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Title: The Dynamics of Family Formation and Women’s Work: What Facilitates and Hinders Female Employment in the Middle East and North Africa?

Despite increases in educational attainment, female labor force participation remains very low in the Middle East and North Africa. Difficulties reconciling work and family formation have been identified as an important factor in low participation. This paper investigates the dynamic relationship between family formation and women’s employment in the Middle East and North Africa region, by examining whether getting married, being married, expecting children, having children, or having young children is the greatest constraint on participation.

The paper studies Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia, leveraging unique retrospective data on work, marriage, child bearing and child rearing. The time variation allows us to estimate discrete hazard models for the duration of different labor statuses. This paper examines three sets of outcomes: (1) duration in employment, (2) duration in non-employment, and (3) duration in different labor market states and specific types of work.

Our study shows that anticipating marriage and child-bearing are strongly associated with women’s employment outcomes. Moreover, non-employment is an absorbing state, that is increasingly hard to exit with marriage and over time.

Our results emphasize the importance of the availability of child care and other child support systems that may help women to return to work or start working. Investigating dynamics around work and family formation in the Middle East and North Africa region, a previously unexplored aspect of female labor force participation, is crucial to understand key mechanisms that support women's ability to reconcile family formation and employment. Our study also pinpoints key policy levers for increasing female labor force participation and reducing barriers to women’s employment, in order to reach gender equality.