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Gender Inequality and Economic Decline: A Comparative Analysis of Gender Roles and its Impact on Economic Development in Egypt and Iran

Kayla E. Joyner

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Kayla Joyner

kjoyner2@fordham.edu

International Studies: Global Track

Fordham University

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Thesis Advisor: Olena Nikolayenko

Thesis Instructor: Stephanie Szitanyi

Table of Contents

1. Abstract

This thesis will demonstrate that increasing female labor force participation in Iran and Egypt will facilitate overall economic growth, reduce poverty rates, and increase family investment in education and health. There are three critical factors that I will examine that are significantly deterring female participation in the labor force in these two countries specifically: sociocultural values, legal barriers, and economic policies. By refusing to mobilize the increasing potential female labor force, Iran and Egypt are hindering the nation's social and economic development.

2. Introduction

Following periods of Westernization in Iran and Egypt, both countries emphasized traditional Islamic values, otherwise known as Shari'a (Abbott, 2017; Lomazzi, 2020). Consequently, gender discrimination, in terms of gender roles and the sexual division of labor, was woven into the Iranian and Egyptian constitutions (Irvani, 2010; Rehman, 2021). Women became associated with the domestic sphere and were prescribed the role of mother and wife, responsible for all domestic duties, whereas men were associated with the public sphere and assumed financially responsible for the family (Roque, 2021; Tremayne, 2021). This ideological worldview translated into laws, policies, and sociocultural beliefs and traditions that disproportionately impacted women's lives and their access to equal economic opportunities (Hiller, 2014l Abbott, 2017).

Both countries demonstrate that women are provided access to college education at increasing rates, however sociocultural traditions and beliefs, in addition to legal provisions, have significantly prohibited their access to the labor force (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011). Iranian and Egyptian women face a considerable amount of pressure to fulfill their prescribed traditional, nuclear family, gender roles (UN Women, 2021). Consequently, both societies esteem marriage as a women's prime purpose and social identity (Tremayne, 2006). Women face immense pressure from their families and society to find a suitable groom in order to preserve family honor (Roque, 2021). If Iranian and Egyptian women are permitted to enter the workforce, they often continue to face significant legal barriers that impede their ability to perform their jobs fully. (Far, 2017).

This thesis will explore the relationship between cultural norms and female participation in the workforce as well as examine the potential economic growth that would come out of

female economic and social empowerment. This thesis will demonstrate how achieving gender equality and recognizing women's rights and economic empowerment is necessary for sustainable economic growth and social development. By refusing to mobilize the increasing, potential female labor force, Iran and Egypt are preventing their societies from promoting social and economic development. The female labor force is untapped, and therefore not contributing human capital to the economy, which would ultimately produce overall social and economic development. My thesis will prove increasing female labor force participation will facilitate overall economic growth, reduce poverty rates, and increase family investment in education and health. In the coming section, I will examine previous literature on the topic of gender inequality and how societal norms and institutions influence gender roles and economic development. Next, the methodology will provide an overview of how my research will be conducted. Afterward, I will provide an overview of Iranian and Egyptian sociocultural values, particularly family, marriage, and education, that are prohibiting women's involvement in the workforce. Then, I will present a snapshot of Egypt and Iran's current economic situation and explain women's current role in the economy. Lastly, I will compare and contrast factors influencing women's participation in the workforce in both countries.

3. Literature Review

Several authors draw connections between gender inequality and economic development (Hiller, 2014; Abbott, 2017; Kleven & Landais, 2017; Lomazzi, 2020; Silva & Klasen, 2021). Specifically, they argue that sociocultural norms reinforce gender inequality and gender roles, thereby having a direct impact on economic development (Ibid). For these scholars, sociocultural norms include the division of labor in household formations, early marriages, arranged marriages, polygamy, education, high fertility, and the use of contraceptives (Abbott 2017;

Kleven & Landais, 2017; Silva & Klasen, 2021). Hiller (2014) references the 2006 World Development Report, which emphasizes that economic and cultural inequalities might feed into each other and are reproduced over time, leading to a gender inequality trap. However, Abbott (2017) and Lomazzi (2020) argue that a society's history, specifically as it relates to colonialism and Westernization, plays a significant role in the development of sociocultural norms around gender roles, leading to the advancement of gender inequality.

The existing literature also suggests that political and social institutions and their intersection with religion also drive gender inequality and further emphasize gender roles (Acker 1992; Abbott 2017; Lomazzi 2020; Geha & Karam 2021). Abbott (2017) and Lomazzi (2020) both argue that sociocultural norms are dependent on a society's history, particularly as it relates to religious beliefs. Specifically, they argue that the experience of colonialism and Westernization has shaped people's values as socioeconomic conditions change (Abbott, 2017; Lomazzi, 2020). Lomazzi (2020) indicates that two components contribute to defining value systems and structural organization in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) societies: the intertwined relationship between religion and politics and the past Western domination. Ultimately, Lomazzi finds that the impact of colonialism and Westernization generated a backlash and further emphasized the necessity of traditional (Islamic) values (Lomazzi, 2020).

To understand the construction of sociocultural norms and gender roles, it is critical to examine a society's political and legal institutions, which have mainly been shaped by religion. The current legal standing of women in Egypt and Iran is heavily influenced by Shari'a law, which is seen as an "opposition to the Western model of democracy and the attempt of re-affirming an authentic identity as a reaction to the colonist era and orientalism" (Lomazzi, 2020, p. 234). Lomazzi (2020) notes that the relationship between religious and political powers

establishes a strong barrier to gender equality. Abbott (2017) and Lomazzi (2020) describe Shari'a law as prescribing gender roles according to the natural differences between men and women, consequently producing a specialization of tasks and responsibilities attributed to gender, which often results in "women [continuing] to be treated as second-class citizens without the same legal rights as men." (Abbott, 2017, p. 10-11). Abbott (2017) and Geha & Karam (2021) both find that gender equality and women empowerment is not compatible with Islam, as gender equality challenges social and political norms protected by Islamic beliefs. It is important to note that the interpretations of Islam are often based on textualism or the "belief that religious texts have one static literalist meaning. For instance, interpreting the Quran's proclamations on inheritance textually stipulates that women's shares should be half of men's" (Glas *et al.,* 2018, p. 691).

Acker (1992), Abbott (2017), and Geha & Karam (2021) examine the strong relationship between social and political institutions and women's rights. Often, "Social institutions are the main factor constraining women's and girls' freedom of choice in economic activities" and significantly hinder their ability to participate fully in society (Abbott, 2017, p. 10). Acker (1992), in corroboration with Abbott's (2017) research, claims gender is present in the processes, practices, images, ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life, a concept she refers to as gendered institutions. She states that "the law, politics, religion, the academy, the state, and the economy are institutions historically developed by men, currently dominated by men, and symbolically interpreted from the standpoint of men in leading positions, both in the present and historically" (Acker, 1992, p. 567). Acker (1992) notes that these institutions have been defined by the absence of women, and the only institution in which women have a central role is the family. Geha & Karam (2017) define state feminism as the

inclusion strategies and the steps taken to ensure or protect women's rights, which are approved and propagated by state institutions. Geha & Karam (2017) argue that state-feminism influences policy and legislation, however, it follows the state's preferred narrative for gender and women's rights. Understanding the role of social and political institutions and structures, along with the concepts of state feminism and gendered institutions, demonstrates the advancement of gender inequality and gender roles that stem from these patriarchal institutions and structures.

Several scholars argue that sociocultural norms assign specific roles to men and women and further advance gender inequality (Hiller, 2014; Abbott, 2017; Kleven & Landais, 2017; Lomazzi, 2020; Silva & Klasen, 2021). Additionally, several scholars conclude that there is a direct relationship between sociocultural norms and women's (lack of) participation in the economy (Ibid). Women are ultimately confined to the domestic sphere and prescribed the role of homemakers and mothers, whereas men are patriarchs within the family and active in the social sphere as breadwinners (Hiller 2014; Abbott 2017; Lomazzi 2020; Silva & Klasen 2021). Silva & Klasen (2021) draw a connection between the gendered division of labor, high fertility rates, and low female educational investments, claiming that "due to this division of labor, the returns to female educational investments are relatively low. These [divided] household behaviors translate into higher fertility rates and lower human capital and thus pose a barrier to long-run development" (Ibid, p. 596).

Other sociocultural factors that prevent women from entering the workforce include early marriages, arranged marriages, the notion of contraceptives, and low education rates (Abbott 2017; Kleven & Landais 2017; Silva & Klasen 2021). Early and arranged marriages impede women from entering the workforce by confining them to the domestic sphere and preventing their access to the workforce (Silva & Klasen 2021). Additionally, in societies where

contraception use is low or unavailable, fertility rates increase, and Silva & Klasen (2021) state that human capital and economic growth are low. Sociocultural norms ultimately impact the notion of contraceptive use, which is viewed as taboo, further restricting women's ability to control their reproductive healthcare and consequently confining them to the domestic sphere.

4. Methodology

For the purposes of this study, I conducted a comparative analysis between the two case studies. Egypt and Iran were selected due to their similar historical progressions, sociocultural norms, legal provisions, and present-day economies. Within the scope of this paper, my thesis seeks to prove that increased female labor force participation will overall, increase the economy of both respective countries.

In order to discern the status of female labor force participation, it is critical to provide a sociocultural analysis of both case studies. A sociocultural analysis is critical to understanding the norms and values of both countries. The sociocultural analysis demonstrates how women are viewed in these societies and depict women's roles in these societies that are stressed by these norms and values. In Egypt and Iran, notions of a "woman's place" in society typically revolve around their role as homemakers. Within both countries, women are expected to marry early which is followed by having children. These two factors, along with others I will discuss in this section, ultimately impede women from entering the workforce. Understanding the sociocultural norms and values of both countries will help provide an understanding as to why women are not participating in the workforce. This section will include data and statistics from the *World Values Surveys,* to demonstrate the prevalence of these sociocultural values.

Following the sociocultural analysis, the paper provides a present-day analysis of the Egyptian and Iranian economies and the current standing of women's rights. Within this section,

I provide an analysis of the correlation between economic decline and women's labor force participation within both countries. I provide data and statistics from the World Economic Forum, the International Labor Organization, the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme. The World Economic Forum (2022) administers the Global Gender Gap Index, which reflects the differences between women and men based on social, political, cultural, or economic attainments or attitudes. Additionally, the World Economic Forum (2022) reports on the country's Economic Participation and Opportunity Index, which indicates a country's level of economic participation and equal opportunity. The United Nations Development Programme administers the Gender Inequality Index to demonstrate inequality in health, empowerment, and the labor market (UNDP, 2021). The paper uses the data and statistics provided by the International Labor Organization in an attempt to prove my thesis, by using variables such as married women's labor force participation, educational attainment and its relation to labor force participation, etc. Finally, the paper uses data and statistics provided by the World Bank, such as tertiary enrollment rates, tertiary graduation rates, vulnerable employment rates, and so on. The indexes and statistics mentioned above will assist my research in proving that sociocultural values, legal barriers, and economic policies drastically deter female labor force participation, therefore negatively impacting the overall economy.

The paper concludes with a comparative analysis of Egypt and Iran. This comparative analysis will aim to prove that increased female labor force participation will ultimately improve the overall economy of both countries. Overall, this paper will include reports from the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Humans Rights Watch, The World Bank, and other international organizations to analyze current data and statistics on women's rights, women's labor force participation, and the Egyptian and Iranian economy. The comparative

study provides data and statistics from the World Bank, World Values Surveys, World Economic Forum, United Nations Development Programme, and the International Labor Organization. These statistics will confirm the thesis question, which will prove that female labor force participation facilitates economic development. Furthermore, this paper will also examine scholarly articles, academic journals, books, and newspaper articles on the historical progression of women's rights, present-day analysis of women's rights, sociocultural analysis of women's rights, and present-day analysis of the economies.

5. Sociocultural Barriers to Female Employment: The Case of Iran

Following the 1979 Revolution, Iranian women believed that there would be a progressive transformation in their society's traditional gender roles, newfound equal opportunities, and increased freedom for all (Shaditalab, 2006). However, this was not the case, as a wave of Islamization, or the "rejection of un-Islamic Western liberal values" connotated to "institutionalized privileges for men" (Ibid, p. 17). The influence of the predominant sociocultural values emphasized male superiority over women in the political, social, and economic spheres (Iravani, 2010). Across all sectors of women's lives, women are restricted or require permission from their husbands or male guardians to participate in society (OHCHR, 2021).

Gender Roles and Family Obligations

Shaditalab (2006) states that gender differences are expressed within the family structure and are difficult to change. Shaditalab (2006) determines that these gender differences indicate that women are associated with requiring security whereas men are associated with guardianship, therefore constructing a division of labor in which men assume the role of guardian in the household and society while women assume the role of motherhood and are constrained to the

domestic sphere (Ibid). According to the *World Values Survey,* 79 percent of Iranian men and 77 percent of Iranian women agree that being a housewife is fulfilling, which indicates just how deep-rooted societal perceptions of gender roles are (World Values Survey, 2020). In addition to marriage, gender roles are also significant within the family structure. Women's movement is heavily restricted, as they are unable to leave the house without a male guardian (Tremayne, 2006, p. 83-84). Iranians exhibit very strong loyalty to their family, and the interest of the family frequently exceeds the needs of an individual (Evason, 2016). Consequently, this loyalty signifies that family honor and shame are shared between all family members (Ibid).

Marriage

In Iranian society, marriage is frequently perceived as a woman's prime purpose and social identity (Tremayne, 2006). For instance, a woman can be a highly respected medical doctor, but if she remains unmarried and lives with her parents, her identity will remain uncertain, with society perceiving her as an object of pity and wonder (Ibid). Unmarried women over the age of twenty are often referred to as "gone sour" *(dokhtar-e-torshideh)* and are stigmatized by society, being perceived as failures (Ibid). According to the interviews Tremayne (2006) conducted with Iranian women, they stated that "the idea of saying no [to a marriage proposal] was inconceivable, even in retrospect. If we did not get married, we would have brought great shame upon our family" (p. 78).

According to the UN Human Rights Council, one of the most concerning sociocultural traditions in Iran regarding the rights of women and girls is the issue of child marriage (OHCHR, 2021). "Early" or "child" marriage is identified as either or both of the bride and groom being under the age of eighteen (Tremayne, 2006). According to Shari'a law, the definition of a child is not restricted to a certain age and varies from context to context, therefore, a child can be a child

in one context, but an adult in another (Ibid). In August 2003, the age of marriage was raised from nine to thirteen for girls, however, "a clause was added stating that earlier marriage would be allowed if the girls' guardian and a judge or medical doctor considered that the girl was ready for marriage" (Ibid, p. 71). Tremayne (2006) claims that the prevalence of patriarchal systems, the persistence of traditional values, and the endorsement of ruling clerics provide reasoning behind child marriages. Furthermore, perceiving child marriages within a sociocultural context takes on a different meaning, and Iranian communities often demonstrate a different understanding and do not necessarily consider it a violation of human rights (Ibid).

Tremayne (2006) states that the exact extent of the practice of child marriage in Iran is unknown and is likely higher than what official statistics suggest. This is presumably due to the practice of temporary marriages *(mut'a/sigheh)* (Ibid). Tremayne (2006) defines temporary marriage as "a contract between a man and an unmarried woman in which the couple agrees to be married for a specified length of time and a fixed sum of money is given to the temporary wife" (p. 72). The practice of temporary marriage is used to legitimize child marriages. "Parents prohibited under the civil code from registering the marriages of their underage daughters resort to temporary marriage, which the couple changes into a permanent one upon reaching the legal age" (Ibid, p. 73). Temporary marriages do not need to be registered, and witnesses are not required (Ibid, 2006).

Education

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant increase in Iranian women's educational attainment, particularly in their participation in higher education (Rezai-Rashti *et al.* 2011). The rise of female educational attainment has produced several positive effects, such as creating relationships between men and women, creating a safe space for women that allows them to

become more confident, and shifting men's attitudes toward women (Ibid). However, it is important to note that most of the education obtained is often based on religion, and instruction in Arabic is intended to be used for religious purposes (Iravani, 2010). Iravani (2010) states that images within Iranian textbooks frequently portray women as inferior to men. Indicating that despite the rise in female educational attainment, sociocultural norms continue to dominate the curriculum.

Iravani's (2010) research indicates that the number of females who drop out to get married during second-level education has been relatively high, demonstrating that the significance of assuming the role of wife/mother hinders girls from completing their education. Another factor prohibiting female education is that girls reach the age of puberty during their second level of education, "allow[ing] families to believe that the honorable thing for girls to do after the age of nine, when by law they are supposed to be veiled, was to remain at home and avoid exposure as much as possible" (Ibid, p. 38). Furthermore, girls are often pulled out of school to "assist their family with housework, childcare, or family business" (Ibid).

If women are permitted to stay in school, there is an emphasis placed on education as a means of enhancing the prospect of marriage for girls, rather than for employment (Tremayne, 2006). However, the effect of delaying marriage for education is uncertain, considering that men will rarely marry an older girl who has passed her 'desirable childbearing' age (Ibid). Additionally, Tremayne (2006) notes that there are widely held beliefs among men and older women, such as "too much education jeopardizes the harmony of family life since women will not submit to their husbands or younger women have healthier babies" (p. 84). It is also expressed that men do not wish to marry girls who obtained a higher education than themselves (Ibid).

6. Sociocultural Barriers to Female Employment: The Case of Egypt

Miyata & Yamada (2016) argue that cultural background plays a significant role in framing individual identity and values in Egypt. Traditional gender roles in Egyptian society have triggered a prevailing patriarchal culture that portrays women as dependents of men (Barsoum, 2018). Consequently, work roles are segregated, and men take priority in access to work, whereas women are responsible for domestic duties within the household (Miyata & Yamada, 2016; Barsoum, 2018). Furthermore, (Barsoum, 2018) argues that the patriarchal culture in Egypt is directly correlated with female labor force participation.

Gender Roles and Family Obligations

In 1920, the Egyptian Personal Status Laws were implemented, and they were the first laws to address the individual rights and duties of husbands and wives within marriage (Roque, 2021). These laws were derived from the Shari'a law, which is fundamentally based on the ideology that men and women have complementary, yet unequal roles (Ibid). The Personal Status Laws constructed the family as patriarchal by identifying the father as the head of the family (Ibid). Roque (2021) argues that the Personal Status Laws "have served to reinforce patriarchal gender relations and maintain existing gender relations" (p. 110). However, it is important to note that "although Egypt's population is predominantly Muslim, similar beliefs are entrenched within Egypt's Coptic populace, indicating that the sexual division of labor is firmly grounded in Egyptian tradition rather than solely dependent on religion" (Ibid).

Gender roles in Egyptian society establish men as the breadwinner, authority figures, and active members of public life, whereas women are confined to the domestic sphere and prescribed the role of wife and mother, responsible for the home and children (Roque, 2021; Barsoum, 2018). Roque (2021) states that the Egyptian household is considered a women's

castle, and her control and management of the household are of great importance, as it is the source of her reputation and respect within the community. According to the World Values Survey, 74 percent of Egyptian women and 87 percent of Egyptian men agree that being a housewife is fulfilling (World Value Survey, 2018). Roque's (2021) research finds that Egyptian women tend to gatekeep their domestic roles and refuse to allow men to help with domestic chores, seeing that their household contributions are perceived as equivalent to their husbands' financial support. Additionally, Roque (2021) states that it is shameful for Egyptian men to perform domestic tasks, as such roles are deemed to be feminine. Furthermore, Roque (2021) argues that "this creates a strong co-dependence in marriages, with husbands providing financial support and wives providing meals and an orderly household" (p. 20).

As indicated in the Egyptian Constitution and prevalent in Egyptian society, the family is perceived as the center of life and society (Roque, 2021). Consequently, Egyptian women possess significant family obligations, which demand the responsibility of childcare and domestic duties (Constant *et al.,* 2020; Barsoum, 2018). Barsoum (2018) argues that "women's ability to join the labor market is related to their family position and opportunities to reconcile family and work obligations" (p. 898).

Marriage

In Egypt, marriage and childrearing are perceived as the most important event in an individual's life (Roque, 2021). The significance of marriage in Egyptian society prompts parents to enforce a strict moral code once their female children reach adolescence or puberty to ensure that their marriage prospects are not ruined and that the family's reputation and honor are preserved (Ibid). From a young age, girls are made aware of their honorable obligations toward their families and their responsibility to enter into a "good" marriage (Ibid). Once females reach

adolescence or puberty, the freedom and mobility they experienced during their childhood are restricted, as women are required to withdraw from society and decrease interactions with the opposite sex (Ibid). Unmarried women are significantly monitored in comparison to their male siblings due to "the preconceived notion that suitable grooms would only want to marry a woman with *akhlaq* (good morals) and with no prior sexual experiences" (Ibid, p. 51).

Marriage in Egyptian society validates and strengthens a woman's social status, providing prestige, respect, and honor to women and their families (Roque, 2021). Upon marriage, women are granted a new identity, symbolizing their transition into adulthood (Ibid). Unmarried women are acknowledged as "not fully women" given that they lack husbands and children and have not acquired the role of wife and mother (Ibid). After marriage, women's socioeconomic status is strengthened on account of their husbands' social status (Ibid). "The term *sitt al-bayt* (lady of the home) carries significant weight, particularly in Egyptian society, implying that a woman belongs to a household that can afford to keep her out of the labor market" (Ibid, p. 20). Unmarried women in Egyptian society are socially stigmatized and labeled as old maids, as men prefer to marry younger women (Ibid, 2021). A woman's educational attainment or career advancements are not recognized in Egyptian society, rather a woman is praised for securing a good husband and producing a family (Ibid, 2021).

Roque (2021), Constant *et al.* (2020), and Barsoum (2018) find that marriage and childbearing are strongly correlated with the decrease in female labor participation. Constant *et al.* (2020) find that "married women are close to 30 percent less likely to participate in the labor force compared with unmarried women" (p. 13). Barsoum (2018) states that married, working women must manage the tasks of domestic duties and work since they rarely receive help from their husbands. Married, working women are frequently blamed by their husbands for being bad

wives and mothers (Roque, 2021; Barsoum, 2018). Barsoum (2018) argues that "married women taking the blame for less than perfect household conditions and children left unattended experience guilt and a culture of blame that limits the empowering potential of work" (p. 910). Married, working women facing high expectations from their husbands are pressured to leave the workforce, considering that it is very difficult to achieve a perfect household while being employed full-time (Roque, 2021).

Education

Roque (2021) and Miyata & Yamada (2016) find that rather than for employment, women are attaining higher education to increase their marriage prospects, their social status, and to become better mothers. Egyptian women receive university degrees to ensure that they are equal to their husbands, considering the notion that men with university degrees are likely unwilling to marry someone with lower educational attainment (Roque, 2021). Roque (2021) emphasizes the importance of gaining this equality since several Egyptian women stated that they were treated poorly, perceived as inferior, and subjected to humiliation by their husbands based on their lower educational attainment. Receiving a university degree also indicates one's socioeconomic status and suggests that one is better equipped for marriage and motherhood (Ibid). Considering that a majority of Egyptian women perceive wife and motherhood as their primary role, they argue that a university education allows them to become better equipped for motherhood and marriage, presenting themselves as more appealing to potential grooms (Ibid).

7. Iran: Present-Day Analysis of the Current Standing of Women and the Iranian Economy

As discussed above, this thesis uses the Global Gender Gap Index and the Gender Inequality Index to indicate Iranian women's current standing in society and in the workforce. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index ranks Iran at 143 out of 146 countries

in 2022 (World Economic Forum, 2022). The Gender Inequality Index, administered by the United Nations Development Programme, ranks Iran at 115 out of 170 countries with the female (ages 15 and older) labor force participation rate at 14 percent in comparison to 68 percent of men (UNDP, 2021).

Legal Barriers to Entering the Workforce

Far (2017) argues that the implementation of the 1979 Iranian Constitution, which included the civil code and the labor code, was the foundation of legal provisions that govern and prohibit women's participation in the labor market even today. Despite guaranteeing gender equality and equal protection under the Constitution (Rehamn, 2021; Far, 2017), in practice, "the Iranian legal system emphasizes women's role as mothers and spouses over other rights stipulated in the Constitution and relies on discriminatory laws codified in provisions of the civil code that defines spouses' rights and responsibilities toward each other" (Far, 2017). According to the World Economic Forum, Iran is ranked 144 out of 146 countries for Economic Participation and Opportunity (World Economic Forum, 2022).

According to Article 1117 of the civil code, a husband has the right to prohibit his wife from occupations he deems as against family values and harmful to his or her reputation (Begum 2022; Rehman 2021; Far 2017). Additionally, Rehman (2021) and Far (2017) state that employers frequently require married women to provide a statement that indicates their husbands' permission for them to work. According to the ILO, only 11.5 percent of married women participate in the labor force (ILO, 2020). In contrast, 34 percent of divorced women and 21 percent of never-married, single women participate in the labor force (ILO, 2020).

The Iranian economy and its citizenry are enduring high levels of inflation, poverty, and a lack of jobs. However, despite these concerns, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has called

for population growth (NCRI, 2022). According to the Women's Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), in a message to the National Staff of Population, Khamenei emphasized the need to stifle policies on women's rights to increase the population rate and declared that generation growth is a vital policy and a crucial task (NCRI, 2022). On November 1, 2021, the Iranian Guardian Council ratified the Youthful Population and Protection of the Family law, which aimed to boost the fertility rate (OHCHR, 2021). Under the new population law, the free distribution of contraceptives is prohibited, voluntary sterilizations for men and women are banned, antenatal screening tests are restricted, women that receive abortions face the death penalty, and the Health Ministry has established a system to collect information on anyone that goes to a health center for fertility treatment, pregnancy, delivery, or abortions - a move that is designed to expand the monitoring of pregnancies and discourage abortions (NCRI, 2022; OHCHR, 2021). UN human rights experts have called on Iran to repeal this law, as it is a direct violation of women's human rights under international law (OHCHR, 2021).

According to the NCRI (2022), the housing poverty line in Tehran and other major cities has reached 80 to 90 percent. Around 40 million of the country's population lives in slums or substandard housing, and about 30 million of the population are renters who spend 50 percent of their income on housing (Ibid). In addition, due to recent price hikes and the elimination of food subsidies, half of Iranian households have nothing left to spend on education and healthcare (Ibid). The provisions in the Youthful Population and the Protection of Family law will significantly increase the number of children that will grow up in low socioeconomic conditions. UN experts argued that restricting access to free contraceptive goods and services will lead to unwanted pregnancies and high maternal mortality (OHCHR, 2021). Additionally, the NCRI

(2022) argued that the population law will also contribute to an increase in venereal diseases, triggering waves of AIDs by imposing restrictions on contraceptives. According to Begum (2022) and NCRI (2022), the regime is offering incentives to families to increase fertility. The NCRI (2022) states that the regime is offering incentives for fathers as leverage against women, proposing that men over the age of 30 will be exempted from military service without penalty on the condition that they have two children. Begum (2022) reported that the law is also offering interest-free loans as incentives to those who marry at 25 or younger. Begum (2022) and NCRI (2022) argue that this law will significantly decrease female employment, increase child marriages, and increase premature births.

According to the Iranian Constitution, girls can legally marry at the age of 13 in comparison to 15 years for boys with paternal and judicial consent (Rehman, 2021). The UN Human Rights Council reported that 13,054 marriages of girls under 13 were registered between March 2018 and March 2019 (Ibid). Between March 2020 and June 2020, 7,323 marriages of girls aged 10 to 14 were registered (Ibid). The UN Human Rights Council argues that girls who marry under the age of 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence, are unable to continue their education, and are marginalized from social activities (Ibid). The UN Human Rights Council reported that 37.5 percent of those subjected to child marriages were illiterate (Ibid). The Youthful Population and the Protection of Family law coupled with the low legal marriage age significantly deter educational attainment and employment prospects.

Legal Barriers within the Workforce

Data indicates that Iranian women are receiving higher levels of education, however, this has not been demonstrated in female labor force participation (Toscano *et al.,* 2020; Far, 2017; Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011; Iravani, 2010). According to the World Bank, in 2020, 57

percent of women received tertiary education, and 26 percent of women graduated from tertiary education (The World Bank, 2020). However, only 33 percent of women that received their Bachelor's degree were participating in the labor force (ILO, 2020).

According to the Iranian Labor Code, employers are prohibited from hiring women for jobs that are deemed dangerous, arduous, or harmful, and employers must ensure that women are employed in jobs that are deemed suitable by Shari'a (Rehman, 2021; Far, 2017). For instance, Shari'a deems professions such as nurses, teachers, or doctors suitable for women, however, professions such as judges or firefighters are not suitable for women due to the authorities' interpretation of Shari'a or because of the claim that the work conditions are inappropriate for women (Far, 2017). Considering that Iranian law does not prohibit gender discrimination in the hiring process, Rehman (2021) and Far (2017) state that the hiring process in the Iranian public and private sectors often specify gender preferences as a qualification for employment. The UN Human Rights Council argues that sociocultural norms and administrative practices point to a widespread preference for male employees (Rehman, 2021). Although Iranian law includes provisions on equal pay for equal work, Rehman (2021) and Far (2017) report that employers pay their female workers as low as one-third of the legal minimum wage, despite performing the same levels of work. According to the World Economic Forum (2022), Iranian women's estimated earned income is 3,46k, whereas men's estimated earned income is 21,66k. The Borgen Project (2021) reported that on average, Iranian women are expected to make 18 percent of what a man makes. Furthermore, women have also reported that they receive discrimination in terms of employment benefits, such as bonuses, social security, health insurance, and overtime (Far, 2017). Far (2017) states that to receive family bonuses, women must prove that their husband is unemployed, has a disability, or that she is the sole guardian of their children. In order

to receive social security, women must prove that they are the primary breadwinner in their households (Ibid). Since Iranian law considers men the head of the household, health insurance is only guaranteed when women are providing for their husbands or if their husband is unemployed or disabled (Ibid).

Iranian law requires women to wear the Islamic *hijab* in public, including in workspaces, and according to Human Rights Watch (Far, 2017) women emphasized that they are subjected to arbitrary and discriminatory criteria when it comes to clothing. According to Iranian law, "women who do not appear with a *hijab* that conforms to authorities' interpretation of modesty in public can be sentenced to up to two months in prison or fined (Ibid). Sexual harassment also appears to be a barrier prohibiting women from entering the workforce, considering that there is no reference to sexual harassment in Iranian law and sexual assault is not criminalized as a crime under the Penal Code (Ibid). Human Rights Watch (Far, 2017) found that "several women reported different forms of sexual harassment - mainly verbal - in their workplaces, and interviewees, especially in the public sector." Due to the "social stigma attached to victims and a lack of trust in the security offices as an institution, women felt uncomfortable reporting complaints to their employers (Ibid). Human Rights Watch (Far, 2017) reported that women who had been victims of sexual harassment in the workplace emphasized that they are frequently blamed and that the security offices argued that they should change their behavior to avoid being sexually harassed. Employers and employees stated that they were not aware of any anti-sexual harassment policies or mechanisms and procedures for reporting harassment within their companies (Ibid). Far (2017) states that "victims face obstacles in proving the crime due to high evidentiary requirement for proving sexual assault. Since extramarital sexual relations are

considered criminal acts, reporting sexual assault may expose victims to prosecution if they cannot prove the act was coercive."

In January 2017, the parliament passed legislation granting nine months of maternity leave to mothers and two weeks to fathers, however, the law did not include provisions to protect female employees against termination or demotion due to taking leave nor did it include sanctions against employers taking such measures (Rehman, 2021; Far, 2017). Human Rights Watch reported that 47,000 out of 145,000 (about one-third) women who had taken their legal maternity leave were fired by their employers upon their return to work. Employers disclosed to Human Rights Watch that they supported the concept of maternity leave, but expressed several concerns, indicating that they might be less inclined to hire women (Far, 2017).

The Informal Economy: Vulnerable Employment

Following the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, the Iranian government boosted investment in employment-generating industries as an effective way to combat the high unemployment rates that plagued the economy during the war (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011). Consequently, this provision expanded the informal economy (Ibid). Since 2005, the Iranian government transferred government-owned companies to the private sector to reduce the size of the public sector (Far, 2017; Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011). Far (2017) and Bahramitash & Esfahani (2011) argue that there is a significant gender gap in the private sector, and "unless the gender distribution of jobs in the private sector becomes more balanced, the country's overall plan to privatize large parts of the economy could increase the overall gap between male and female employment." Due to significant gender discrimination in the public and private sectors, a substantial amount of Iranian women are working in the informal sector (Ibid. Bahramitash & Esfahani (2011) define the informal sector:

> The informal sector has been defined by the ILO as a group of household enterprises or unincorporated enterprises that may employ contributing family workers and employees on an occasional basis, and enterprises of informal economy that employ one or more employees continuously. This sector includes the black market or underground economy, dominated by illegal activities (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011, p. 226).

UN Women (2020) report that people in vulnerable employment are less likely to receive benefits, social security, and representation by unions. Additionally, these jobs are likely to have low productivity, low wages, and difficult working conditions (UN Women, 2020). According to the World Bank, in 2019, 42.5 percent of Iranian women work in vulnerable employment (The World Bank, 2019). Human Rights Watch reported that in 2015, "a study conducted by the Office of the Vice President for Women and Family Affairs estimates that half of the jobs held by women are in the informal economy" (Far, 2017). However, Bahramitash & Esfahani (2011) argue that the share of women working in the informal sector may be significantly undercounted in formal official statistics. Bahramitash & Esfahani (2011) found that women working in the informal sector do not declare their employment to the national census due to the fear that they would have to pay taxes and that the state would become involved in their affairs.

Bahramitash & Esfahani's (2011) research indicated that there are contrasting perceptions regarding informal work, which is based on economic status and the type of work that is performed. During Bahramitash & Esfahani's (2011) research, they found that middle and upper-class women preferred to work informally. Middle and upper-class informal workers tend to operate home-based businesses, which allowed them to work unveiled in a sexually segregated space and provided a space for economic empowerment (Ibid). Additionally, they did not have to face the inconveniences of highly congested traffic and male harassment while traveling to work (Ibid). However, lower-class informal workers tend to be employed as domestic workers, such as maids, or street vendors, which was implied as highly demeaning (Ibid). Domestic workers disclosed that they were often insulted by their employers and forced to do hard work in

humiliating situations (Ibid). Bahramitash & Esfahani (2011) state that street vending is one of the fastest-growing activities in the informal sector. Street vendors frequently face the problems such as “having no legal status or recognition, harassment by local authorities, vulnerability to local authorities who can evict them and confiscate their goods, and unsanitary and hazardous workplaces that often lack basic services” (Ibid. 248). Bahramitash & Esfahani (2011) found that the income of street vendors ranged between three to twenty dollars a day, and a majority earned an average of five to ten dollars a day.

These conflicting perceptions of informal work imply that the self-employed enjoy better pay and working conditions, whereas wage laborers tend to be the worst paid and are at the bottom of employment strata (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011). Informal workers with high-income levels are more likely to set their own terms of employment than women from low-income backgrounds (Ibid). In the case of higher economic status, women tend to prefer informal work due to better working arrangements and more flexible hours, which is more suitable for women’s domestic work as mothers and wives (Ibid). Additionally, preference for the informal sector may also be due to the fact that much formal work is designated in the public sector, and with rising inflation, this sector is not as economically attractive as working in the informal sector (Ibid).

Current Snapshot of the Iranian Economy

Iran is an upper-middle-income country, characterized by its hydrocarbon, agricultural, and service sectors, along with a noticeable presence in manufacturing and financial services (The World Bank, 2022; Far, 2017). Iran ranks second in the world for natural gas reserves and fourth for crude oil reserves, which they primarily use to support their economy. However, the World Bank (2022) reported that the oil sector is often subject to “external shocks, including

sanctions and commodity price volatility," making Iran's reliance on it unpredictable. Large contractions in oil exports place significant pressure on government finances and drove inflation to over 40 percent for four consecutive years (Ibid). High inflation led to a substantial reduction in households' purchasing power, and in addition, job creation was insufficient to absorb the large pool of young and educated candidates in the labor market (Ibid). Iran's economy was further demolished due to COVID-19. Although there has been economic recovery following the pandemic, the World Bank (2022) indicates that the "economic rebound has yet to be reflected in the labor market as the recovery was largely driven by the oil sector, and employment growth in services and industries could not compensate for job losses in the agricultural sector." Consequently, only a third of pandemic period job losses have been recovered (Ibid).

Human Rights Watch (Begum, 2022) reported that this prolonged economic crisis coupled with women's rights violations, drove many Iranians into the margins of poverty, affecting women disproportionately. Yee & Fassihi (2022) and the World Bank (2022) reported that many working-class people are falling below the poverty line as inflation is accelerating, and according to Iran's Ministry of Labor and Social Services, in 2021, one out of three Iranians, nearly 30 million people, live in poverty. Educated young Iranians are unable to find jobs that match their degrees, and consequently, high inflation combined with a lack of jobs has negatively impacted household welfare, adding to social grievances (Ibid). The World Bank (2022) reports that "average GDP growth is projected to remain modest as the economy remains constrained by the continued impact of the pandemic through weaker domestic and global demand, while trade, especially oil exports, remains restricted by ongoing sanctions." Additionally, sustained inflation

will continue to put pressure on the livelihood of poor and vulnerable households which have been severely hit by the pandemic crisis (Ibid).

8. Egypt: Present-Day Analysis of the Current Standing of Women and the Egyptian Economy

According to the World Economic Forum (2022), the Global Gender Gap Index ranks Egypt at 129 out of 146 countries. The Gender Inequality Index ranks Egypt at 109 out of 170 countries with the female (ages 15 and older) labor force participation rate at 15 percent in comparison to 67 percent of men (UNDP, 2021).

Legal Barriers Affecting Female Labor Force Participation

Although the 2014 Egyptian Constitution guarantees the equality and protection of female and male citizens in terms of freedom of choice of profession, wages, and terms and conditions of work, Egyptian women frequently endure several barriers prohibiting their access to the workforce (UN Women, 2021). According to the World Economic Forum (2022), the Economic Participation and Opportunity Index ranks Egypt at 142 out of 146 countries.

In 2008, the Egyptian Child Law rose the minimum age of marriage to 18 years for both genders, however, El-Saharty *et al.* (2022) and UNICEF (2018) both argue that despite outlawing child marriage, the practice is still common in Egypt, often due to poverty, social norms, and low educational attainment. El-Saharty *et al.* (2022) estimate that 6 percent of females ages 15 to 17 and 27 percent of females ages 18 to 19 are forced to undergo early marriages. Early and child marriages facilitate higher fertility rates, curtail educational attainment, and significantly hinder access to the workforce, which in turn, tremendously reduces the social and economic welfare of the country (El-Saharty *et al.,* 2022; UNICEF, 2018). El-Saharty *et al.* (2022) argue that “early

marriage and early motherhood can create a vicious cycle that affects women's agency, endowments, and economic and productive role, and results in increased fertility" (p. 68).

Egyptian labor laws require employers to provide 4 months of paid maternity leave and childcare services if more than 100 women are employed at the workplace and include provisions that declare it illegal to dismiss a pregnant woman from work (Constant *et al.,* 2020; Roque, 2021; Barsoum, 2018). However, Constant *et al.* (2020), Roque (2021), and Barsoum (2018) find that employers are generally unwilling to assume the costs of women's reproductive roles by providing paid maternity leave or childcare services, suggesting that there is a preference to hire men rather than women. Constant *et al.* (2020) note that labor laws do not prohibit employers from asking job candidates about family status, and their research found employers do consider family status, especially if there is a likelihood that female candidates may decide to start a family in the near future. Additionally, Constant *et al.* (2020) find that "employers perceive women as more costly and less productive relative to men, because of the need to create conditions that limit contact with men through separate workspaces and to adapt to restrictions that women have in terms of travel and freedom of movement" (p.17). Part-time work is also not included in Egyptian labor laws, and Roque (2021) asserts that Egyptian women prefer part-time work as it enables working mothers to successfully balance their work and domestic duties. The ILO identifies that only 22.5 percent of married women with young children participate in the labor force (ILO, 2017). The perception that women are more costly to hire due to the requirements under Egyptian law along with high levels of gender discrimination significantly diminishes employment opportunities for women

The 2014 Egyptian Constitution introduced penalties for sexual harassment, however, Constant *et al.* (2020) Roque (2021) Barsoum (2018) El Feki *et al.* (2017) identify high levels of

sexual harassment in the workplace and public transport. Constant *et al.* (2020) argue that "despite the existence of these laws, there remain issues with privacy for victims of sexual harassment and violence, support for victims to report incidents, and investigations of incidents" (p. 15). Roque (2021) and Barsoum (2018) indicate that there is a connection between sexual harassment and reputation. Roque (2021) states that many Egyptian women perceive employment as "humiliating" and "degrading" due to the high levels of sexual harassment in public transport and the workplace. In addition, Barsoum (2018) notes that there is a "fear of sexual harassment and the reputation effect of working in small-scale private-sector companies, where it is often only one female in the workplace, as key issues for unmarried young women to opt out of the labor market" (p. 906). For unmarried women, marriageability is a primary concern in Egyptian society, and if a job presents reputational concerns, withdrawing from employment may come with social benefits, as that decision becomes a cultural symbol of social status (Ibid). El Feki *et al.* (2017) reported that over 60 percent of Egyptian men admitted to sexually harassing a woman or girl, and almost 60 percent of Egyptian women reported that they have been exposed to sexual harassment - mainly verbal. Constant *et al.* (2020) argue that the poor enforcement of sexual harassment laws and the lack of privacy protections and support significantly prohibit women from entering the workforce.

The gender wage gap also appears to be another significant barrier deterring women from the workforce (Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020). According to the World Economic Forum (2022), women's estimated earned income is 3.82k, whereas men's estimated earned income is 19.92k. Constant *et al.* (2020) notes that overall, women earn 12 to 14 percent less than men in Egypt.

The Informal Economy: Vulnerable Employment

During Sadat's presidency (1970-1981), several "open-door" policies were implemented with the intent to open the economy to private-sector investment, which consequently led to a decrease in the public sector (Barsoum, 2018). Barsoum (2018) states that the immense growth of the private sector led to job scarcity and compromised quality. Furthermore, Roque (2021) and Barsoum (2018) argue that reducing the public sector disproportionately affected women, seeing that the public sector was the primary employer of women. Roque (2021), Constant *et al.* (2020), and Barsoum (2018) note that women generally prefer working in the public sector since it provides appropriate working hours, lower incidences of sexual harassment, paid leave, and job security. The public sector is also associated with social status, as it frequently employs educated, middle-class workers, therefore it has a reputation as being a decent and suitable workplace for women (Ibid). Another benefit of the public sector includes its flexibility and shorter working hours, which allow women to effectively balance their employment and domestic duties.

The private sector is now considered the new engine of employment growth in Egypt, however, Egyptian women have strongly resisted joining this sector (Roque, 2021). Roque (2021) states that the formal private sector employs only one-fourth of women, whereas 42 percent of women are reported to be employed in the public sector. Although the formal private sector is considered as providing reasonable, quality employment for women, Roque (2020) argues that it has significantly failed to recruit female employees due to its lack of female-friendly policies, such as maternity leave and childcare services. As a result, the formal private sector experiences high exit rates once women marry, and consequently, this sector frequently employs men over women (Ibid). Due to the significant reduction of the public sector

and the disapproval of the formal private sector, high rates of women are turning to the private informal sector (Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020, Barsoum, 2018).

The private informal sector consists of unregulated or unregistered employment with a lack of job security, benefits, social protection, health insurance, and social insurance along with providing poor wages, poor working conditions, long working hours, and higher risks of sexual harassment (Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020). Research has indicated that the private informal sector is rapidly growing, offering an alternative to the formal public and private sectors. The ILO database reveals that informal employment is the most common among younger individuals, particularly ages 15 to 24, with 74 percent of women and 92 percent of men participating in the informal economy (ILO, 2020). Additionally, the ILO indicates that the total population of young adults, ages 15 to 24, forms 90 percent of the informal economy (Ibid). In 2019, the World Bank found that 28 percent of women in comparison to 15 percent of men work in vulnerable employment (The World Bank, 2019). Roque (2021) defines vulnerable employment as "consisting of unpaid and own-account workers, which includes the country's working poor who are earning less than U.S. $2 per day" (p. 35). However, particularly for women, the informal sector is much less attractive due to the lack of labor laws and poor working conditions (Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020). Rather than tolerating the hardships of the informal sector, many women choose to withdraw from the labor force altogether (Constant *et al.,* 2020). Many married women stated that they prefer to be stay-at-home mothers due to the informal sectors' poor working conditions, low wages, no benefits, and difficult, long commutes, which are exacerbated by their important domestic duties (Roque, 2021). According to the ILO, only 48 percent of married women are employed in the informal sector, therefore confirming the notion that married women favor the role of a stay-at-home mother rather than employment (ILO, 2020).

Egypt is experiencing significant improvements in education levels, with higher enrollments and graduation rates, however, due to poor economic growth, labor force participation did not increase for either gender, but decreased, resulting in a large portion of the country's human resources untapped (El-Saharty *et al.* 2022). El-Saharty *et al.* (2022) and Roque (2020) argue that this has significantly impacted women with tertiary education, seeing that they are entering the labor market at increasingly lower rates. According to the World Bank (2018), 40 percent of women relative to 38 percent of men are enrolled in tertiary education. Only 43 percent of women with a Bachelor's in comparison to 80 percent of men are participating in the labor force (ILO, 2020).

Roque (2021) states that "the increasing number of university graduates is correlated to the current "youth bulge" in Egypt whereby young people aged 15 to 29 represent more than one-quarter (27 percent) of the population" (p. 93-94). This "youth bulge" created fierce competition in the labor market, which has been exacerbated by widespread job scarcity (Roque, 2021). Constant *et al.* (2020) and Roque (2021) find that the unemployed, educated youth in Egypt prefer to wait for extended periods rather than accept a job below their education and reservation wage, thus exacerbating the unemployment rate. In addition to job scarcity and fierce competition, the unemployed youth are also facing Egypt's low-quality education system (El-Saharty *et al.,* 2022; Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020; Barsoum, 2018). Poor quality appears to be present in all levels of education, given that the overall learning poverty rate stands at 70 percent (The World Bank, 2016). Additionally, Constant *et al.,* (2020) find that "employer surveys and analyses of labor force data reveal that graduates of secondary, postsecondary, and vocational education are deemed to lack both technical and soft skills in demand by employers" (p. 5). There is a common consensus that Egypt's education systems are not providing the youth

with the necessary skills to gain secure employment (El-Saharty *et al.,* 2022; Roque, 2020; Constant *et al.,* 2020; Barsoum, 2018). El-Saharty *et al.* (2022) argue that "although the government is committed to "education for all," it remains a challenge to keep pace with the rising demand for enrollment, expanding the education system, and constructing classrooms to absorb the population growth" (p. 59). El-Saharty *et al.* (2022) identify several challenges in Egypt's tertiary education such as overcrowding and poor quality. The rise in enrollment in tertiary education has not been matched by a rise in per-student funding or teaching capacity, thus resulting in a higher student ratio in comparison to a significantly lower faculty ratio (El-Saharty *et al.,* 2022). For instance, the student-to-faculty ratio in a commerce program stood at 489 to 1 (Ibid).

Current Snapshot of the Egyptian Economy

According to the World Bank (2022), "Egypt's growth model shifted…towards non-tradable low productivity sectors contributed to the relatively limited export penetration and sophistication, as well as below-potential labor market outcomes" (p. 1). Consequently, as of 2020, Egypt's poverty rate stood at 30 percent (The World Bank, 2022). The World Bank (2022) argues that pursuing "structural reforms to unleash the private sector's potential in higher value-added and export-oriented activities are necessary to create jobs and improve living standards" (p. 1).

High fertility rates coupled with job scarcity and a low-quality education system have triggered a significant rise in unemployed youth, disproportionately affecting women. However, the Egyptian government has launched a new strategy intending to alleviate these concerns (El-Saharty *et al,* 2022). Egypt has launched the National Population Strategy (2015-2030)

which is accompanied by the First Five-Year Population Implementation Plan (2015-2020) (Ibid). According to the National Population Strategy:

> "the State shall implement a population program aimed at striking a balance between population growth and available resources; and shall maximize investments in human resources and improve their characteristics to achieve sustainable development" (El-Saharty *et al.,* 2022, p. 25).

The National Population Strategy places emphasis on the improvement and accessibility of family planning and reproductive services, the facilitation of adolescent livelihood and the improvement of youth health, the improvement of education quality across all levels, and the empowerment of women (Ibid). Egypt has already witnessed a few successes within the First-Five Year Population Implementation Plan, such as a 94 percent increase in the number of provided family planning services and a sector-wide reform to modernize the education system and prioritize learning (Ibid). However, Egypt continues to face challenges concerning financial resources and the portion of the national budget authorized to be applied to its primary objectives (Ibid). The small share of Egypt's national budget appears to be insufficient to resolve all of the National Population Plan's objectives (Ibid). El-Saharty *et al.* (2022) argue that the rise in fertility rates presents significant challenges for a comprehensive improvement of family planning and reproductive services, adolescent and youth health, education quality, and female empowerment.

9. Comparative Analysis of Iran and Egypt

Egypt and Iran experience high levels of gender inequality that have been exacerbated by economic crises combined with decades of corruption and mismanagement. Consequently, Iran's Gender Gap Index ranks the country at 143 out of 146 countries, and the Gender Inequality Index places them at 115 out of 170 countries (UNDP, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022). Likewise, Egypt's Gender Gap Index is 129 out of 146 countries, and its Gender Inequality Index is 109 out of 170 countries (Ibid). It appears that Iran experiences higher levels of gender

inequality across all sectors, however, the economic indicators used for this thesis demonstrate similarities. According to the World Economic Forum, Iran is ranked 144 out of 146 countries for Economic Participation and Opportunity, which is demonstrated in their overall labor force participation (ages 15 and older), with 14 percent of female participation in comparison to 68 percent of men (Ibid). Similarly, Egypt's Economic Participation and Opportunity Index stands at 142 out of 146 countries, and their overall labor force participation (ages 15 and older) indicates female participation at 15 percent relative to 67 percent of men (World Economic Forum, 2022; UNDP 2021). Additionally, both countries experience a high gender wage gap with Iran's Estimated Earned Income for women at 3.46k and men at 21.66k, and Egypt's Estimated Earned Income for women at 3.82k and 19.92k (World Economic Forum, 2022). As of 2022, the ongoing economic crises have placed Egypt's national poverty rate at 29.7 percent in comparison to Iran at 18.4 percent (The World Bank, 2022; Kozhanov, 2022). However, Iran is experiencing higher levels of inflation at 40 percent in contrast to Egypt at 8.5 percent (IMF, 2022). Iran's extreme inflation rate is likely due to two rounds of U.S.-led sanctions that have isolated them from the international economy (The World Bank, 2022).

Sociocultural Beliefs as Barriers to the Workforce

Although both Constitutions guarantee equality and equal protection of both genders, both Iran and Egypt follow Shari'a law (Islamic law), which is ingrained in their Constitutions and reinforces the value of traditional gender roles (Roque, 2021; UN Women, 2021; Rehman, 2021; Iravani, 2010).

In both societies, marriage is perceived as a woman's prime value and social identity (Tremayne, 2006; Roque, 2021). Both societies fail to recognize a woman's educational attainment or career advancement, but rather esteem women for their ability to secure a good

husband and have a family (Ibid). Due to the significance of marriage in both societies, research indicates that women face a considerable amount of pressure to fulfill their family obligations of marriage (Ibid). In both countries, women asserted that their failure to secure a good marriage would result in great shame upon the family name and would ruin their reputations (Ibid). Consequently, unmarried women are socially stigmatized in both societies and are perceived as having no identity (Ibid). Research on both societies suggests that the patriarchal culture associated with gender roles is directly correlated with female labor force participation (Barsoum, 2018). This prevalent sociocultural belief is demonstrated in married women's labor force participation statistics, seeing that 11.5 percent of married Iranian women in comparison to 75 percent of married Iranian men participate in the labor force (ILO, 2020). Similarly, 15 percent of married Egyptian women participate in the labor force relative to 84 percent of Egyptian men. Additionally, 21 percent of single Iranian women and 34 percent of divorced Iranian women participate in the labor force, whereas 19 percent of single women and 30 percent of divorce women participate in the labor force, therefore indicating that marriage is a significant barrier to female labor force participation (Ibid).

Research indicated that despite several similarities regarding marriage, gender roles, and the sexual division of labor, both societies have distinct perceptions of education. Tremayne (2006) finds that delaying marriage for education is controversial, considering that men will rarely marry an older girl who has passed her "desirable childbearing" age. However, in Iran, education among female youth is highly encouraged in Egyptian society, seeing that education is perceived as assisting women in securing better grooms, becoming better mothers, and indicates a high socioeconomic status (Roque, 2021). Roque (2021) found that in Egypt, men with higher education are likely unwilling to marry someone with lower educational attainment, and several

Egyptian women indicated that due to their low educational attainment, they were treated poorly, perceived as inferior, and subjected to humiliation by their husbands. However, in Iran, research suggests that men do not wish to marry girls who obtained higher education than themselves (Tremayne, 2006).

Legal Barriers to the Workforce

Research has indicated that there are far more legal barriers in Iran than in Egypt that is preventing female labor force participation. In Iran, according to Article 1117 of the civil code, a husband has the right to prohibit his wife from occupations he deems as against family values and harmful to his or her reputation, and employers often require written permission from women's husbands to work (Begum, 2022; Rehamn, 2021; Far, 2017). The legal marriage age in both countries also differs significantly. According to the Iranian Constitution, girls can legally marry at the age of 13 in comparison to 15 years for boys with paternal and judicial consent (Rehman, 21). However, in Egypt, the legal age of marriage is 18 years for both genders (El-Saharty, 2022; UNICEF, 2018). Although Egypt's legal marriage age is the highly accepted, recognized age for adulthood, both countries appear to be experiencing high levels of child marriages. Iran, however, presents a special case for child marriage seeing that their Constitution's definition of a child is not restricted to a certain age and varies from context to context, therefore, a child can be a child in one context, but an adult in another (Tremayne, 2006). Additionally, Iranian tradition involves the practice of temporary marriages *(mut'a/sigheh),* which do not need to be registered, and witnesses are not required (Ibid). Parents, who are prohibited under the civil code from registering marriages under the age of 13, often resort to temporary marriage to legitimize child marriage, which is then switched to a permanent marriage once the child reaches the legal age to marry (Ibid). Due to Iran's legal provisions that

ultimately encourage child marriage, they are experiencing higher rates of child marriage in comparison to Egypt, with 21 percent of girls married under the age of 18 in comparison to 17 percent in Egypt in 2014 (IranWire, 2022; Demographic and Health Survey, 2015).

Iran's labor laws also include significantly more legal provisions prohibiting female labor force participation in comparison to Egypt. The Iranian Labor Code, "grants equal protection and free choice of profession to men and women as long as it is not inconsistent with Islamic values, the public interest, or the rights of others" (Rehman, 2021, p. 20). Consequently, employers are prohibited from hiring women for jobs that are deemed dangerous, arduous, or harmful, and employers must ensure that women are employed in jobs that are deemed suitable by Shari'a (Rehman, 2021; Far, 2017). However, Egypt does enforce labor laws that prohibit female participation in certain sectors, but they are not as severe as Iran's (UN Women, 2021). According to Egypt's labor laws, women are prohibited "to work underground in any mines and quarries regardless of their type, and all work related to the extraction of minerals and stones from the subsoil (Ibid, p. 1). Additionally, Iranian labor laws do not prohibit gender discrimination in the hiring process, whereas, in Egypt, there are legal provisions for this (Rehman, 2021; Far, 2017). Because of the failure to include legal provisions on gender discrimination in the hiring process, Iranian employers in the public and private sectors often specify gender preferences as a qualification for employment (Ibid). Iranian women have also reported that they face discrimination in terms of employment benefits, such as bonuses, social security, health insurance, and overtime (Far, 2017). Additionally, since Iranian law considers men the head of the household, health insurance is only guaranteed when women are providing for their husbands or if their husband is unemployed or disabled (Ibid). Iranian law also requires women to wear the Islamic *hijab* in public and according to the Iranian Constitution, "women

who do not appear with a *hijab* that conforms to authorities' interpretation of modesty in public can be sentenced to up to two months in prison or fined" (Ibid). As a consequence of this law, several Iranian women emphasized that they are subjected to arbitrary and discriminatory criteria when it comes to clothing (Ibid). Although the Iranian labor laws present significantly more barriers to female employment, the Egyptian labor laws do not include part-time work (Roque, 2021). Roque (2021) argues that Egyptian women prefer part-time work as it enables working mothers to successfully balance their work and domestic duties.

Research has shown that both countries are experiencing high levels of sexual harassment in the workplace, however, Iran does not include legal provisions or penalties for sexual harassment in Iranian law, whereas Egypt does (Constant *et al.,* 2020; Roque, 2021; Barsoum, 2018, El Feki *et al.,* 2017; Far, 2017) The 2014 Egyptian Constitution introduced penalties for sexual harassment, however, high levels of sexual harassment in the workplace are still reported (Ibid). Although Egypt provides legal provisions for sexual harassment and Iran does not, both societies appear to have the same sociocultural perceptions of sexual harassment (Ibid). In both countries, it appears that there is a social stigma attached to victims and Iranian and Egyptian women reported that they are frequently blamed despite being victims (Ibid). Since the notion of marriage is a highly esteemed duty for women and extramarital relations are perceived as unorthodox in both societies, a job that presents reputational concerns might encourage women to withdraw from the labor force permanently, considering that this decision becomes a cultural symbol of social status (Barsoum, 2018; Far, 2017). In Egypt and Iran, pregnant women also face several barriers prohibiting their employment (Rehamn, 2021; Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020; Barsoum, 2018; Far, 2017). However, it is important to note that Iran's labor laws do not include legal provisions that protect female employees against termination or demotion due to

taking maternity leave nor does it include sanctions against employers that take such measures (Rehman, 2021; Far, 2017). In contrast, Egypt's labor laws indicate that it is illegal to dismiss pregnant women from work, however, these legal provisions have not prohibited employers from doing so (Constant *et al.,* 2020; Roque, 2020; Barsoum, 2018). Considering that both countries provide legal provisions that guarantee paid maternity leave, research has found that there is a common consensus among pregnant women in both countries (Ibid). There is a widely held notion among employers that women are perceived as more costly and less productive relative to men, due to their reproductive roles (Ibid). Because employers are generally unwilling to assume the costs of women's reproductive roles, such as by providing maternity leave or childcare services, employers have indicated that they prefer to hire men over women (Ibid).

Economic Policies, Economic Crises, and the Informal Economy

Research has found that Egyptian and Iranian women participate in the informal economy at significantly high levels (Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020, Barsoum, 2018; Far, 2017; Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011). The expansion of the informal economy was due to a series of economic policies, resulting in the reduction of the public sector and the growth of the private sector (Roque, 2021; Barsoum, 2018; Far, 2017; Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011). It is important to note that both countries implemented rounds of similar economic policies that triggered the informal economy's expansion (Ibid). Due to the high levels of discrimination in the public and private sectors, a significant amount of Egyptian and Iranian women have turned to the informal economy for work (Ibid). There is also widespread job scarcity which has resulted in fierce competition in the labor market due to the high levels of educated youth, which is disproportionately impacting Egyptian and Iranian women (El-Saharty *et al.,* 2022; Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020; Toscano *et al.,* 2020; Far, 2017; Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011; Iravani,

2010). According to the World Bank (2020), 57 percent of Iranian women in comparison to 59 percent of Iranian men are enrolled in tertiary education, and 26 percent of Iranian women in comparison to 26 percent of Iranian men are graduating from tertiary education. According to the ILO, only 33 percent of women with a Bachelor's relative to 66.5 percent of men with a Bachelor's participate in the labor force (ILO, 2020). Similarly, in 2018, 40 percent of Egyptian women were enrolled in tertiary education in comparison to 38 percent of Egyptian men, and in 2016, 19 percent of Egyptian women in comparison to 17 percent of Egyptian men were graduating from tertiary education (The World Bank, 2018; The World Bank, 2016). Additionally, only 43 percent of women with a Bachelor's in comparison to 80 percent of men with a Bachelor's participate in the labor force (ILO, 2020). Despite the rise of female educational attainment, it is clear that this is not reflected in female labor force participation. Unlike in Iran, youth unemployment rates are exacerbated by Egypt's low-quality education system, which is present at all levels of education (El-Saharty *et al.,* 2022; Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020; Barsoum, 2018). According to the World Bank (2016), the overall learning poverty rate stood at 70 percent in Egypt, in comparison to 26 percent in Iran. There is a common consensus that Egypt's education systems are not providing the youth with the necessary skills to gain secure employment (Ibid). Constant *et al.* (2020) found that "employer surveys and analyses of labor force data reveal that graduates of secondary, postsecondary, and vocational education are deemed to lack both technical and soft skills in demand by employers" (p. 5). Additionally, El-Saharty *et al.* (2022) identified several challenges in Egypt's tertiary education, such as overcrowding and poor quality. Although the Egyptian government advocates for "education for all," they have failed to adequately address the rising demand for enrollment,

the expansion of the education system, and the construction of classrooms to absorb population growth.

According to the ILO (2020), 50 percent of Egyptian women participate in the informal sector and 74 percent of women ages 15 to 24 participate in the informal sector. Additionally, 21 percent of Egyptian women with a Bachelor's are participating in the informal sector (ILO, 2020). Unfortunately, the ILO does not provide data on Iranian female participation in the informal sector, however, the World Bank (2019) reported that 42.5 percent of Iranian women work in vulnerable employment, relative to 28 percent of Egyptian women. Research on both countries indicates that there are conflicting perceptions among women regarding informal employment. Research on Iran suggests that these perceptions of the informal sector are based on economic status and the type of work that is performed (Bahramitash & Esfahani, 2011). Upper-class women prefer to operate home-based businesses, as it allows them to work unveiled in segregated spaces (Ibid). In contrast, lower-class informal workers tend to be employed as domestic workers, such as maids, or street vendors, which was implied as highly demeaning (Ibid). Unlike the case of Iran, where perceptions of the informal sector were based on economic status, the overall consensus of the informal sector for Egyptian women was highly negative (Roque, 2021). Many Egyptian married women argued that they preferred to be stay-at-home mothers due to the informal sectors' poor working conditions, low wages, lack of benefits, and difficult, long commutes, which altogether, are exacerbated by their critical domestic duties (Ibid). Additionally, Roque (2021) found that a majority of Egyptian women perceived informal employment as "suffering," and that the lack of quality jobs has served as a major deterrent for women entering the labor force.

Government's Strategy

Considering the high levels of gender inequality and the ongoing economic crises in Egypt and Iran, the government has responded with distinct strategies intended to resolve these concerns. In Iran, the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has called for population growth, emphasizing the need to stifle policies on women's rights to increase the population rate, arguing that population growth is a vital policy and a crucial task (NCRI, 2022). Iran is implementing a series of policies, known as the Youthful Population and Protection of the Family Act, which reduces female access to contraceptives, criminalizes abortion, and prohibits voluntary sterilization (NCRI, 2022; OHCHR, 2021). Because of these policies, poverty rates are expected to increase drastically in Iran. In contrast, the Egyptian government has launched the National Population Strategy (2015-2030) accompanied by the First Five-Year Population Implementation Plan (2015-2020) which is intended to alleviate the impacts of the ongoing economic crisis (El-Saharty *et al.,* 2022). According to the National Population Strategy: "the State shall implement a population program aimed at striking a balance between population growth and available resources; and shall maximize investments in human resources and improve their characteristics to achieve sustainable development"(Ibid, p. 25).

The National Population Strategy intends to improve family planning and reproductive services, facilitate adolescent livelihood and improve youth health, improve education quality across all levels, and facilitate female empowerment (Ibid). Egypt has already witnessed a few successes within the First-Five Year Population Implementation Plan, such as a 94 percent increase in the number of provided family planning services and a sector-wide reform to modernize the education system and prioritize learning (Ibid). However, Egypt continues to face several challenges concerning financial resources and the portion of the national budget authorized to be applied to its primary objectives (Ibid). The small share of Egypt's national

budget that has been allocated for these strategies appears to be too insufficient to resolve all of these concerns (Ibid).

Unlike Iran, Egypt has recognized high fertility rates as a severe concern, which has augmented job scarcity and deteriorated their education systems (Ibid). High fertility rates have prevented Egypt from transforming its growing population into human capital (Ibid). Seeing that a large portion of Egypt's human capital remains untapped, there is a significant amount of unemployed, educated youth due to job scarcity in a fiercely competitive labor market and an education system that is failing to provide the youth with the necessary skills for employment, which is ultimately disproportionately affecting women (El-Saharty *et al.,* 2022; Roque, 2021; Constant *et al.,* 2020; Barsoum, 2018). Consequently, the ongoing economic crisis has augmented levels of poverty and inflation rates. In the case of Iran, the Iranian government has failed to recognize that these same concerns are intensifying their economic crisis. Emphasizing population growth in the Youthful Population and Protection of the Family law will prohibit a significant amount of Iranian women's entry into the labor force (NCRI, 2022; Begum 2022; OHCHR, 2021). The number of children born into poverty will considerably increase due to the emphasis on population growth rather than the improvement of healthcare, education, and female empowerment (NCRI, 2022; OHCHR, 2021). The Youthful Population and Protection of the Family law will ultimately accelerate Iran's economic crisis, seeing that the potential of the large female population will remain untapped and will be unable to transform into human capital, which would ultimately produce overall economic development for Iran.

10. Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that sociocultural perceptions and traditions, such as the sexual division of labor, the significance of marriage, and the prevalence of child marriages, in

addition to legal barriers preventing female entrance to the labor force and their extension within the labor force are critical to a woman's decision to work (Far, *et al*. 2017). Additionally, economic crises that have been exacerbated by high fertility rates, job scarcity, fierce labor market competition, and an increase in educated youth, have disproportionately impacted female labor force participation (El-Saharty *et al.* 2022). Considering the prolonged economic crises, decades of corruption and mismanagement, and prevalent sociocultural beliefs and traditions, Egypt and Iran are paying a tremendously high opportunity cost by not effectively utilizing the human capital of the potential female labor force (Barsoum *et a.* 2018). Additionally, because Iranian and Egyptian women are forced to turn to the informal sector for employment, the informal economy and its expansion appear to be another high opportunity cost for Egypt and Iran, considering that the informal sector generates no tax revenue for the states (Roque *et al.* 2021). Seeing that Egypt and Iran prioritized the expansion of the private sector, a considerable amount of Egyptians and Iranians of both genders are working in the informal sector, thus a large portion of the Egyptian and Iranian workforce remains unutilized and unable to contribute to the economy (Roque *et al.* 2021).

Stemming from the research accumulated within this thesis, I have argued that neither women's employment nor women's access to higher education reflects female empowerment. In the case of female employment, there is limited empowerment potential in jobs with poor quality, low wages, lack of job security, lack of benefits, poor working conditions, and threats of sexual harassment (El-Saharty *et al.* 2022). Additionally, working, married women also face blame and guilt from their husbands due to less-than-perfect household conditions and unattended children - which is attributable to sociocultural norms, - therefore significantly limiting the empowering potential of female work (Roque *et al.* 2021). Social policies and legal provisions have failed to

protect women from sexual harassment, poor working conditions, poor-quality jobs, low wages, and discrimination in employment and the hiring process, and have failed to provide job security and job benefits (Barsoum, 2018). In the case of education, my research has provided a considerable amount of evidence indicating that attaining a higher education does not demonstrate an increase in female labor force participation (Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011). Although there has been a significant increase in women enrolled in tertiary education and graduating from tertiary education, research has indicated that high rates of educated, young women are employed in the informal economy, therefore negatively affecting female empowerment (Roque *et al.* 2021).

In order to achieve gender equality in employment, it is crucial that the Egyptian and Iranian governments provide legal provisions for any acts of gender discrimination in employment and the hiring process and guarantee women equal opportunity in jobs and remuneration commensurate with their education. However, for this to be successful, it is essential that the governments ensure that these legal provisions are adequately implemented and enforced, considering that Egyptian law includes legal provisions prohibiting gender discrimination in employment, but research has indicated that it is not adequately enforced (Rehman, 2021). The governments must address the social stigma attached to women and their reproductive roles within the workforce, and it is essential that the governments enforce greater flexibility and family-friendly policies as provisions in employment to further encourage women to participate in the labor force. It is crucial that governments and employers recognize women's domestic duties, which are attributable to sociocultural tradition, and provide them with social insurance and facilities intending to assist them in combining household duties with outside employment. In the case of Iran, overall legal reform is vital, considering that Iranian laws affect

women of all ages across all sectors of society (Abbott, 2017). Laws in Iran significantly regulate women's lives in comparison to Egypt, considering that Iranian law declares that 13 is the legal marriage age for girls or that husbands have the right to prevent their wives from working in occupations he deems as against family values or harmful to their reputation (Rehman *et al.* 2021). However, simply creating laws to increase female labor force participation will not resolve this issue. It is imperative that sociocultural values dictating the perceptions of women and their prescribed gender roles are transformed.

I also argued that decreasing fertility rates is crucial for economic growth, female empowerment, and larger investments in health and education. Lower fertility rates and fewer children per household indicate that more resources are available per child and can be invested in the health, education, and skills development of these children, therefore inducing greater human capital formation (El-Saharty *et al.* 2022). Additionally, households with fewer children can accumulate savings, which can boost overall economic growth through investments back into the economy (Ibid). Without a fertility decline, Egypt and Iran will face an ever-growing population base with larger youth cohorts, and children will be further exposed to greater health risks and lower investments in education. Higher fertility rates coupled with larger youth cohorts also trigger widespread job scarcity and fierce labor market competition, which disproportionately affects female access to employment (Roque *et al.* 2021). Consequently, there is a significant number of unemployed youth due to the Egyptian and Iranian government's failure to create adequate employment opportunities that meet the needs of their increasing population, therefore, a large source of the country's human capital remains untapped, unable to contribute to economic growth (Ibid). Fertility decline will also produce labor market opportunities for women, seeing that their reproductive roles will not be stressed due to prevalent sociocultural values. By

actively engaging women in the economy, which is another source of human capital significantly untapped, Egypt and Iran can help foster overall social and economic development (El-Saharty *et al.* 2022). Removing barriers to female labor force participation and investing in female economic empowerment, not only promotes women's agency and advances gender equality but can all increase the over GDP, reduce levels of poverty, and lead to better household outcomes by increasing investments in children's health and education, which ultimately facilitates overall economic and social development.

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