out across different world regions. This paper discusses and compares the barriers to (decent) work faced by women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). It is inspired by the three labour market transitions as countries develop economically over time (paid work, wage work and occupational variety) as presented by Bandiera et al. (2022a). Against this background, we identify the factors that are most helpful in explaining why so many women (i) do not take up any paid work; (ii) cannot find more decent (wage) work; and (iii) are rarely employed in specialized, well-remunerated and highly productive work.

We find that labour market outcomes of women in both regions are negatively affected by gender norms, yet in a remarkably different way. Women in the MENA region especially do not often take up paid work at all (first transition) due to strong prevailing social norms and prioritised personal commitments, such as care work and other household chores. Women in SSA are more often detained from finding wage work with better working conditions (second transition). For economic reasons, many African women need to contribute to the household income so gendered labour market barriers, such as care responsibilities and time constraints, frequently push them to accept precarious jobs. Possibilities to get into more specialised occupations (third transition) are slim for women in both our regions of interest, as they tend to continue working in traditionally female-dominated sectors. Yet, in MENA, occupational segregation often arises due to gender norms around appropriate workplace and tasks or transportation, while this link is less pronounced in SSA. Our approach, thus, allows us to compare the barriers to labour market inclusion and advancement that deny women better jobs and a more active role in economic development in different world regions.

Contents

1 Introduction

The World Bank (2011) dedicated an entire World Development Report to gender equality to address the accumulating evidence of its importance in the development process. Since then, increasingly, the theoretical literature on long-run development has incorporated gender inequality into its models emphasising it as a major constraining factor for economic development (for extensive reviews of the different strands of this literature, see Kabeer, 2016; Santos Silva & Klasen, 2021; Seguino, 2020). Alongside the theoretical literature, an expanding pool of empirical literature underscores the gendered organisation of labour (Bandiera et al., 2022a) and suggests that a more gender-equal occupational distribution would lead to increased firm productivity (Ashraf et al., 2022) and large overall economic gains (Hsieh et al., 2019).

We argue that, from a development perspective, women's labour market inclusion is vital for three reasons. First, income generation leads to *poverty reduction* – as labour is the only endowment of the poor, it is the best way to improve their livelihoods. Second, employment and income generation enable women's *individual empowerment* by widening the space for independent life choices and self-fulfilment. Third, women's employment may lead to *collective empowerment* and socially more cohesive and resilient societies by affecting underlying power structures and transforming how labour markets and the economy at large are organised.

Although several barriers to women's equitable inclusion in the labour market have been identified in the literature (such as social norms, insufficient financial inclusion and legal protection, and occupational segregation), we lack an understanding of the relative importance of these barriers in different situations and geographical contexts. Which barriers are most significant in low- and middle-income countries? Which obstacles loom largest in different world regions, denying women better labour market outcomes and a more active role in economic development? Which root causes need to be prioritised to achieve transformative changes?

In the present paper we address this gap by identifying and systematising barriers to women's employment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). In both regions, employment creation, and especially the provision of more decent and productive jobs, is a continuous and massive challenge. Especially for women, the employment situation in the two regions is extremely difficult, ranking last (MENA) and third-last (SSA) in the regional comparison by the Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2021). At the same time, labour market challenges for women in both regions look very different: despite rising educational attainment (e.g., UNESCWA, 2019), MENA countries have globally the lowest female labour force participation (FLFP) – 18.0 per cent in Arab States, 22.2 per cent in North Africa (ILO, 2020). Women in the SSA region have the highest labour force participation of all subregions – 62 per cent vs. the world average of 47 per cent (ILO, 2020) –, yet most work in informal and vulnerable employment in the low-wage sector (e.g., AUC/OECD, 2018).

Based on an extensive review of theoretical and empirical literature across different disciplines, we show that some barriers to female employment are particularly strong in one region more so than the other. While social norms play a role in both regions (e.g., time constraints due to care work), social stigmatisation of working women is particularly strong in the MENA region. Barriers stemming from the weakness of the private sector and from informality affect women in SSA much more strongly than women in MENA, as poverty forces them to seek employment despite the small size of the formal and productive segment of the labour market.

This paper, thus, adds a regional component to the ideal-typical transitions in labour markets presented by Bandiera et al. (2022a), proceeding as follows. After a brief explanation and critique of the model, we consider the factors that are most helpful in explaining what prevents women from taking up any paid work (Section 2.1), more decent wage work (Section 2.2), and more specialised, often more productive work (Section 2.3). As mentioned above, in each of these subsections, we discuss the relative importance of the factors in both regions under study.

We close with a brief summary of the most relevant labour market constraints for women in these regions and aspects that require further research.

2 Barriers to women's employment and the three transitions in the labour market

The three transitions model proposed by the Jobs of the World Project (Bandiera et al., 2022a) is our conceptual starting point to understand the link between labour and development and to analyse female labour market outcomes in different contexts, such as MENA and SSA. Following their framework, one can model three more-or-less successive and more-or-less distinctive[1] transitions in the organisation of labour over the course of economic development. First, labour moves from home to market production; second, workers transition from self-employment to wage employment as labour is increasingly organised by firms; third, due to increasing labour division within firms, jobs become more specialised and on average more productive. While this framework follows from the analysis of historical developments across countries, development is not linear and the transition to market production, wage work and specialised labour may lag for some population groups in some contexts. We shed light on the factors that slow down the three transitions and inhibit women from realising their full potential in the labour market, with special attention given to the MENA and SSA regions.

2.1 Marketisation of work: bringing women into the labour force

Gender-related outcomes in the process of development have attracted a considerable amount of interest from the academic community, and there is already a large body of literature on women's inclusion in the labour market along the development path (for comprehensive reviews, see Elson, 1999; Heath & Jayachandran, 2018; Klasen, 2019). As many scholars have pointed out, the global trends of increasing female education, decreasing fertility and strong per capita growth in most low- and middle-income countries in past decades should have provided a strong basis for women's growing inclusion in the labour market. Even considering that women move out of labour as incomes rise and only re-enter the labour force at much higher income levels, as the "feminisation U hypothesis" argues (e.g., Goldin, 1995), there should have been a spurring impact of per capita growth. Instead, women's labour force participation has stagnated around 50 per cent globally and remains trapped below 20 per cent in the MENA region and just above 60 per cent in SSA.[2] In terms of the underlying conditions, the MENA region has seen a tremendous decline in fertility (45 per cent since 1990), almost double the worldwide figure, with female secondary enrolment rates expanding by 70 per cent, pacing the world average, and just per capita GDP growth lagging behind with 117 per cent. In comparison, in SSA the decline in fertility of 25 per cent has been considerably slower, while female enrolment rates more than doubled and per capita GDP grew at a robust 122 per cent (own calculations are based on data from World Development Indicators between 1990 and 2019).

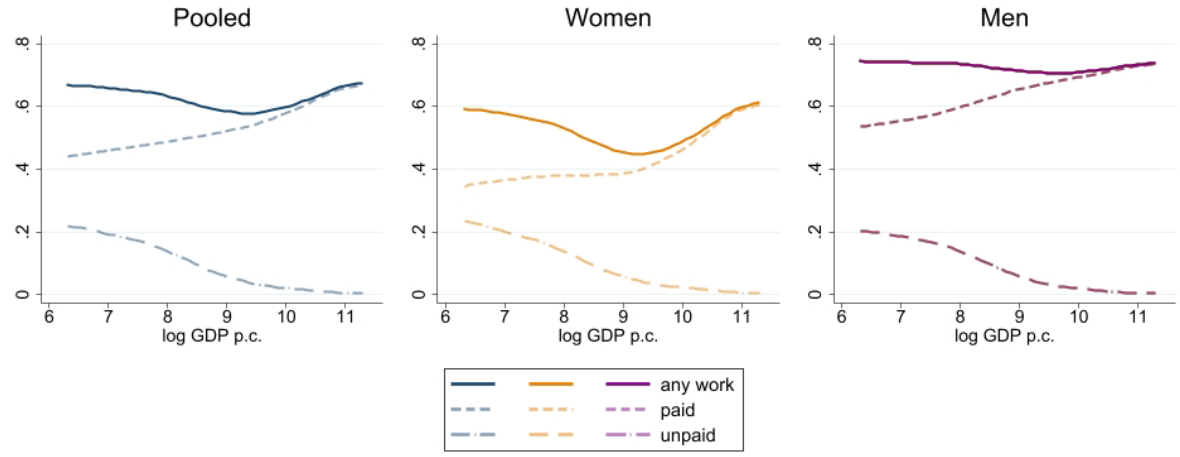
1 Historically, the first transition led mostly to self-employment and the second to employment in a company. Today, the first two transitions often happen simultaneously, when formerly not economically active persons directly enter wage employment. The distinction into two transitions is, however, helpful to compare between the uptake of *any* income-generating work (whether employed or self-employed) and additional barriers for accessing wage employment.

2 Over the past three decades, Latin America has been the only world region registering measureable progress in FLFP (Klasen, 2019).

In this section, we, therefore, discuss women's labour market entry barriers that interfere with the per se favourable conditions. After outlining Bandiera et al.'s (2022a) first transition to paid labour we consult region-specific literature to identify reasons for the variance between countries, that is, why especially women in the MENA region have not been able to participate in this transition to paid jobs. We, thus, discuss the relative significance of labour market entry barriers for women, such as social norms around care work and marriage, social stigma or the male breadwinner model, and how their impact is moderated by other factors, most notably income and education.

Bandiera et al.'s (2022a) first transition shows that markets tend to grow as countries develop, resulting in a rising incidence of paid work. While at very low levels of economic development, large parts of a country's population engage in subsistence farming to meet the consumption needs of their household, over time farmers produce surpluses to be sold on the market. They, thus, start to generate an income that allows them to purchase other needed goods on the market, while unpaid work declines. Figure 1 visualises this process and plots the share of people in different types of work across per capita incomes. Even though in most countries, the majority of workers are already engaged in paid work, the transition to market production remains highly relevant among low-income countries mainly for two reasons. First, subsistence farming still makes up a considerable share of economic activity in some rural areas, especially in SSA. Second, and more crucial for our analysis, this transition is not gender neutral.

Figure 1: Paid and unpaid work against log GDP per capita by gender (115 countries globally)



Notes: The data is from the Jobs of the World Database (JWD) (Bandiera & Elsayed, 2023), which consists of macro-level indicators aggregated from 358 micro-level surveys (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS)) in 115 countries between 1990 and 2019.

Source: Reproduction of Figure 3 in Bandiera et al. (2022a, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY)

At first glance, Bandiera et al.'s (2022a) depiction simply confirms the feminisation U hypothesis, as the slightly U-shaped relationship between the type of work and income in the pooled sample can be largely attributed to women. In the pooled sample of Figure 1, the share of unpaid workers decreases rather rapidly from low- to middle-income countries, while the share of people in paid work increases from low- to high-income countries at a slower pace. Thus, there is an overall temporal decline in the share of workers, which explains the U-shaped relationship. Women seem to be the drivers behind this U-shaped relationship. Not only is their labour force participation (up to 65 per cent) generally lower than for men (75 per cent) across all levels of development but, for women, the share of unpaid workers declines while their share of paid

workers remains almost constant in middle-income countries.[3] In contrast, for men, the share of workers is significantly higher and remains almost constant, as male workers seem to switch directly into paid work.

Yet, Bandiera et al. (2022a) like other recent literature casts doubt on the universal applicability of the feminisation U hypothesis. Gaddis and Klasen (2014) argue that current trends in FLFP in many low-income countries are incompatible with this hypothesis. Their analysis, based on dynamic panel models and sector-specific growth rates, finds only a small U-pattern that by itself is not able to explain the observed patterns of FLFP sufficiently and conclude that previous evidence for the U-hypothesis is greatly dependent on the employed data. Furthermore, Bandiera et al.'s (2022a) analysis of within-country wealth quintiles shows that the transition to paid work is also driven by wealth. However, while wealthier households are generally more likely to engage in paid employment, gender remains the stronger predictor, as the U-shape is mostly driven by women in the lower wealth quintiles. This means that women especially from poorer households drop out of the labour market and only re-enter the labour market at relatively higher income levels.[4] This pattern seems at odds with the income effect explanation of the feminisation U hypothesis, which suggests that, at mid-income levels, women can afford to drop out of the labour market, as their income is not necessary. On the other hand, a more recent contribution by Uberti and Douarin (2023) argues that initial gender norms moderate the development process such that a U-shape can only be observed in countries with less gender-equal norms, linking it to the literature on the historical origins of gender norms (see below). This raises important questions about the interaction of culture and structural transformation in shaping development outcomes.

In fact, there is a greater heterogeneity across countries than the U-hypothesis suggests as the gender gap in labour force participation varies greatly even among countries of similar income-levels. This can be seen when plotting the gender gap in labour force participation against income (Figure 2).[5] While Figure 2 also suggests the same U-shaped relationship, here shown inversely, the figure shows a considerable variation of women's inclusion in the labour market at all income levels, but particularly across middle-income countries. In the low-income economies in SSA (depicted in green) FLFP is rather high and, thus, the gender gap rather small. This suggests that in these countries a substantial number of women work due to economic necessity, but even in those settings there is considerable heterogeneity. Yet, in MENA countries (depicted in orange), the gender gap is very high throughout,[6] even in the higher-income Gulf countries. The regional comparison in the World Economic Forum's (WEF, 2021) Global Gender Gap report corroborates this picture: while SSA has closed 66.1 per cent of the economic participation and opportunity gender gap to date, MENA has closed only 40.9 per cent of this gap. Out of eight subregions, SSA and MENA rank fifth and seventh, respectively, in this category (WEF, 2021, pp. 26, 28). The high variation in figures suggests that, irrespective of the income level, FLFP is not solely due to women's own decision to work– data show that across countries more women are willing to work than actually do (e.g., Gallup & ILO, 2017; perception survey in Jordan by Felicio & Gauri, 2018) – but that other constraints play a role.

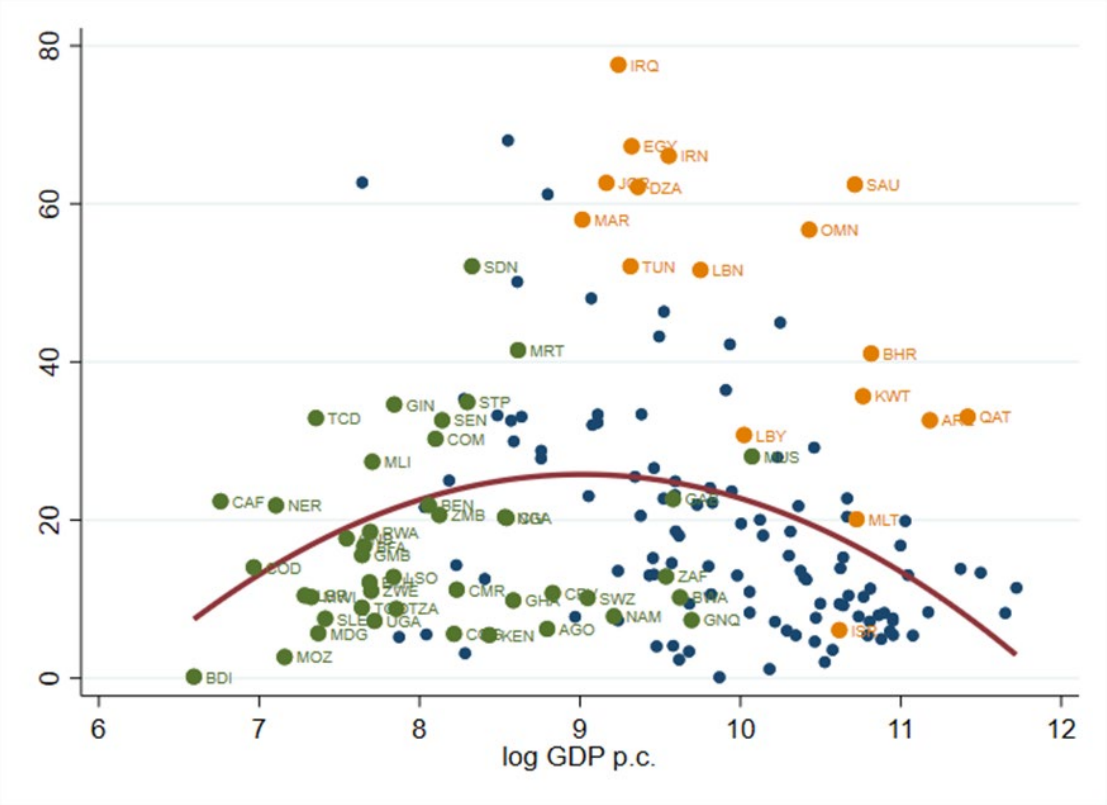
3 FLFP decreases from 60 per cent to about 45 per cent before eventually returning to its initial value. The turning point lies at an income level of around 11,000 USD per capita.

4 Bandiera et al. (2022a) show that FLFP in the two bottom quintiles only starts rising again at per capita GDP of USD 22,000, which is considerably later than in the overall sample (see previous footnote).

5 While ILO's modelled estimates are less accurate and need to be interpreted with care, they provide an informed source for a larger number of countries across regions than available within Bandiera et al.'s (2022a) dataset, which comprises only 41 SSA countries (167 micro-level surveys) and only four MENA countries (seven surveys).

6 Exceptions are Israel and Malta, which can be considered outliers in the region economically, politically and culturally.

Figure 2: Gender gap in labour force participation against log GDP per capita in 2019



Notes: SSA countries are shown in green, MENA countries in orange. The red line mirrors the reverse feminisation U hypothesis. These are ILO-modelled estimates, based on data for 170 countries in 2019.

Source: Authors' calculations and visualisation.

A large body of literature attempts to explain the differences between countries by looking at the gendered division of labour and the concomitant evolution of social norms pertaining to gender. Social norms are generally defined as context-specific informal rules that guide human behaviour in different social contexts, while gender norms define the roles women and men are expected to play in society (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2023). Klasen (2019) points to four recent studies on the possible historical origins of gender norms, ranging from the introduction of the plough (Alesina et al., 2013; similarly, Uberti & Douarin, 2023) or the transition to sedentary agriculture (Hansen et al., 2015) to historic resource scarcities (Hazarika et al., 2015) or a "cool water condition" (Santos Silva et al., 2023), as areas with frosty winters, mild summers and available fresh water had lower child mortality. Further studies underline other deep drivers for the emergence of gender norms in labour markets, such as religion (Feldmann, 2007; Guiso et al., 2003), traditional values (Atasoy, 2017) and patriarchal norms (Barnett et al., 2021; Evans, 2023; Solati, 2017). Klasen (2019) mentions socialist rule and wars as possible shocks with a strong and lasting impact on both gender norms and FLFP. Such historical legacies cannot be counteracted easily (Klasen, 2019).

Social norms thus exhibit a strong "path dependency" as they are transmitted through societal institutions and remain highly persistent over time (Fernández & Fogli, 2009; Grosjean & Khattar, 2019). Still, Fernandez (2013) provides a simple model of intergenerational learning that links the long-term changes in FLFP with the accompanying revolution in social attitudes, which explains well the path of FLFP in the US since the late 19th century.

Wherever more conservative social norms exist, they constitute considerable barriers for women to take up paid work. Also, Klasen et al.'s (2021) analysis suggests that gender norms and

societal expectations need to be taken into account, as changes in individual labour supply factors insufficiently explain changes and differences in FLFP. The following paragraphs, therefore, discuss the pervasive impact of gender norms on FLFP, focussing on the time constraints women face due to household obligations and care work, direct restrictions on women's participation in work outside their home and lastly different factors moderating the impact of these gender norms.

2.1.1 Women's limited time and double burden

In gender-unequal settings, where opportunities, rights and resources are less equally distributed between genders, the prevailing gender roles oblige women to spend more time on care work and household chores, which naturally limits their time for market work. In addition, these obligations push women into family-contributing work and/or subsistence farming, as it is more compatible with their family obligations. Thus, women's limited involvement in the labour market can in part be attributed to an incomplete measurement of their activities, as household obligations remain entirely uncounted and contributing family work and subsistence farming are often severely underreported. As Bandiera et al. (2022a) acknowledge, such incomplete measurement might explain a considerable amount of the described U-shape in their data. Evidence from South Africa underlines this problem by comparing data from standard labour force and time-use surveys, showing that women do engage in different forms of temporary and casual employment that fails to be registered in the former (Floro & Komatsu, 2011). This suggests that there is a need for more complete measures of activity based on standardised time use surveys to better understand women's restrictions when deciding on their labour supply choices (Hendy, 2010; UNESCWA, 2019, pp. 116-117). Rubiano-Matulevich and Viollaz (2019) summarise the existing evidence of studies using time-use data from 19 countries confirming general expectations that women seem to specialise in unpaid domestic and care work, spending on average 3.2 hours more per day on this kind of work, which mostly results in overall more time spent on "productive" activities, especially in low-income countries.[7] Further analyses show that time use patterns for women shift considerably after marriage and parenthood and these patterns persist throughout women's lifecycles. While there is also substantial heterogeneity across countries, analysis in this regard is limited due to the low number of countries with comparable time-use data.

Thus, care work serves as the main factor limiting women's engagement in market work. Studies across the globe show that the presence of (small) children almost universally affects women's labour outcomes negatively.[8] Using sophisticated data from Denmark, Kleven at al. (2019) show that motherhood results in lower participation in the labour force, fewer hours worked and lower wage rates, combining to a long-run gender gap in earnings of 20 per cent, which works through occupational and career choices. Based on the same methodology, Kleven et al. (2023) build a world atlas of child penalties in terms of labour force participation, showing that these exist across the globe, but are closely connected to the level of economic development and structural transformation, as they are very small at lower incomes and then increase as countries' income grows.[9] Breakdowns by region show that penalties are generally relatively small in SSA (34

7 Data from Ethiopia further underlines the time poverty of (poor) women due to their double burden (Robles, 2010). Hendy (2010) finds for Egypt that "married females spend about eight hours less on market work relative to their single counterparts".

8 The large constraining impact of care responsibilities on FLFP came to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., ElBehairy et al., 2022). Counterintuitively, in absolute numbers, MENA women were not as affected as women elsewhere, as many women had not worked due to care work before the pandemic (Krafft et al., 2022).

9 Aronson et al. (2021) provide similar evidence but follow a different methodology.

countries included), but large and persistent in MENA (eight countries included).[10] In SSA still some heterogeneity can be observed, as penalties are virtually non-existent in the poorer countries in SSA (e.g., Mozambique and Tanzania), then there is a temporary downturn that fades in some of the middle-income countries (e.g., Ghana and Kenya), while in South Africa and Botswana the first child has a sizeable and persistent negative effect on employment. In their more selective sample, Klasen et al. (2021) also find that the negative employment effects decrease when children grow older, and for school-age girls the effect is particularly small, suggesting that they might take up some of their mother's household chores. The described double burden of working women may drive up their reservation wages (i.e., the minimum amount of income they are willing to work for) and explain why women in the high-income, resource-rich Gulf countries are not attracted to the labour market (i.e., the "outliers" in Figure 2 above). In this sense, traditional social norms, rather than the analytical distinction between resource-rich and resource-scarce MENA countries, influence FLFP.

As noted above, fertility has generally declined substantially in much of the developing world including MENA countries, as countries' incomes have increased. However, this does not have palpable effects on FLFP in MENA countries (for evidence on Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, see Majbouri, 2020). The fertility transition seems to be rather unique and much slower in SSA, which appears to be the results of a persistently high desire for fertility (Bongaarts, 2017). An extensive body of literature links high fertility with education, showing that higher women's education, both at the primary and secondary levels, leads to lower fertility (Duflo et al., 2015; Duflo et al., 2021; Keats, 2018; Ozier, 2018). A more recent study shows that the high desired fertility in SSA is driven by women from lower wealth quintiles, who are also less likely to engage in wage work, suggesting a possible reverse causal relationship, that is, that the lack of more decent wage employment opportunities for poorer women strongly mediates their fertility choices (Zipfel, 2023). Concerning the type of marriage, Rossi (2019) finds evidence that women in polygamous relationships have more children, due to competition between co-wives. Given that polygamy is most prevalent in SSA, this would be an additional explanation for its slow fertility transition.

Ultimately, women will continue to give birth, but there is a clear need to solve women's time poverty by alleviating their care burden. Tackling the prevailing gender roles will have to be part of the solution to distribute obligations within the household more equally, but other aspects will also need to be considered. In this regard, Klasen (2019) notes that there is no conclusive evidence on the impact of labour-saving household technologies and childcare services in the context of developing countries,[11] while the evidence from OECD countries suggests that both can have positive impacts (Cavalcanti & Tavares, 2008; Coen-Pirani et al., 2010; Gehringer & Klasen, 2017; Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2017).

2.1.2 Social stigmatisation of working women

Besides the time spent on care work, there is ample evidence that a woman's marital status also has a negative impact on her access to the labour market. Naturally, marriage – including the timing and the type of marital arrangement – is closely connected to fertility. Kleven et al. (2023) acknowledge this fact and calculate a marriage penalty. Their findings indicate that marriage penalties are particularly large in low- and middle-income countries in addition to child penalties, while there are some countries in SSA where both child and marriage penalties are very small (e.g., Rwanda). Additionally, there is a sizeable body of literature on the negative impact of marriage on female labour market inclusion in the MENA countries, as many women – including

10 Kleven (2022) links the extent of child penalties to gender norms based on subnational data from the US.

11 The Arab Gender Gap Report (UNESCWA, 2019, pp. 83-84) at least assesses the availability of early childhood education, showing that 45 per cent of female and 46 per cent of male children had been enrolled in 2018, with much higher rates in Gulf countries and Lebanon than in other Arab countries.

those highly skilled – never enter employment or leave employment due to marriage (Assaad et al., 2022). The descriptions in Santos Silva et al. (2023) point to the importance of later female marriage age, as it not only accompanies lower fertility, but also leads to smaller age differences between spouses and thus more egalitarian marriages, which ultimately supports higher FLFP. Similarly, more egalitarian family laws and divorce laws have an impact. For instance, the introduction of Islamic *Khul* (unilateral divorce rights for women) increased FLFP in a sample of 18 MENA countries (Hassani-Nezhad & Sjögren, 2014).

Much of the described negative discrimination of married women in terms of access to the labour market can be subsumed under the male breadwinner model, which points to the supplementary nature of female income in households. The prevalence of the male breadwinner norm differs considerably by country. Afrobarometer (2017) data shows, for instance, that in many African countries more than 60 per cent of the population, yet only 45 per cent in Senegal and 36 per cent in Tunisia, disagree with men receiving preferential access to jobs when these are scarce. In international comparison, the divergence is even larger, exposing clear majorities in MENA and South Asian countries for a man's natural "right to a job" (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2023, p. 6 based on World Value Survey, wave 7 (2017-2022)). Evans (2014) shows how the male breadwinner model emerged historically in Zambia, linking it to an imported Christian ideology and an economic climate that enabled men to financially provide for their families. While conservative marriage laws underscore the male breadwinner model in MENA (personal status laws are often guided by Islamic law granting prerogatives to the husband, see also WBL data in World Bank, 2023), so do social insurance laws like Egypt's Law 79 of 1975, which stipulates that retired public sector workers' unmarried daughters of any age are entitled to a pension, as long as they do not have an income of their own (Barsoum, 2019).

In some regions, the negative discrimination reflects a strong stigma against female employment in general – as a sign of her male relatives' inability to cover her living expenses – and certain forms of employment in particular. Klasen and Pieters (2015) document the presence of such a stigma in India, finding it to be one of the most important factors explaining the stagnation of FLFP there. Chamlou et al. (2008) find similar evidence in the MENA region. The stigma also relates to the type of employment, as well-educated women are often highly concentrated in white-collar services, such as health, education and public services (Klasen et al., 2021; sectoral segregation by gender will be further discussed in Section 2.3). In Jordan, over 90 per cent of relatively well-educated women work in these sectors, which suggests that the range of socially acceptable jobs is limited, putting severe constraints on bringing more women into the labour market, as the growth of these jobs is limited by population growth and size (Klasen, 2019).

Breaking down these strong barriers and opening up new opportunities for women in other parts of the economy will not be easy, as norms usually only change incrementally. In that regard, it is important to differentiate between gender-transformative and gender-sensitive approaches to social norms: many interventions do not transform norms towards more gender equity, but merely try to tackle the underlying symptoms and thus fail to address the root causes, leaving the detrimental norms in place (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2023).

2.1.3 Factors moderating the impact of norms

Certain factors moderate the degree to which gender norms affect women's access to the labour market. For instance, the socioeconomic status of a household plays an important role. Household income and income uncertainty are mostly negatively related to FLFP, yet this link appears to be context-specific (AlAzzawi & Hlasny, 2019) and becomes less relevant as countries grow richer (Klasen et al., 2021). Still, essentially confirming the first slump of the feminisation U hypothesis, many women in poor contexts engage in market work in order to make ends meet and often leave these undesirable jobs when they can afford to (Klasen, 2019;

Priebe, 2010).[12] While this exit from the labour market is sometimes a woman's deliberate decision (Zintl & Loewe, 2022) it is more often the result of social pressure, poor working conditions or the lack of opportunities for educated women, as noted above (Klasen, 2019). The weak labour market attachment of women and the supplementary nature of female income become particularly obvious in the strong counter-cyclical reactions, resulting in strong increases of FLFP in times of crises (Bhalotra, 2010; Bhalotra & Umaña-Aponte, 2010; Ghazalian, 2022; Priebe, 2010). In countries with a strong social stigma of female employment, Evans (2022) identifies an "honour-income trade-off", suggesting that FLFP only rises if its economic returns are large enough to compensate men's costs of defying the socially acceptable behaviour in terms of lost "honour".

Besides income, education is another important factor moderating the nature of social norms, as female education in general positively contributes to women's involvement in the labour market. Heath and Jayachandran (2018) argue that lately the female labour supply curve has shifted upwards, and the magnitude of the U-shape has diminished, because of policies on girls' education and skills training for women, as well as a sectoral shift from physical labour-intensive primary and secondary sectors to services. Yet, the magnitude of this link differs considerably across countries. Klasen et al. (2021) find linear increases of education and FLFP in some countries that often become weaker over time, but also more or less strong U-shape relationships. Klasen (2019) attributes the context-dependence to the differing nature and strength of social stigma as described above (Klasen et al., 2021; Rahman & Islam, 2013; Seneviratne, 2020). Thus, low FLFP rates can persist despite big increases in female education, especially in the MENA region.[13]

This expansion of women's education has often been driven not so much by returns in the labour market but is promoted either as an end in itself or as a means to potential returns in other markets, such as the marriage market (Klasen, 2019). For instance, in Egypt, rural women's return to education on the marriage market, estimated by bride price and future husband's wage, is much higher than on the labour market (Deng et al., 2023). Similarly, Krafft and Assaad (2020) demonstrate for Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia that the marriage market renders "queuing" for better job opportunities, for example, in the public sector, a reasonable strategy. Women, thus, stay unemployed for much longer and, often, they eventually remain out of the labour market altogether. Amer (2018) demonstrates that Jordanian women have a much longer school-to-work transition than men. Between 2010 and 2016, the push for higher FLFP seems to have won a pyros victory: Jordanian women's economic inactivity decreased, yet their unemployment rate rose in parallel, meaning that more women were actively searching for a job (disconcertingly, the picture for men was exactly the reverse with rising inactivity (Amer, 2018)).

Favouritism may be another constraining factor for the translation of educational attainment into labour market entry. There is a well-established body of literature on patron-client relationships and favouritism based on political ties, tribal relationships or personal relations (*wasta* in Arabic) in the MENA region (e.g., Berger et al., 2015; Loewe et al., 2008; Ruiz de Elvira et al., 2019), as well as a growing body of literature on preferential access to education due to ethnic and regional ties in SSA, which also extends to labour markets and employment (Asatryan et al., 2021; Franck & Rainer, 2012; Kramon & Posner, 2016). Albeit the available literature in MENA mostly focusses on men, it clearly demonstrates the pervasive influence of patronage on recruitment decisions and career outcomes (e.g., for the Jordanian banking sector, see Ali et al., 2017; for five MENA countries, see Baranik & Wright, 2018; for MENA managers, see Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011).

12 Subsection 2.2 will go into more detail on the implications of economic necessity.

13 As detailed by the Global Gender Gap report, MENA has closed the educational attainment gender gap by 94.2 per cent, while SSA, ranking last of all world regions, has closed it by only 84.5 per cent (WEF, 2021, pp. 26, 28).

Not only has labour market inclusion been limited and much slower for women than for men, also the terms and conditions of work arrangements lag behind those of men. This development is captured well by the transition to wage work, which will be discussed in the following subsection.

2.2 Emergence of firms: bringing women into (more) decent work

This section focusses on barriers to female employment that affect the type of employment, which is strongly related to the quality dimension. This is of particular relevance for SSA countries, as in MENA much fewer women decide to take on vulnerable jobs because of the associated social stigma. Weak labour demand by the private sector and employer discrimination by gender also plays a role in the lack of more decent employment.

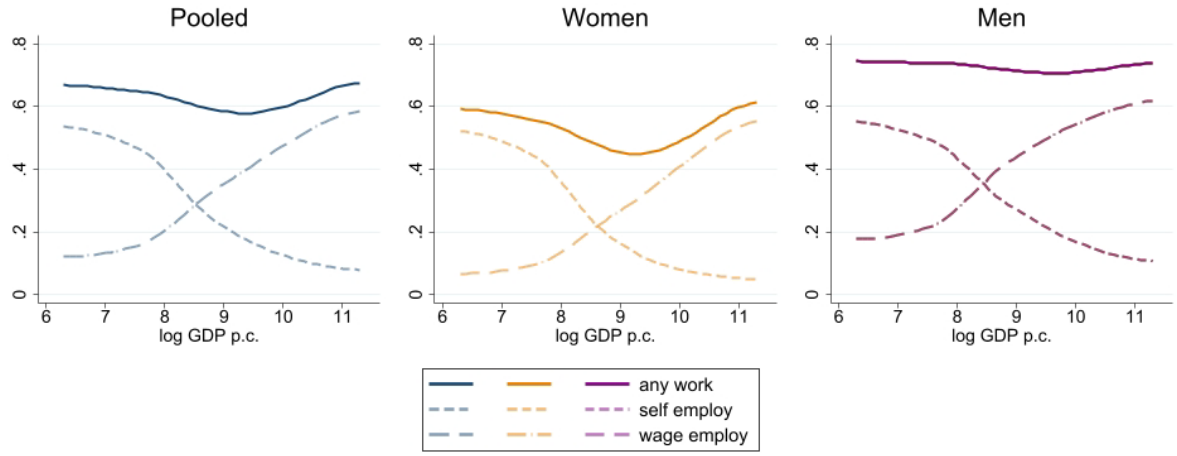
The second major transition that takes place in the labour market according to Bandiera et al. (2022a) concerns the employment status, as workers move out of self-employment and into wage jobs. While there is also wage employment in the often-oversaturated public sectors, the growth of wage jobs usually, and in the long run, correlates with the emergence of private firms. Figure 3 indicates that this transition progresses rather slowly at low-income levels and then accelerates at middle-income, while fading out at high-income levels. This suggests that the transitions happen successively, with the first transition typically starting before the second transition in most countries.[14] The evidence also highlights that developed economies are not based on an agglomeration of many small firms, but that there is considerable consolidation happening among businesses, meaning that medium- and large-size firms generate a considerable share of employment. Other researchers highlighted that urbanisation plays a large role in this process,[15] since the transition towards wage employment is usually kick-started in urban areas and in the manufacturing and service sectors (Bandiera et al., 2022a), but ultimately extends to rural areas and the agricultural sector.

Bandiera et al. (2022a) show that, analogous to the first transition, men transition slightly before women (see Figure 3) and wealthy households before poorer ones. In both the SSA and the MENA regions, the second transition appears to take off much later for women, as the gradient of the self-employment graph is flat for much longer and wage employment only becomes the dominant form of employment much later (see Figure 4).

14 In many low-income countries in SSA, the second transition is still in its infancy and proceeds alongside other transformations, such as the sectoral shift from agriculture to industry and services and the process of urbanisation.

15 In fact, all three transitions are characterised by increasing urbanisation, as markets (Section 2.1), firms (2.2) as well as more specialised occupations (2.3) thrive in urban centres. This is why the World Bank's upcoming flagship report (World Bank, forthcoming) considers urbanisation as a separate, fourth process. We abstain from doing so, not least because technological developments and increasing digitalisation counter this development and uncouple economic activity from set markets (e.g., through e-commerce) and from work done in brick-and-mortar factories and firm premises (e.g., online labour and mobile working arrangements).

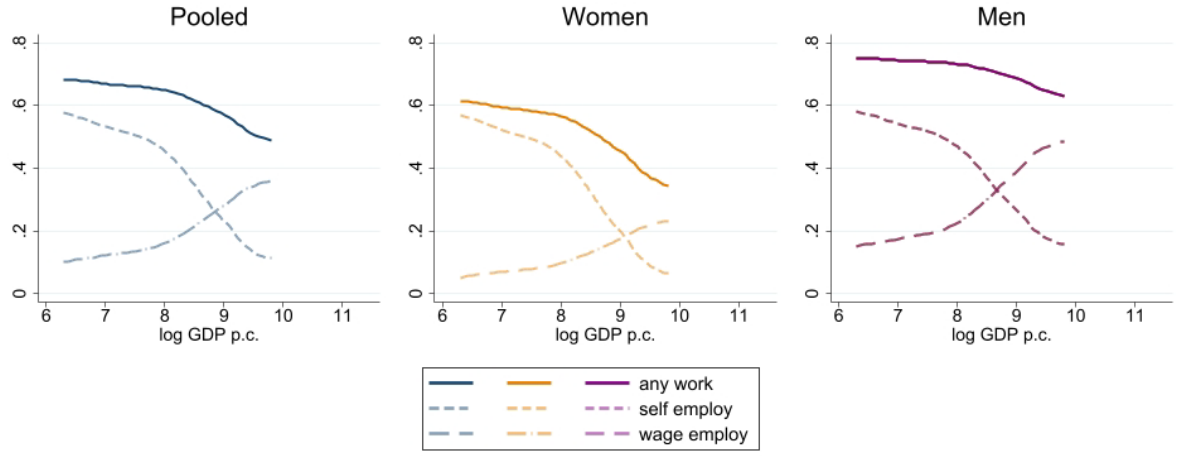
Figure 3: Self- and wage employment against log GDP per capita by gender



Notes: The data is from Jobs of the World Database (JWD) (Bandiera & Elsayed, 2023), which consists of macro-level indicators aggregated from 358 micro-level surveys (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) and Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS)) in 115 countries between 1990 and 2019.

Source: Reproduction of Figure 11 in Bandiera et al. (2022a, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY)

Figure 4: Self- and wage employment against log GDP per capita by gender (SSA and MENA countries only)



Notes: The data is from 45 countries: 41 SSA countries (167 micro-level surveys) and only four MENA countries (seven surveys).

Source: Authors, based on Bandiera et al. (2022a)

The transition from self-employment to wage labour usually means a shift from vulnerable to more formal and stable work arrangements, including access to benefits and social protection such as maternity leave. The second transition is thus closely connected to the interrelated debates on formality and quality of employment. Formal employment is usually associated with having a written work contract issued by a firm registered with the respective state authorities. Yet, there is no comprehensive definition of formality, and the quantitative measurement is difficult, as data lacks comparability across countries. Bandiera et al. (2022a) abstain from further exploring this aspect since enforcement of firm regulations and labour laws differ significantly across countries, so that formality would be more indicative of state capacity than of the actual organisation of labour. Quality of employment meanwhile has multiple dimensions, such as its remuneration, security, working conditions and workers' rights. ILO's definition of

decent work (e.g., Seiffarth et al., 2023) comprises opportunities for work that deliver fair income, security in the workplace and social protection, workers' representation and opportunities for personal development. Thus, it is easier to identify the absence of decent work, that is, vulnerable employment, which ILO defines as family-contributing and own-account workers.[16] New efforts to measure quality of employment in a multidimensional way[17] show that MENA countries fare poorly, with declining quality of employment in Egypt (Sehnbruch et al., forthcoming). Bandiera et al. (2022a) do not concern themselves intensively with the decency dimension, their main point is that the transition towards wage employment is a necessary step, as there are no examples of high-income countries in which the majority of workers are engaged in self-employment. Thus, while not all wage employment is necessarily decent, many of the characteristics of decency mentioned above are also connected to the emergence of wage employment, generally making wage employment *more* decent than much of the existing self-employment.

The gender gap in vulnerable employment, for example, the difference in the share of vulnerable employment between genders, is plotted against income level in Figure 5. This graph suggests that the gap begins to close with rising income and essentially disappears in high-income countries, while there is again considerable heterogeneity across countries. There is a considerable negative gender gap in low-income countries, most of them in SSA, showing that women are particularly affected by vulnerable employment. In contrast, and at first sight surprisingly, gender gaps in some of the MENA countries are positive, which indicates more men in vulnerable employment. This fits the narrative presented in Section 2.1, as in many MENA countries women would rather voluntarily stay outside the labour force than accept informal jobs, and is further corroborated by the above-mentioned literature, indicating better job quality for women in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia than for men (Frontenaud, 2023; Sehnbruch et al., forthcoming). Social norms purport that only wage jobs, especially those in the public sector, are appropriate for women. These norms are especially strong in the Middle Eastern countries (*Mashreq*) of the region, while in North African countries (*Maghreb*), especially Morocco and Egypt, more women are willing to work informally, for example, in agriculture.

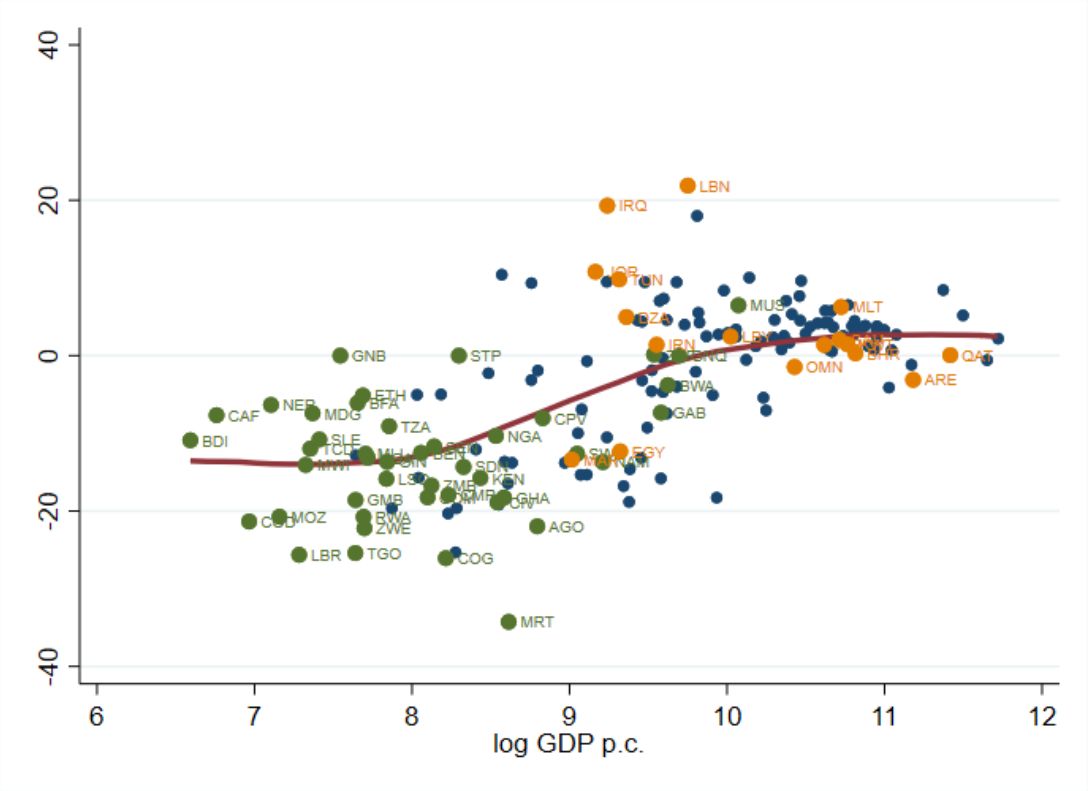
The literature on job quality and vulnerable employment by gender in developing countries is only slowly evolving. In Lo Bue et al.'s (2022) descriptive assessment on gender gaps in vulnerable employment, women are more likely to be in vulnerable employment, and the incidence of vulnerable employment and its gender gap is particularly large in SSA and in their sample of MENA countries[18]. Similarly to the above assessment of trends in the first transition (see Klasen, 2019, and Klasen et al., 2021, cited in Section 2.1), Lo Bue et al. (2022) find that improvements in education and reduced fertility are also the main drivers of the relative reduction in vulnerable employment among women over the past two decades. Their decomposition of gender gaps and changes over time also suggests that the room for a further decline in the gender gap is closing, as differences in supply-side characteristics cannot explain the current remaining gap. The only factor having a sizable impact on the current gap is the sectoral segregation (see Section 2.3).

16 Gindling and Newhouse (2014) show that this definition based on employment status relates quite well to the quality of employment in terms of outcomes, as it can also be used to rank workers' socioeconomic status, with employers and wage employees being better off than family-contributing and own-account workers, that is, those defined by ILO as vulnerably employed.

17 Sehnbruch et al. (2020; forthcoming) focus on the categories of income, job security/employment stability and employment conditions while, slightly differently, Frontenaud (2023) suggests access to job benefits, job stability and working conditions.

18 Their restricted MENA sample includes Morocco and Egypt (in addition to Jordan, Syria and Tunisia), which are the only MENA countries in Figure 5 above that witness a considerable negative gender gap in vulnerable employment.

Figure 5: Gender gap in vulnerable employment against log GDP per capita in 2019



Notes: These are ILO-modelled estimates, based on data for 170 countries in 2019. SSA countries are shown in green, MENA countries in orange.

Source: Authors' calculation and visualisation.

Lo Bue et al. (2022) further indicate that legal discrimination in the areas of marriage, parenthood, inheritance and business registration are important determinants of the gender gap in vulnerable employment. While this study yields some interesting preliminary insights, it also shows the need for further research on this topic and a more comprehensive measurement of job quality, as current measurements including those by ILO are rather simplistic.

In most MENA countries, legal barriers for women also persist in the fields of inheritance law, access to credit and entitlement to pensions as well as marriage and parenthood law. Despite recent reforms, MENA is globally the region with the lowest score in the Women, Business and the Law (WBL) survey, with better scores in the North African subregion than in the Gulf and, particularly, in the Middle East (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2023; overview in Islam et al., 2022, p. 132). Many countries in SSA have been able to catch up in terms of legal gender equality in the past two decades, and the average WBL score puts SSA in the middle of the cross-continent distribution. However, this average masks a large variance within the continent and women are still considerably disadvantaged in the areas of entrepreneurship, marriage and mobility. Another caveat is that some of the positive reforms, especially those pertaining to employment, often do not reflect women's actual realities due to the widespread informality of their work engagements (Muñoz Boudet et al., 2023). In any case, gender-equal reforms often exist only on paper and are not sufficiently implemented if the rule of law and judicial systems are weak.

Regarding the delay in the transition to more decent wage work for women in both SSA and the MENA regions, two aspects need to be discussed in more detail: (1) the impact of economic necessity, which leads to "necessity entrepreneurs" and a higher willingness to accept poor working conditions and (2) a general lack of more decent wage work due to insufficient formal job creation, particularly in the private sector. The following subsections discuss these aspects.

Box 1: Intersectionality: female youth and migrant women on the labour market

Women can be marginalised due to a combination of their individual characteristics such as age, sexual orientation, ethnic or religious identity, socioeconomic background or rural origin. For such discrimination due to multiple reasons, the term intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is widely used in feminist theory. The impact of intersectionality on labour market outcomes is, however, highly context-dependent: young age or migratory background can either be a challenge adding to discrimination and exclusion or serve as an important opportunity for women's empowerment.

Young women

Young job seekers often face similar barriers to employment as women and, at the intersection, young women are particularly affected. Vulnerabilities can be sticky, if school-to-work transitions are protracted and those not in employment, education, or training (NEET) become long-term unemployed; or if youth in an informal first job never transition into formal sector employment (AlAzzawi & Hlasny, 2018; Paciello & Pioppi, 2021). Throughout MENA, youth and graduate unemployment rates are high and, on average, one-third of youth are NEET (Islam et al., 2022, p. 8). In MENA, many newly issued work contracts in the public sector come with worse working conditions than old contracts, especially if labour market insiders like trade unionists protect their privileges (Paciello & Pioppi, 2021). In contexts with deficient job creation but a strong male breadwinner model, young men often spend years of their life in "waithood" (Singerman, 2007, 2021) until they have the financial means to start families of their own. Since many of the young men's life decisions depend on finding a well-paid job, they are more ambitious and flexible in their job search than young women. In SSA, the lack of access to wage employment is particularly apparent among young adults; while much of this can be explained by the relatively lower income levels in SSA, the transition towards wage employment is not driven by young adults, like it is in other low- and middle-income countries (Bandiera et al. 2022b).

Female refugees and migrants

Migratory experience has an ambiguous effect on female labour market outcomes. On the one hand, a high share of migrant women enters the labour force as they are either pushed by economic needs or attracted by new opportunities or both. Through their migratory experience, women may be able to break free from established social norms and social control and thus gain autonomy and self-esteem (Fleury, 2016) or more financial independence through entrepreneurial activities (Bello-Bravo, 2015). Both economic need and opportunity play a role for refugee women (on Syrian refugee women in Jordan, see Lenner & Turner, 2019, or Zintl & Loewe, 2022; on FLFP in conflict-affected MENA countries, see Ghazalian, 2022). On the other hand, female migrants' access to quality employment can be particularly difficult. For instance, refugee women face a double vulnerability on the labour market, being disadvantaged both as women and as refugees. Domestic workers, who globally make up an immense percentage of female employees (34.6 per cent in the Arab States, 15.8 per cent in Africa (Seiffarth et al., 2023, p. 4)), often face dire working conditions. They work almost exclusively in informal employment (99.7 per cent in the Arab States and 91.6 per cent in Africa (ILO, 2023, p. 10)) and are often dependent on intermediaries or human traffickers, and are particularly vulnerable to occupational safety and health risks, as well as harassment and violence. Such is the case for Asian nannies coming to the MENA region, while outward migration and intra-Arab labour migration to the segregated Gulf labour markets (e.g., Blaydes, 2023; Hertog, 2022) is predominantly a male phenomenon. Migration also has indirect effects on female labour market inclusion. For example, when a woman stays behind to care for children and aging parents, she will live off her husband's remittances and be further deprived of her own labour market aspirations (for Egypt, see Binzel & Assaad, 2011; for Ghana, see Asiedu & Chimbar, 2020).

2.2.1 Economic necessity: vulnerable employment and necessity entrepreneurs

As has been mentioned already, in low-income settings many women enter the labour market and accept poorer working conditions out of economic necessity, as they need to contribute to the family income.[19] However, due to the various constraints introduced above, women's employment choices are also severely restricted. Social stigma and restrictive norms directly prevent women from entering certain sectors and occupations. Due to their household obligations in their role as mother and wife they are mostly restricted to more flexible and casual work arrangements that are compatible with these obligations, while some firms are also reluctant to recruit women, as they fear frequent absences because of these obligations. This is why women often choose to be self-employed. Here it is important to differentiate between productive entrepreneurship and what is described in the literature as "necessity entrepreneurs", as both types are systematically different in terms of characteristics and the success of their business (Schoar, 2010). The literature generally finds that female-run businesses tend to perform worse economically, in terms of size, profits, growth and closure rates (for evidence from MENA, see El-Hamidi, 2011; for SSA, see Aterido & Hallward-Driemeier, 2011, and Bardasi et al., 2011).[20] While it is beyond the scope of this paper to review the vast literature on entrepreneurship in developing countries, for our purposes it is important to understand why women are significantly over-represented in the large pool of rather unproductive entrepreneurs.

Carranza et al. (2018) identify four drivers of differences in the performance of female entrepreneurs: motivation, endowments, and external and internal constraints. First, women differ in terms of motivation, as they are more likely to be "pushed" into entrepreneurship due to the lack of better opportunities in wage employment (Moore & Buttner, 1997). Additionally, their motivation and goals are more often influenced by their life circumstances, and they tend to prefer a "slow and steady" business, which might be explained by their risk aversion, less competitiveness and limited time commitment (Eckel & Grossman, 2008; Morris et al., 2006; Reynolds & Renzulli, 2005). Second, women are more often disadvantaged regarding endowments, which extends to the accumulation of assets, education, skills and general business experience, but also their networks and social capital (McKenzie & Puerto, 2021). Poor financial inclusion is a case in point; for instance, in the MENA region, about two-thirds of women in the Gulf countries, but not even one-third of women in the Middle East subregion, have access to bank accounts (Assi & Marcati, 2020, p. 25). The third driver is external constraints, which comprise most notably of discrimination in the legal system (Ashraf et al., 2019; Muñoz Boudet et al., 2023) or social norms, which translates to lacking access to external finances (Banerjee et al., 2015; Cai & Szeidl, 2022; De Mel et al., 2008), restrictions in sectoral choice and care responsibilities. These constraints are also linked to their lack of endowments. Fourth, women's entrepreneurial activity is subject to internal constraints, such as low self-confidence and self-perception, reluctance to seek external finances and the misperception of business opportunities and environment, which again relates to their lack of endowments. The relation between external and internal constraints becomes obvious in women's limited *access to credit* due to (external) discrimination but also (internal) self-selection (for Tunisia, see Adair & Berguiga, 2023). The importance of each of these four drivers differs on a case-by-case basis,

19 And, vice versa: women in vulnerable employment are more likely to exit the labour market, and women's businesses are also more prone to shocks (Bardasi et al., 2011; El-Hamidi, 2011). Precarious employment and unpaid care responsibilities rendered public responses to the COVID-19 pandemic gender-insensitive, especially in fragile settings like the Occupied Palestinian Territories (AbuMezied & Sawafta, 2022).

20 However, as Carranza et al. (2018) point out, women often evaluate their business success according to non-economic outcomes, such as self-empowerment, status in the community, etc., which also need to be considered.

and their specific impact on outcomes of women entrepreneurs needs to be identified, in order to address them by appropriate policies.

As Schoar (2010) points out, so far, the evidence suggests that it is rather difficult to transform "necessity entrepreneurs" into productive entrepreneurs even when effectively addressing important bottlenecks to their growth. Therefore, it will be important to provide these women with opportunities to leave self-employment by creating more wage employment, which will be the next aspect we turn to.

2.2.2 Insufficient private sector job growth and employer discrimination

Bandiera et al. (2022a) note that the transition to wage employment is closely connected to the emergence and growth of firms, but, like in many other low- and middle-income countries, this process is greatly hampered in SSA and MENA countries. A large body of literature has studied challenges for private sector development and the numerous constraints small firms face.

In both regions, few firms are large enough to create much wage employment. Particularly in SSA, very small firms abound (Hsieh & Olken, 2014) and both regions are characterised by a split between numerous small firms and very few large firms, entailing a discussion of economic conditions detrimental to firm growth and a "missing middle" (Assaad & Rana, 2019; Hsieh & Olken, 2014; Teal, 2023; Tybout, 2014). The reasons for this development are still not well understood. Based on a study from Ghana, Hardy et al. (2023) blame informational frictions, arguing that small firms would seek to benefit from consolidation if they learnt about other business owners' willingness to consolidate. Many authors point to political economy factors, leading to economic conditions detrimental to firm growth, such as lacking competition, a strong legacy of the public sector and state-owned enterprises and cronyism (particularly in MENA; see for instance Diwan et al. (2019)). This links with theories about rentier state mentality (e.g., Beblawi & Luciani, 2015; Hertog, 2020), the resource curse (e.g., Ross, 1999), and poor political settlements, leading to misguided industrial policies (e.g., Whitfield et al., 2017).

Under these conditions, labour competition for the few existing formal private sector jobs is high, and female job seekers face structural disadvantages competing for the available more decent work because, as was mentioned, private firms are often reluctant to hire women. Furthermore, a business culture rewarding seniority and attendance over performance hampers women's career development.

Especially in patriarchal or conservative contexts, like MENA, recruitment decisions in firms can be influenced by the stereotype of male breadwinners and female caregivers. Firms may want to avoid additional costs that arise once female employees request particular arrangements in terms of working hours and (un)paid leave, which are not needed by equally qualified male applicants. Many of the barriers to women's employment mentioned in other sections – such as recruitment decisions based on favouritism within mostly male networks (see Section 2.1.3), or lack of nurseries and suitable mobility options (see below; Diab & Hindy, 2022) – reinforce the disincentive to hire women. Employer discrimination against women is underlined by poor skills utilisation particularly for young women (for five MENA countries, see Arayssi et al., 2023) and by quick turnover and low retention rates (e.g., Al Araj & Bassaid, 2020, for Jordan). Kaasolu et al. (2019) find high labour demand bottlenecks for more highly educated Jordanian women and make employer discrimination visible as an unexplained gender wage gap, which is larger than the actual gender wage gap due to indirect, non-observable factors. Overall, demand-side labour barriers for women are less studied than supply-side barriers (e.g., Gentile et al., 2023) and the interplay between these two categories is not always clear.

With less discrimination by gender and better working conditions in the public sector, it is unsurprising that women have a strong preference to seek employment there (for MENA, see Assaad et al., 2020; Barsoum, 2021; Barsoum & Abdalla 2020), which leads to a discussion of

female- versus male-dominated sectors and occupational segregation by gender in the next section.

2.3 Increasing jobs variety: bringing women into more specialised occupations

Bandiera et al. (2022a) propose a third transition once most employment takes place within firms in the form of wage work. In their sample,[21] the analysis of occupation classifications suggests a positive relationship between a country's income level and the number of different occupations available. With the availability of more advanced technologies, more specialised education and higher productivity due to better matching of workers' skills and tasks, the concentration of labour in larger firms creates more opportunities for division of labour, leading to more specialisation and thus a growing occupational variety. Thus, while a certain division of labour already appears during earlier transitions, this specialisation quickens with growing firm size.[22] Bandiera et al. (2022a) note that the increasing degree of specialisation again goes along with increasing urbanisation and a larger variety of jobs available in cities.

Though this transition is more visible in more advanced economies, growing occupational variety is also highly relevant for our discussion on women's employment in MENA and SSA, because it does not appear to be gender-neutral, but contributes to gender segregation. Economic development per se does not result in less gender segregation in the labour market, as more recent evidence rather suggests that some of the newly emerging jobs are taken up predominantly by men, while other jobs are more often taken up by women (Bandiera et al., 2022a). This observation is in line with the findings of Borrowman and Klasen (2020) and the narrative in World Bank (2011) and largely rebuts some neoclassical arguments that gender segregation mostly stems from differences in skill investments and discriminatory recruitment practices (Becker, 1971, 1998), as these would suggest that segregation reduces as economic development progresses. However, other arguments based on gender differences in preferences and behaviours are still compatible with these results (Bertrand, 2011; Croson & Gneezy, 2009). The same holds true for the importance of persisting social norms and rigid hierarchies in labour markets as put forward in institutionalist and feminist economics theories (Elson, 1999; Klasen, 2019).

Occupational segregation by gender becomes entrenched as economic development unfolds and occupational variety increases, even though literature on the misallocation of labour suggests that there are costs of the gendered division of work both for firms and for society (Ashraf et al., 2022; Bandiera et al., 2022a; Hsieh et al., 2019). In fact, while occupational segregation accelerates with the third transition, it begins during the earlier transitions. Occupational segregation, thus, is a factor that explains why each of the three transitions, but especially the third transition, happens at a slower pace for women.

Already in the first transition, social norms and stigmatisation give rise to occupational segregation, for instance, if particular economic activities or workplaces are considered "inappropriate" for women. Especially in the MENA region, it is considered unsuitable for women to work in public spaces or in physically demanding jobs (e.g., Zintl & Loewe, 2022) or if there is no "safe" means of transport for commuting to/from work (Diab & Hindy, 2022). While personal preferences on female-only vs. mixed-gender work teams differ (e.g., Zintl & Loewe, 2022), social expectations tend to discourage women from working in mixed-gender workplaces out of

21 Due to data limitations, their analysis only uses a restricted sample of 44 countries, of which 13 are in SSA and four in the MENA region, making the results less fitting to our regional focus.

22 While the distinction is not always clear cut, singling out a third transition is helpful to compare between labour market barriers connected to specific occupations.

fear of harassment (e.g., Felicio & Gauri, 2018, for Jordan). Barnett et al. (2021) found that Jordanian women did not apply to jobs in mixed-sex workplaces, even if income was higher. Such restrictions disproportionately limit female employment opportunities because “suitable” sectors (e.g., white-collar services in the public sector) tend to grow much more slowly, or are downsized due to austerity measures (Assaad, 2014; Klasen, 2019). In Egypt, for example, IMF-mandated reforms prioritised capital intensive and largely male-dominated sectors (Diab & Hindy, 2022).

In the second transition, women have less access to more decent wage work as they require more flexible work arrangements (see above), giving again rise to occupational segregation. They are often overrepresented in fields with poorer working conditions and fewer benefits such as social protection (World Bank, 2011; similarly, Seguino & Braunstein, 2019, and Arora et al., 2023, or, as detailed above, Borrowman & Klasen, 2020, and Lo Bue et al., 2022). Seeking jobs that are more compatible with their care responsibilities relegates women to occupations with fewer career development opportunities, which allow for work interruptions like maternal leave (Fang & Moro, 2011). Occupational segregation by gender is also connected to gender wage gaps, as shown by evidence, albeit mostly from developed countries (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Simón, 2012).

As noted, increasing specialisation and division of labour has so far mostly underlined and aggravated women’s limited access to (more decent) jobs (third transition). Occupational segregation worsens when women lack access to education and specialised skills, both in terms of quantity (especially SSA) and quality of education. Return to education is low in MENA (though slightly higher for women, probably due to their preference for working in the public sector) (Tzannatos et al., 2016). Future growth sectors might also open new entrepreneurship and employment opportunities for women, yet the noted social norms continue to restrict access. For instance, green and digital jobs could potentially be competitive “islands of efficiency” for female job seekers with more performance-based hiring decisions that leave gender stereotypes behind. Yet, also in these fields, social norms to first and foremost provide jobs for “male breadwinners” may continue to slow the removal of barriers for women’s labour inclusion and discourage women from working in their learnt profession. As re-skilling and upskilling the work force in digital or green skills is imperative, this contradictory prospect needs to be solved.

For female employment, there are two avenues to deal with occupational segregation by gender: either by addressing social norms that restrict women’s access to male-dominated sectors, or by improving and developing opportunities in the already female-dominated sectors. Klasen (2019) notes that further increasing female domination in their preferred sectors, which is what has happened in much of Latin America and Scandinavia, is not necessarily incompatible with high FLFP (Klasen, 2019). However, in countries with a general scarcity of such (often public sector) jobs, employment creation in other, male-dominated sectors might be a more advisable strategy. Conclusive evidence on these issues is still scarce and warrants more research.

Table 1: Labour market transitions and barriers to work for women in MENA and SSA

Labour market transition (Bandiera et al., 2022a)	**Labour market barriers and conditions for women**		
	Across regions	**Specific for MENA**	**Specific for SSA**
(1) From unpaid to paid labour	Prevailing social norms delay transition, deny access to labour market: - time constraints due to household obligations - preferential access for males due to breadwinner norm	Few women active in labour market Social norms are very restrictive: - time needs for care work hardly negotiable - social stigma of working outside home, favouring female seclusion - returns to education on marriage market, not labour market - *individual empowerment* as the main challenge	Many women active in labour market Social norms are less restrictive: - time constraints underpinned by slow fertility transition, but - countered by economic necessity that pushes women into labour force - predominantly unrecorded "casual work" or as "necessity entrepreneurs" leading to considerable double burden
		Gender-transformative change would enable access	Gender-sensitive change would stabilise access and make it more gainful
(2) From self-employment to wage employment	Structural disadvantage for women: - time constraints curb female education and career progress - institutional and employer discrimination	Relatively high share of women in wage employment but very low absolute number: - social stigmatisation urges women to seek white-collar wage jobs, particularly in public sector	Very few women in (more) decent wage employment: - male preference disadvantages women in competition for few wage jobs - urgent need for income (*poverty reduction*), time constraints prevent access to less flexible wage jobs
(3) Specialisation and expansion of occupations	Occupational segregation by gender: - Female-/male-dominated occupations exhibit different working conditions and wage levels (gender pay gap) > Need for *collective empowerment*	Female-dominated occupations entrenched by social norms, e.g., - appropriate workplace - appropriate work tasks - safe transportation for women	Female-dominated occupations remain important - due to time and skills constraints - less due to specific workplace or tasks
		- Delays in 1st (MENA) and 2nd (SSA) transitions deprive basis to kick-start 3rd transition	
		Gender-transformative change would enable fair recognition of occupations and overcome the split in female- and male-dominated fields.	

Source: Authors

3 Conclusions

We have proposed to use Bandiera et al.'s (2022a) framework of three transitions of labour in the development process in order to systematise and analyse barriers to women's employment in the MENA and SSA regions. As summarised in Table 1, we found that while women are disadvantaged in all three transitions and their labour market outcomes are worse than that of the total workforce, the patterns differ by region. Social norms and traditional gender roles are the most important cause for this deviation as they play out differently in different contexts and interact with other structural labour market deficiencies, such as weak private sector development.

Whether or not women participate in the labour force – Bandiera et al.'s (2022a) first transition to paid work – is particularly constrained by social norms and private commitments, such as care work and other household chores. Thus, while factors like income (as the feminisation U hypothesis proposed) and women's education take the role of moderators, FLFP is often shaped by traditional norms and social policies that are connected to, but go beyond, fertility rates. Social norms also affect women's motivation to work and help explain why FLFP is so low in regions like MENA (despite comparatively high female education). While there is some evidence that the norms environment in some African countries is less restrictive, economic necessity plays a much greater role, countering some of the labour-restricting effects of social norms.

Whether women are in more vulnerable self-employment or in more decent wage work – as described in Bandiera et al.'s (2022a) second transition to wage work – mainly hinges on two factors: first, the urgency and economic necessity for them to find a job quickly and, second, labour demand by the formal sector, which is closely related to the emergence and growth of private firms. The first question of economic urgency is particularly relevant for women in SSA as well as for female work migrants and domestic workers elsewhere. These women already joined the work force (somehow coping with the challenges of the first transition) yet had no time to search for more *decent* work. The second question of weak private sector development and insufficient job creation affects both our regions of interests yet leads to a high share of vulnerable female employment in SSA and to vulnerable male employment and low FLFP in MENA.

Thus, for the first two transitions, we find that specific barriers to female employment are powerful enough to affect how quickly they follow on to each other. While the first transition is in general particularly relevant for low-income countries, for women it is restrained mainly in the (mostly middle-income) MENA countries struggling with extremely low FLFP – in fact, for most women in MENA both transitions tend to be conflated into one: only if they are able to enter (more) decent wage employment do they take up paid labour at all. Vice versa, the second transition to more decent wage work should be relevant for middle-income countries, but it plays a much larger role for women in the (low- or lower-middle-income) SSA countries largely affected by informal sector work. This reverse priority is due to the region-specific interplay between economic pressure to work (higher in SSA) and restrictive social norms (more severe in MENA). Or – to take up the three underlying reasons for women's labour market inclusion mentioned in the introduction – *poverty reduction* is relatively more important in SSA, while in MENA, women's *individual empowerment* is more of a challenge. Our findings, therefore, highlight that economic returns need to offset potential reputational loss in societies where (some forms of) female employment contradicts social norms – what Evans calls the "honour-income trade-off" (2022).

Bandiera et al.'s (2022a) third transition to occupational variety, which should be particularly relevant for high-income countries with larger economic diversification, highlights the difficulties countries (irrespective of their current economic development) will face if they cannot tap into all their human resources to best navigate a competitive global economy. This shows that most of the already identified barriers to female employment culminate in occupational segregation

by gender. Women tend to continue working in traditionally female-dominated sectors – in MENA, this occupational segregation is strong because of gender norms around appropriate workplace and tasks or transportation, while this link is less pronounced in SSA. Occupational segregation is, therefore, one of the decisive bottlenecks to be tackled, as countries seek to identify competitive sectors, including growth sectors like digital and green economy, to spur their economic development and wealth of their populations. In other words, female labour market inclusion eventually serves for *collective empowerment* of societies – the third reason mentioned in the introduction.

This paper outlined barriers to female labour market inclusion and their relative importance in all three labour transitions in different contexts. As these barriers to a large degree are connected to gender norms, future research should (i) gather more data on how social norms affect women's labour market decisions in different social contexts, for example, in the form of better time-use and perception surveys and (ii) assess the effectiveness, sustainability and scalability of social norm interventions. In particular, the effects of different gender-sensitive versus gender-transformative approaches should be studied. This includes the question of whether enhancing work conditions within female-dominated sectors or whether transcending occupational segregation into female- and male-dominated sectors in order to build new sectors with fair employment opportunities for both genders has stronger effects on female labour market outcomes.

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