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Explaining the persistence of the Mediterranean Paradox : Towards more inclusive societies and efficient policy-making in gender equality issues

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in collaboration with :



1. Summary

This policy brief presents some preliminary findings of a recently launched assessment of existing policy measures regarding women empowerment issues in the South Mediterranean region. In order to explain the persistence of numerous gender gaps, I examine the reasons behind the inefficiency of national policies regarding gender equality, by comparing the wanted effects of implemented legal measures with the latest state of play in terms of gender issues in the different countries of the region.

First, the 'Mediterranean Paradox' (Assaad et al., 2018) could be explained by the existence of structural obstacles, crucial to overcome: Multi-layered gender structural inequalities exist in the region and are self-reinforced in a vicious cycle induced by unconscious biasness, social pressures, misinterpreted social and cultural norms and power discrimination. Second, the brief will show that punctual uncoordinated measures explain some of the persistence in gender gaps, mostly due to the lack of collaboration between stakeholders and of true political will to prioritize gender equality issue and deconstruct social norms and stereotypes. This policy brief also seeks to provide preliminary ideas to achieve a more comprehensive and inclusive policy-making on these issues. Combatting unconscious biases and policy inefficiency goes through increasing the outreach of female success stories, mentoring, promoting collaboration between stakeholders and embedding women empowerment in public-private partnerships.

2. Introduction

The Mediterranean region has particular trends in gender gaps and their evolution. The specialised literature on the region shows a significant paradox, the **Mediterranean Paradox** (idem, 2018). On the one hand, female educational attainments have improved drastically. We note a reversal of the gender gap in education in countries such as Turkey and Lebanon and a closing of this gap for the region in general (World Economic Forum, 2016). On the other hand, women struggle to find a place in the labour market. Female labour force participation rates remain stagnant and lower than in other developing countries. In the South Med countries, female economic participation stands at 22% while the global average is at 46% (World Bank, 2017). Female joining the labour markets adds to the increasing unemployment or low value-added

jobs. It thus seems like women's participation in the labour market in the region is constrained by other factors than access to education (Sidlo et al., 2017).

Many studies have addressed this issue and have identified different other variables that affect the female participation in the labour markets. This goes from family and labour codes not providing gender equality to physical constraints such as the lack of affordable and safe transportation that women could use to commute to work (Smits, 2007). It also includes unconscious biases and stereotypes that are accepted and are fuelled by misinterpretations of traditions and social norms, reinforcing gender inequalities in the society (Chamlou et al., 2011).

Yet, while multiple women's empowerment programmes have already been implemented in some countries, they seem to have a small impact due to the scale of the gap and the quality of these women's integration initiatives. Hence, this policy brief seeks to shed some light on these policy-making inefficiencies and to provide preliminary recommendations that can help alleviate them. Clearly, increasing the efficiency of gender equality policy-making would improve the situation of women in multiple other contexts and eliminate the vicious circle women face that starts with poor household bargaining power.

3. Approaches and Results

Women are essential in achieving sustainable development and improving resource allocation in society. According to the United Nations Development Program, "achieving gender equality in educational attainment and labour force participation by 2030 could raise global GDP by 3.6 percent and reduce the share of the global population living in extreme poverty by 0.5 percentage points" (Gettu, 2018). If women's labour market participation equalled that of men in the MENA region, "the regional GDP could rise by as much as 47% over the next decade" which is the equivalent of an "economic impact of around €490 billion annually" (Union for the Mediterranean, 2018).

Therefore, a first question to ask is:

Has the situation of women in the South Mediterranean region been improving in terms of concrete empowerment and economic inclusion?

With the wave of insurgence across the Middle East, people are calling for more egalitarian societies, insinuating that equality of all kinds is seen as a means of empowering the whole society. Unfortunately, the analysis of the Gender Quotas Database (2014) shows that the rates of female economic participation in these countries did not increase significantly and the mentalities remain sceptical about a full empowerment of women in the region, in spite of the implementation of gender quotas [1] in national politics or managerial boards of private companies.

This leads us to the second main question of this research:

Why is the situation of women not improving concretely despite the measures adopted: Is it a question of inefficiency policy-making or of flawed implementation?

By analysing the gaps between the needed policies to close the inequality gaps—based on the two approaches presented below—and the actual policies adopted in the region, the preliminary assessment shows that even when the political will to change the situation of women exists, policies do not always translate into implementation. Policy-making seems to be inefficient in answering the needs of women.

To answer this question two approaches have been implemented:

- 1. A literature review of the state of play of women in some of the main issues that concern them; and**
- 2. A two-way interviews with both stakeholders and women from the civil society about their experience.**

The results showed that even when the political will to change the situation of women exists, policies do not always translate into implementation. Policy-making seems to be inefficient in answering the needs of women.

First, to **show the divergence between the needs (clarify?) and the policies, a literature review has been undertaken on the state of play of women in some of the relevant main issues in the region:** work-life balance and access to services; gender violence; access to education; access to the job market; access to finance; and access to the political sphere. Most of the academic articles reviewed in the paper base their analysis on economic manipulations (econometric analysis) of recent gender equality data as well as on qualitative material such as interviews conducted locally or writings describing the situation of women in a particular year/context, in order to deepen our understanding of some gender equality issues in the region. The analysis of these articles shows deep structural inequalities in many fields in all countries, slowing down change and its implementation. However, requirements to close the inequality gaps are different across the region and even within the same country, meaning that priorities cannot be generalized on the regional scale.

Second, the assessment included **conducting interviews with two types of stakeholders**, using questionnaires, one with the policy-makers and influencers of the region to identify concrete national priorities (11 questionnaires have been answered until now) and one with women from multiple socio-economic backgrounds (18 questionnaires have been answered until now) to further explore the unconscious biases and gaps between women's needs and the current laws [2]. The questionnaires aimed at gathering perceptions on the main issues and priorities for Women Empowerment in South-Mediterranean countries and is divided into 3 parts: Personal information (age, country of origin, country of residence, occupation), Ranking question and Open questions.

The ranking questions (5) asked to prioritize the major obstacles faced by Mediterranean women – identified by my research (lack of secondary education, lack of financial inclusion, low employability, stereotypes, mentalities and preconceived social norms, etc.) – for each key areas: household bargaining power, entrepreneurship, political participation, Labour market participation and in general, social inclusion. Whereas, open questions (3) focused on key measures that were recognized as efficient, the causes of inefficiency of national policies/ strategies, and key measures that are needed in their country.

The first results confirm the literature-review findings: **there is a gap between the needs or expectations of women and the policies designed to reduce inequalities and gender-based discrimination.**

Furthermore, my analysis presents some programmes implemented in the region in order to assess whether the gender gaps left out by national strategies were covered by the collaboration between international NGOs and civil society actors. This review focuses mostly, but not exclusively, on European programmes (European commissions or undertaken by European countries) or International Development banks, such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, launched in the South Mediterranean countries in the past couple of years. The project presented are diverse and tackle multiple issues: gendered domestic violence in Turkey (Preventing violence against women: A data collection model [3]), homeless women's protection in Cairo (Improving protection and promoting equality in Cairo [4]), Improving political participation and inclusion of Bedouin women in Israel [5], etc. Most of these initiatives are often implemented with the collaboration of

local actors such as universities and/or local and regional NGOs.

This approach shows that multiple actors have been trying to collaborate with the aim of fostering gender equality in all of the fields explored by this research. However, without a holistic and coherent national strategy that tackles the issue of women's empowerment as a priority, these projects remain ephemeral, uncoordinated and sub-optimal in each country and for the region as a whole.

4. Conclusion

Overall, despite several initiatives, gender-related issues are still treated as a secondary interest by governments. The Mediterranean Paradox observed in the region is the reflection, among others, of the lack of collaboration between stakeholders in key matters such as knowledge transfers, projects' implementation, female employability, life-work balance improvement, transportation and promotion of competitive sectors, creating a complex and entangled situation of multi-layered structural inequalities. Unconscious bias, explicit violence and discrimination, low household bargaining power, financial exclusion and many other apparent or unrevealed gender-based discriminations remain untreated or inefficiently addressed.

Moreover, measures cannot be efficient if they do not take into account the diversity of situations for women – There is not one single Mediterranean woman. The needs of women in the region are different across national contexts and within each nation-state. The lack of a holistic approach to women's empowerment accentuates discrimination schemes and undermines the impacts of gender gaps in all sectors on national development strategies. This could mainly be due to the lack of concrete women's empowerment policies, the absence of follow-up and monitoring of the results of programmes, the low female political representation and participation and to the unrealized and untapped potential of women as key economic actors.

The insufficiency of collaboration between the different stakeholders in issues of deconstructing social stereotypes leads not only to sub-optimal results but also to a re-enforcement of existing vicious circles in the society, through the misleading image of women communicated by the media and within the education system – an image that is rarely based on the values and experiences of the female role models in the region.

Misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of women empowerment explains the low efficiency of policy-making in the region. Women empowerment does not only concern women but the entire system.

One has to mention that women themselves have an important role to play in closing this gap through their pursuit of education, avoiding early marriages, seeking participation in the labour markets and persisting in climbing the leadership ladder.

5. Implication and recommendations

The recommendations that emanate from the preliminary IM-FEMISE assessment include the following key points:

- Structural empowerment: The need for comprehensive laws.

Women empowerment needs to be **a priority in National agendas and not only an aspiration**. A structural approach is thus needed to foster equality in all fields and avoid symbolically placing women's equality issues as a superfluous, optional or "vitrine-enhancing" topic in national and regional policy-making. Quotas in parliaments and/or jobs are not enough given that they do not tackle the sources of the structural discriminations, but tackle only the symptoms of the problem. Therefore, national strategies need to create the conditions allowing women to fulfil their potential in all sectors of the economy, society and national politics. Having a holistic vision on how to improve the work-life balance of each woman in each context is key. Disparities

between women exist, and creating a flexible national framework that understands their needs in each sector of activity and each context and that adapts to these needs would allow the institutionalization of women's empowerment, improving the work-life balance of each woman within a labour market structural approach.

- Role modelling: virtuous circle of women empowerment.

Women in the Mediterranean region still perceive labour market participation as an existential and decisive trade-off between working/having a job and housework/childcare. This is mainly due to prevalent misconceptions on the role of women in the society and the explicit or implicit weight of tradition on mentalities of both men and women in the region. Increasing the outreach of successful women from the region itself, who managed to alleviate discriminations and to balance between household chores and their jobs, would increase the self-confidence of women, an essential asset for women empowerment in more than one domain. **By capitalizing on role models and institutionalizing local mentoring and sororities, both women's self-esteem and social beliefs would improve, developing positive spillovers across social issues.** It could give rise to internal solutions to the issue of gender violence, given that it allows women and other key stakeholders to participate actively in deconstructing misleading social norms and creating a safer environment for women.

- The importance of embedding women empowerment in public-private partnerships.

We saw that currently policy-making fails to address key obstacles impeding women from participating fully in developing their potential, exploring new options and having a say in decision-making economically and politically. Therefore, new means should be developed in order to exit the loop of multi-layered structural inequalities. The real question to ask ourselves to encourage women empowerment is **how to invest in them?** Beyond wanting gender equality and understanding its economic positive externalities, there are ways and sectors in which women empowerment can be particularly beneficial and cost-effective:

1) Investing in the digital sector : The potentialities of the digital sector are considerable and exponentially rising. Encouraging women to engage in digital jobs and training can be an element of evening out the economic opportunities accessible to women and raising their employability. Gaining technical skills will allow them to choose their own paths through vocational training and forward-thinking education. This sector is proven to be key in South Med countries (Elmasry et al., 2016), which would multiply women's bargaining power on the job market and increase the possible jobs that women can have access to, especially due to the rise of coding as a crucial international language. An example of an initiative that could be used as a basis for women empowerment in this field is the Codi school in Beirut where women are taught to code.

2) Investing in rural women : Women in rural areas are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, violence and other obstacles when reaching the workplace or participating in decision making on each level: starting with the household and moving towards national political representation. Moreover, the share of women in the agriculture sector is increasing over time and reached 45% in 2010 (Bader, 2010). Empowering rural women in financial terms by giving them access to credit and investment possibilities through an improvement of connectivity and public transportation and by offering economic activity opportunities would help close the huge gap between urban and rural women in the region and help realize the potential of a part of the society still considerably marginalized by decision-makers.

3) Investing in data collection and monitoring : Gender equality programmes are often targeted to a specific fraction of the society and are hard to follow and quantify. The lack of data on gender equality issues in the region impedes the creation of adequate and flexible policies in a context of instability and uncertainty. To improve policy making in the matters of women's empowerment, we need to be able to quantify the impact of programmes and monitor them. A public-private partnership is key to allowing efficient data collection and the establishment of national databases. This would also allow clarification of the commonalities between countries of the region in terms of needs and state of play.

- Women empowerment inducing ecosystem.

Three entities are essential to change mentalities and deconstruct profoundly embedded social norms: The family, the media and schools. Social norms cannot be modified if these three entities do not collaborate. The change starts at a really young age and needs to be established through a participative process of education and socialisation. This early-stage education affects all stages of inclusiveness in a society and is key to dismantling stereotypes and unconscious biases at all levels of structural inequalities. The concept of disempowerment is fundamental. It does not mean that men lose the power that women gain. It is, rather, a shared beneficial desirability that cannot be fully attained without the collaboration of stakeholders. What women have are qualities that are actually beneficial to the whole society (Green et al., 2015). What South-Med women need is to be given the tools to make the system evolve and to choose their own paths freely.

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Notes

1. For instance, in Algeria, Jordan and Morocco, laws specifying that respectively 31.6%, 12% and 16.7% of the lower/single house seats were reserved for women were adopted by 2014 (Gender Quotas Database, 2014).

2. I tested a first version of the questionnaire for policy-makers on the participants of the Union for the Mediterranean conference “Women4Mediterranean” in Lisbon on 10-10-2018 and 11-10-2018.

3. <https://www.developmentaid.org/#!/references/view/76909>

4. <http://www.samu-social-international.com/site/wp-content/uploads/Request-for-proposals-for-video-campaign.pdf>

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FEMISE is coordinated by the Economic Research Forum (Cairo, Egypt) and the Institut de la Méditerranée (Marseille, France) and gathers more than 100 members of economic research institutes, representing the 37 partners of the Barcelona Process.

Its main objectives are:

- to contribute to the reinforcement of dialogue on economic and financial issues in the Euro- Mediterranean partnership, within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean,*
- to improve the understanding of priority stakes in the economic and social spheres, and their repercussions on Mediterranean partners in the framework of implementation of EU Association Agreements and Action Plans,*
- to consolidate the partners of the network of research institutes capable of North-South and South-South interactions, while it sets into motion a transfer of know-how and knowledge between members.*

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