DYNAMICS OF GENDER INEQUALITY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND SOUTH ASIA

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The strategic network supports activities to identify innovative disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research agendas on female labour and dynamics of inequality in developing countries, helping to shape the direction of future funding for the ESRC GCRF funding window. This network is concerned with gender and dynamics of inequality in three world regions, with specific focus on (a) the interplay of economic structures, policies and institutions as the determinants of women’s access to employment and (b) the patterns of women’s economic participation as key drivers of inequality.

The network focuses on eight countries in the three regions of the Middle East (Iran, Turkey), North Africa (Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia), and South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka). It consists of researchers who have made major contributions to the understanding of gender and social inequality in their respective regions, as well as non-academic participants from developing countries and relevant international institutions. The network also includes social scientists from Europe who have contributed to the literature on gender and inequality, but might not directly work on international development issues, in order to exchange ideas with our core group of social scientists from developing countries. In particular, the experience of the Southern European countries during the past three decades and the methods used by European social scientists to analyze the changes can be valuable in generating fresh and innovative approaches to the study of gender inequality in our three developing regions.

The overriding objective is to establish a network and platform for the formulation of more comprehensive theories and methodologies to enable longer-term investigation by the network and other researchers and to create an infrastructure for continuing research.

Given the multidisciplinary nature of our network, the specific research questions that follow are focused on the interaction between economic and legal / institutional factors, with the major objective of generating new, innovative approaches:

• What are the impediments to women’s access to jobs?
  o Studies on MENA and South Asia have identified the persistence of patriarchal social norms and family laws. How do these interact with economic conditions, i.e., what are the economic preconditions for the persistence of patriarchal norms and associated regulations.
  o How relevant is the absence of work-family reconciliation policies and how does this affect female employment under different labour market institutions in the three regions?
o What are the implications of trade policies and structural changes on female employment? How do these interact with workplace discrimination, other legal impediments to FLFP and the physical and social infrastructure for working women?

- What are the effects on household well-being of women’s lack of employment and income?
  o What is the relationship between female employment, poverty and inequality under the different social policy regimes of the three regions?
  o Is there a relationship between the persistence of one-bread-winner families in the three regions and the persistence of income and consumption subsidies?
  o How are national policy-makers addressing these matters? To what extent is low FLFP a matter of public discourse?

- What is the relationship between gender inequality and social stratification, and what are the implications for the dynamics of income inequality?
  o How can we best conceptualize social stratification and labour market segmentation in our sample countries and how does gender inequality map onto (align with) broader social inequality?
  o What are the implications of these factors for the dynamics of inequality within households and among individuals and women? In other words, how can research bring horizontal inequalities to bear on explaining vertical inequalities?
  o How do women’s organizations and trade unions address social and gender inequality?

- What are the.data requirements for addressing the above list of questions, and what gaps need to be filled?

Network activities include a planning workshop (London, March 2017), a conference (Rabat, December 2017) and a final workshop (London, May 2018), as well as collaboration within thematic working groups, the production of research briefs on our findings, and a final report offering new and innovative frameworks for research on gender and the dynamics of inequality. What follows is a summary of activities thus far.

- The first workshop took place in London, 9-11 June 2017, where participants prepared short papers laying out key issues or anomalies with respect to their regions of specialization. The workshop identified the following four thematic areas for policy-oriented research proposals to be developed by network participants (detailed in workshop report):
  1. Macroeconomic environment and economic/structural policy
  2. Social norms, laws, and social institutions
  3. Work opportunities and workplace discrimination
  4. Labour market institutions and gender inequality

- The conference convened in Rabat, 19-20 December 2017, where the network participants, now grouped into the four thematic research groups, presented their substantive research proposals and received the comments of invited researchers from local, regional, and international NGOs and policy-makers (including one former Moroccan MP). During this conference it was agreed that violence against women which has important implications for gender inequality and sustainable development, should be added to the four identified thematic research agendas as a cross-cutting theme. A fifth theme on labour migration and gender inequality was added to the research agenda.

- The third and final workshop took place on 3-4 May 2018, where the finalized proposals of each working group, with full description of the intellectual landscape and identification of policy relevant research gaps in the existing literature, were presented and discussed. It
should be noted that the strategic multidisciplinary research agendas developed by our workshop engage with four of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), namely: Goal 5 on Gender Equality; Goal 10 on Reduced Inequalities; Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth from a gender perspective; and Goal 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

- The network has established links with other networks working on issues of gender and social inequality: Center for Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), the Economic Research for the Arab Countries, Iran and Turkey (ERF), and Forum Euro-méditerranéen des Instituts de Sciences Economiques (FEMISE) are active participants in our network.

- The findings of the network have been disseminated through social media and seminars at SOAS and other institutions. The network has organized a roundtable session at the Development Studies Association in Manchester in June 2018. Individual members have posted working papers or discussed the results at various seminars and conferences.

As noted, the project’s main purpose is to identify policy-relevant strategic research issues from a multidisciplinary perspective in an area of research which is of utmost interest, not only in the countries and regions covered by this research, but also globally. For example, there is consensus that much of the problem of low or declining female labour force participation lies on the demand side, including the scarcity of what the ILO calls “decent work”. One of our findings pertains to the importance of support structures for working mothers. Paid maternity leave and a network of affordable and quality childcare and preschool facilities could increase the supply of women from working-class and lower-income households. The network’s research ideas may inform the research agenda for other public, private, or voluntary sectors interested in issues related to gender and social inequality. As the network continues to analyze the importance and broad ramifications of decent work for women, and to highlight links with the SDGs, we expect that policymakers, women’s rights groups, and the relevant advocacy organizations in the three regions will find our country studies, proposals, and recommendations of interest and relevance. Our studies could inform the advocacy work of women’s rights associations, trade unions, certain professional associations, and related organizations, but they also can be referred to in national economic and social development plans.