WHAT WOMEN WANT: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND ASPIRATIONS IN MENA REGION COUNTRIES

Report

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ACRONYMS

EU	European Union
FLPR	Female Labour Participation Rate
GNI	Gross National Income
GPI	Gender Parity Index
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MENA	Middle East North Africa
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
STEM	Science Technology Engineering Math
SWANA	South West Asia and North Africa
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WB	World Bank
WDI	World Development Indicators
WVS	World Value Survey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ability to disentangle how aspirations of populations change according to different geographical and socio-economic contexts is important to determine the effectiveness of a country's international projection. Understanding how to read and interpret aspirations can indeed be very useful for 'building' on common traits future development programs. In this perspective, the issue of gender equality and women's empowerment becomes of interest not only in terms of access to rights but also in strategic terms to predict future trajectories of human and economic development, countries' stability, demographic pressure and migration dynamics.

The present research, carried out by the Inclusive Development Unit of ARCO - PIN s.c.r.l., aims to share with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation an in-depth analysis of the relationship between attitudes and aspirations towards gender equality on the one hand and countries' development trends on the other hand. The geographical focus of the analysis is the Middle East and North Africa (MENA, or SWANA, meaning South West Asia and North Africa) region, which is characterised by the so-called 'MENA paradox' (a dynamic whereby despite the rapid narrowing of the gender gap in education and the decrease in fertility rates, female participation in the labour market still presents low and stagnant levels). Considering the 'MENA paradox', the region represents a very interesting case study for this type of analysis.

Although there is an extensive literature analysing structural barriers to women's labour market participation in the region, the influence of aspirations and attitudes and their consequences on women's economic choices has not yet been analysed in depth. We therefore intend to contribute creating a solid knowledge base on the relationship between women's background, attitudes, and aspirations and on how these influence women's socio-economic behaviour in the MENA region. We adopted a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative analysis of data from the World Value Surveys with qualitative information from interviews with key informants from governmental institutions, international organisations, development partners and academia.

The results indicate that the region is characterised by the prevalence of more conservative positions on gender equality than other low- and middle-income regions. These positions vary according to certain socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, individual education level, parental education level and milieu of residence. The internalisation of social norms appears to be a determining factor for socio-economic behaviour: for women, in particular, having more conservative attitudes towards gender equality appears to be associated with a lower likelihood of being active in the labour market. This also remains valid while controlling for other factors i.e. ceteris paribus; in fact, multivariate analyses show that among respondents presenting similar characteristics in terms of gender, age, education and milieu, those who are more conservative towards gender equality, especially with regard to women's position within the family and women's political representation, are more likely to remain outside the labour market than others. Similarly, respondents with attitudes further removed from gender equality tend to maintain higher fertility rates than others.

Thus, our results indicate that, in addition to considering structural barriers in the labour market, an accurate analysis of the attitudes and aspirations of the actors of development themselves is crucial to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals: in order to increase women's labour market participation, it is key to favouring a bottom-up approach that puts women's agency at the centre of programmes.

Policy recommendations based on the results of the research are intended to address gender inequality through various strategies:

1. **Educational Initiatives**: Promote women's participation in high-quality, accessible education programs across all fields. Integrate gender equality principles into school curricula and provide gender-sensitive training for teachers to influence future generations positively.

2. **Addressing Care Responsibilities and Workplace Equality**: Implement policies supporting work-life balance, especially for married women, including affordable childcare services, flexible working hours, and parental leave. Encourage employers to adopt practices that promote gender equality, such as closing the gender pay gap and offering equal career advancement opportunities.

3. **Public Awareness Campaigns**: Launch campaigns challenging traditional gender norms and stereotypes through media, social media, and community-based initiatives, particularly focusing on women's roles in the family and political representation.

4. **Collaborative Efforts and Long-Term Commitment**: Encourage coordinated interventions, involving academia, government, civil society organizations, and international agencies to comprehensively address gender inequality. Advocate for long-term commitment from donors to provide stability and consistency for initiatives aimed at changing gender norms.

5. **Data Collection and Monitoring**: Continuously collect and analyse data on gender attitudes, labour market participation, and fertility rates to monitor progress and adjust policies accordingly. Prioritize gathering data on women's personal aspirations and detailed information on informal work and care work, which are often neglected but critical areas for gender equality efforts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA[1]) region have recorded important progress in human development (UNDP, 2010). Women's empowerment represents an essential ingredient for human development: further to the intrinsic value of gender equality, women's empowerment deeply influences a wide range of social and economic outcomes. The adoption of a gender-specific perspective is crucial for international cooperation, since achieving a better understanding of women's aspirations and preferences is functional to predict development trajectories, economic behaviours and demographic trends. Indeed, agents' economic behaviours and decisions -including their responses to aid and development programs- depend on their attitudes and aspirations, which in turn are strongly connected to social norms and cultural views proper of their contexts. In terms of policy implications, designing and implementing interventions aimed to raise aspirations of girls and women can contribute to foster and unlock important resources for sustainable growth.

The research aims to inform the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation with an in-depth analysis on the relationship between women's aspirations -intended as attitudes and preferences- on one side and development trends on the other side. The MENA region constitutes the geographical focus of the analysis, since it represents a strategic territory for the Italian cooperation, for reasons including geopolitical significance, energy agreements, trade and investment relations, and the management of migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, the region is characterised by the so-called 'MENA paradox': despite the rapid narrowing of the gender gap in education and the decrease in fertility rates, female formal labour market participation is still low and stagnant. Only 21% of women in the region are economically active in the formal labour market, while the corresponding numbers for South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are around 40% and 60%, respectively (Nazier, 2019). Thus, the region represents a very interesting case study for this type of analysis: describing women's aspirations in the MENA region is relevant to inform development and cooperations policies attempting to unravel the MENA paradox, offering stakeholders a useful analytical perspective to tailor adequate policies. While there is an extensive literature analysing structural barriers against women's participation in the labour market, the influence of preferences and attitudes is not in-depth analysed. This work intends to contribute filling the evidence gap by addressing specific objectives:

-Describe the current situation in MENA countries with reference to the MENA paradox, providing an overview on (i) women's education, (ii) women's participation to the labour market and (iii) fertility rates.

-Analyse the relevance of individual attitudes towards gender equality to achieving a better understanding about the MENA paradox, according to an intersectional approach.

-Identify the main dynamics related to women's aspirations and social norms which play a role in explaining the MENA paradox.

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[1] In this report we adopt the acronym "MENA", although the alternative abbreviation "SWANA" (South West Asia and North Africa) is also currently used.

-Verify the existence of converging trends between MENA countries and EU countries with respect to individual attitudes towards gender equality.

The report is structured as follows: the second section includes a description of the theoretical background of the research, together with an overview of the existing evidence on the relationship between women's aspirations and socio-economic behaviours. The third section describes the adopted methodology. The fourth section presents the main results emerging from the analysis, while the final section provides conclusions and policy recommendations.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND EXISTING EVIDENCE

Equal opportunity for men and women to live the lives of their choosing represents an essential human right (Nussbaum, 1999). The conceptualisation of empowerment has been largely discussed in the literature. According to Freire (1990) a prerequisite for gaining power and freedom is moving from being an object (situation where others determine how the person is defined or what happens to him/her) to becoming a subject with agency (situation where the person defines him/herself, individual goals and actions). As we look at gender dynamics, an effective shift in power would mean a woman claiming decision-making authority ("taking power"), opposed to a man delegating power to her ("giving power") (Annan et al., 2021).

Empowerment is multidimensional and refers to economic, social and political spheres (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Economic and social empowerment of women indicates the level of decision-making ability at home and in the workplace with respect to effective control over assets and income, as well as their level of freedoms of speech, association, and movement. Political empowerment is related to women's representation in government, their knowledge of and participation in the political system. Further to its intrinsic value, women empowerment has an instrumental importance to facilitate the achievement of development goals: several analyses show that higher levels of women empowerment are associated with improvements in maternal health (Bloom et al, 2001; Gupta, 1996) and children welfare, including children health and nutrition outcomes (Carlson et al., 2015; Kishor, 2000; Pratley, 2016).

Although the meaning of empowerment has to be contextualized and declined according to social and economic spheres, analysing aspirations of those directly concerned (women, in this case) represents a preliminary step to increase their level of empowerment. Appadurai's work is key in this sense; he defines the *capacity to aspire* as a "meta capacity" in which current capabilities are utilised to shape future capabilities (Appadurai, 2004). Being able to aspire requires connecting immediate steps with intermediate and future goals. The *capacity to aspire* is considered as fundamental in defining future trajectories of personal development. Thus, stimulating the *capacity to aspire* can facilitate a future oriented logic of development (Appadurai, 2004; Nathan, 2005).

Both individual and collective factors play a role in shaping aspirations, which depend on interactions and social life (Appadurai, 2004). As a result, the *capacity to aspire* is not evenly distributed among social groups. Whilst the rich and powerful categories are more likely to fully develop this meta capacity, the poorer and vulnerable groups usually present a more reduced capacity with a brittle horizon of aspirations. Differences can be interpreted considering that the existing capability set of a group restricts the *capacity to aspire*. In this sense, the poor lack adequate resources, including social and aspirational resources, to *"contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty"* (Appadurai, 2004, pp.49). Moreover, the *capacity to aspire* differ between men and women and it can be affected by the gender division of responsibilities, economic roles within and outside the household, changes in economic and cultural practices adopted (Nathan, 2005).

According to the theory of adaptive preferences, individual tend to adapt their preferences according to the context and background where they live; in particular, preferences may not genuinely reflect individual capabilities or desires due to societal constraints or limited opportunities (Baber, 2007).

The concept of adaptive preferences has been also adopted by many feminist scholars, who declined it with respect to the gender equality debate: *"each wave of feminism continues to confront the problem of women's internalization of their own oppression, that is, the problem of women forming their preferences within the coercive and deforming space that patriarchy provides"* (Walsh, 2015, pp.1).

On the basis of available data on MENA countries, it is quite challenging to measure and analyse individual aspirations; there are very few studies that truly capture the personal aspirations of respondents, and they do so by collecting primary data with *ad hoc* surveys. For this reason, a key methodological step in our research is indeed to use gender-roles attitudes and preferences, which are more often collected in publicly available datasets, as a measure of aspirations (Heyne, 2017). Our research adopts these theoretical references to investigate, on one hand, how aspirations - intended as preferences and attitudes- vary according to context and, on the other hand, how these relate to observable economic behaviours such as labour market participation and fertility, which are often the targets of many development programmes and projects in the MENA region.

Existing evidence is quite consistent as far as the importance of aspirations for individual choices on decision-making ability and economic behaviour. For example, in the context of Kyrgyzstan, Kosec and colleagues (2022) find that women with higher aspirations are more likely to promote gender equality and to present a more active role in decision-making. The same dynamic applies to preferences and attitudes: preferences aligned with a more traditional view towards the family and the role of women are more likely to result into a lower female participation in the labour market (Alesina and Giuliano, 2010). In a similar fashion, Bayanpourtehran and Sylwester (2013) find that cultural traditions other than Islam are likely to be responsible for the low female labour force participation in MENA region, while Hayo and Caris (2013) prove that Muslim women in MENA area do not participate in the labour market than non-Muslim women, whereas those with strong traditional identities have a lower probability of entering in the labour market. Given the strong association between individual aspirations and family environment, analysing women's aspirations is likely to provide insights also on intergenerational dynamics: as observed by Siddique (2020), parental aspirations are likely to be reflected to a certain degree into children preferences when they grow up.

To conclude, analysing women's empowerment and aspiration requires to devote a special attention in order not to adopt a too Western-centric approach, as it is frequently the case with gender studies (Syed, 2010). This applies especially to the definitions of women's empowerment, which, as already mentioned, may differ very much according to the cultural and socio-political context under consideration. For example, there are several feminist scholars that consider the focus on the participation to the formal labour market as the result of a too capitalistic and secular approach to the debate on women's empowerment (Steady, 2005). Although it is important to acknowledge that women's participation to labour market and fertility rates dimensions represent imperfect proxies of women's empowerment, this analysis contributes to shed lights on the relevance of women's aspirations for development trajectories.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research follows a mixed-methods approach, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Indeed, we conducted a quantitative analysis mainly based on micro-data collected through the World Value Survey (WVS) project and on macro-data from the World Bank Development Indicators. We combine these results with information from desk review and interviews with key informants, which have been instrumental to explore and qualify specific processes that emerged from the quantitative analysis.

3.1 Quantitative data

Data for macro descriptive statistics at the country level have been extracted from the databank of the World Bank Development Indicators[2]. More granular data for the empirical quantitative analysis derive instead from the V3.0 of the World Values Survey (WVS) dataset, covering the period 1981-2022. The World Value Survey project is led by the Swedish World Value Survey Association, and it explores people's values and beliefs, how they change over time, and what social and political impact they have for more than 100 countries.

The whole dataset combines WVS surveys completed in waves 1 (1981-1983); 2 (1990-1992); 3 (1995-1998); 4 (2000-2004); 5 (2005-2008); 6 (2010-2014), and 7 (2017-2022); since there were very few observations for the first three waves for the countries of our interest, the sample has been restricted to the last four waves. Furthermore, from a total of 108 countries for which the WVS offers information, we narrowed our working sample to 19; these include countries which are commonly considered in the MENA region, plus France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain for possible comparisons of convergence in dynamics. In Table 1 below we report the number of observations by country and wave[3].

For each country, the sample is representative of all persons aged 18 years and over residing in the territory, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, or language (thus not only citizens, but also residents). In terms of topics covered by the survey, the questionnaires collect information on values, religion, opinions on the role of women in the household, in the community, in politics, in child-rearing, attitudes towards foreigners, about the possibility of migration, towards institutions, the media, towards international organisations, personal aspirations and towards children, as well as information on standard socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, occupation, etc.).

Specifically, information on attitudes towards gender equality, which we use as measures of respondents' preferences and aspirations, have been extracted from WVS using the following questions[4]:

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[2] World Development Indicators (WDI) is the primary World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from officially recognized international sources.

[3] It should be noted that WVS are pooled cross-section data without a panel structure, showing how the values of the given country/society have been changing over time - rather than how the values of a selected group of people (panel) have been changing over their life. Indeed, national-wide representative samples of the adult population have been surveyed in every country/territory during each wave, but there is no continuity of respondents across waves.

[4] For each of them, respondents are asked to say whether they agree or disagree with the statement.

1) "Being a housewife is just fulfilling as working"
2) "Pre-school child suffers with working mother"
3) "University is more important for a boy than for a girl"
4) "Problem if women have more income than men"
5) "Men make better business executives than women do"
6) "Men make better political leaders than women do"

The first two statements reflect the respondents' attitudes concerning the role of women within the household; the third concerns their preferences towards girls' and boys' educational attainments, while the fourth and fifth statements are about women economic empowerment. The last statements is about women's political representation. Overall, the degree of support towards these statements is informative about respondents' attitude towards gender equality; in other words, the higher the percentage of respondents agreeing with statements, the higher the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes. As mentioned above, it is worth mentioning that we focus on gender-roles attitudes as we use these dimensions as a proxy for preferences and aspirations. This is because the former are more easily observable with the available data from WVS, whereas, for example, aspirations are hardly ever surveyed, except with ad hoc questionnaires, which were not available for this research. Moreover, the usual socio-demographic characteristics such as sex, age, educational attainment, milieu of residence and marital status have been extracted from the WVS to be used as control variables.

Table 1: Number of observations included in the working dataset by wave in each country of the selected sample.

Country	WVS-wave				
	1999-2004	2005-2009	2010-2014	2017-2022	Total
1. Algeria	1,282	0	1,200	0	2,482
2. Egypt	3,000	3,051	1,523	1,200	8,774
3. France	0	1,001	0	0	1,001
4. Germany	0	2,064	2,046	1,528	5,638
5. Greece	0	0	0	1,200	1,200
6. Iran	2,532	2,667	0	1,499	6,698
7. Iraq	2,325	2,701	1,200	1,200	7,426
8. Italy	0	1,012	0	0	1,012
9. Jordan	1,223	1,200	1,200	1,203	4,826
10. Kuwait	0	0	1,303	0	1,303
11. Lebanon	0	0	1,200	1,200	2,400
12. Libya	0	0	2,131	1,196	3,327
13. Morocco	1,251	1,200	1,200	1,200	4,851
14. Palestine	0	0	1,000	0	1,000
15. Qatar	0	0	1,060	0	1,060
16. Saudi Arabia	1,502	0	0	0	1,502
17. Spain	1,209	1,200	1,189	0	3,598
18. Tunisia	0	0	1,205	1,208	2,413
19. Yemen	0	0	1,000	0	1,000
Total	14,324	16,096	18,457	12,634	61,511

Source: Authors' elaboration on WVS data

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Although MENA countries are often considered and analysed all together, it is worth noting that this area is extremely extensive, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf, and it presents many differences in terms of cultural, social and political characteristics. For this reason, scholars sometimes divide countries in the MENA area into the Maghreb and the Mashreq subregions. The former includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lybia and Mauritania (Mauritania is not covered by the WVS), while the latter includes Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia. The 'non-Maghreb' Mashreq includes, in addition to the above Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Egypt and Sudan.

Consequently, as we can grasp from Figure 1 below, we divide countries in our sample into 3 different groups, with the possibility to disaggregate the analysis between countries of Maghreb and Mashreq, to identify possible heterogeneities in our analysis; the third group consists of the five European countries that we have included in the analysis for comparative purpose. We are conscious there exist heterogeneities also within each subregion; for example, the Mashreq area includes countries such as Yemen, with a GNI per capita of 840, and Qatar, with a GNI per capita of 70,500 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2023); where possible, we try to disaggregate the analysis also at the country level.

Figure 1: Countries included in the analysis.
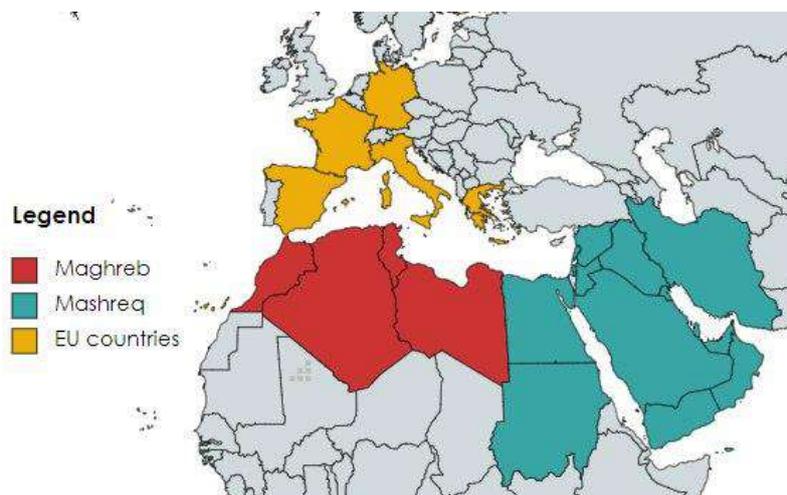
Source: Authors' elaboration

3.2 Qualitative data

Quantitative results have been complemented and triangulated with a desk review and Key Informant Interviews (KII). Both desk review and KII have focused on existing evidence on MENA countries with respect to topics of women's empowerment and aspirations. Key informant interviews have involved representatives of government institutions, civil society, international organizations, NGOs, and the academia. In total, 7 interviewees were selected based on their expertise and on their first-hand knowledge; the interviews have been functional to explore and qualify the specific processes underlying the socio-economic changes in the different contexts and how these dimensions correlate with women's aspirations and preferences. Experts' privacy has been preserved by avoiding direct

linkage between the specific contents included in the report and the experts' names. Here below we provide a list of the key informants we interviewed, together with their affiliation (Table 2).

Qualitative information obtained from desk review and KII have been analysed employing selective coding with (i) women's empowerment, (ii) women's aspirations and (iii) social norms related to gender roles as core categories.

Table 2: List of key informants

Key Informant	Organization	Type of organization
1. Solava Ibrahim	Anglia Ruskin University	Academia
2. Giulia Olmi	CISP	Third sector/International Cooperation
3. Chiara Rambaldi	CISP	Third sector/International Cooperation
4. Imane El Ouizgani	Ibn Zohr University	Academia
5. Riham Elezaby	GIZ	Third sector/International Cooperation
6. Sara Borrillo	Università l'Orientale di Napoli	Academia
7. Hadeel Qazzaz	OXFAM International	Third sector/International Cooperation

Source: Authors' elaboration

4. RESULTS

In this section, we initially present some stylized facts concerning the MENA paradox, utilizing macro-level data sourced from the World Bank Development Indicators. Secondly, we systematically examine the main arguments pertaining to the structural and labour demand-side factors that have been advanced in the academic debate to explain the MENA paradox. Then we address the central point of our analysis, shifting our gaze to the importance of attitudes and preferences in explaining the evidence of the MENA paradox. Indeed, in this part, using micro-level data from World Value Survey and information extracted from key informant interviews, we first analyse the main trends in gender-role attitudes within the region from a descriptive standpoint. Subsequently, we delve into the examination of the correlation between respondents' attitudes towards gender equality and their economic behaviours, specifically focusing on participation in the labour market and fertility.

4.1 Overview on the MENA paradox

Over the last fifty years, the MENA region has achieved remarkable progresses in attaining gender equality in education (World Bank, 2013). Since 1970, these countries have exhibited among the fastest advancements in human development: according to the WB report, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, among MENA countries, secured positions in the top 10 fastest advancing nations worldwide during this timeframe in terms of human development.

Yet, although the general improvements in human development and although the gender gap in education even reversed for many MENA countries, this has not translated into a narrowing of the gap in the labour market, which remains one of the lowest worldwide; indeed, in 2019 the MENA region was characterized by the world's lowest female labour force participation rate, with only 21% of women in the region economically active, while the corresponding numbers for South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, for example, were respectively 40 and 60 percent (Nazier, 2019).

Figure 2 below, with data from the World Bank Development Indicators, shows the same picture: countries in MENA area display similar trends in the Gender Parity Index[5] for secondary education as the world average throughout the last 25 years, with an increasing trend approaching 100%. Yet, MENA countries display a remarkable difference if we look at the ratio of female to male labour participation rate[6]: while the world average is stable at almost 70%, the MENA average reaches no more than 30% despite an increasing trend.

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[5] Gender parity index (GPI) for gross enrolment ratio in secondary education is the ratio of girls to boys enrolled at secondary level in public and private schools. The GPI is calculated by dividing female gross enrolment ratio in secondary education by male gross enrolment ratio in secondary education. The GPI indicates parity between girls and boys. A GPI of less than 1 suggests girls are more disadvantaged than boys in learning opportunities and a GPI of greater than 1 suggests the other way around. Note that in Figure 1, to make comparison between the GPI and the female labour participation rate, we multiplied the GPI by 100.

[6] Labor force participation rate is the proportion of the population ages 15 and older that is economically active: all people who supply labour for the production of goods and services during a specified period. Ratio of female to male labour force participation rate is calculated by dividing female labour force participation rate by male labour force participation rate and multiplying by 100.

To summarize, although levels of female educational attainment are increasing in the MENA region, these have not translated into an equivalent rise in women's participation in labour markets. This situation is known as the "MENA paradox" (World Bank, 2013).

As we focus on the participation of women in the labour market, it is important to highlight that all individuals who supply labour to produce goods and services are included in the count for the World Bank indicators as participants in the labour market; thus, both those who work in the formal and the informal market are considered as economically active. However, very often many statistics only refer to the formal market, thus excluding a slice of the market in which women work abundantly (or where are even the majority).

Moreover, and most importantly, very often the unpaid care work performed by women (towards the elderly, children and in general towards those in need of care within the household), is not counted in the official estimates. As highlighted during a KII, this dynamic can become very burdensome for women, especially in countries where the welfare system is deficient, with a twofold adverse effect: first, care and reproductive duties create barriers to participation in the formal labour market for women. Second, the economic importance of women's reproductive and caregiver tasks is not recognised since this is considered as an extension of women's reproductive role.

Figure 2: Trends in secondary education and FLPR, MENA and world average
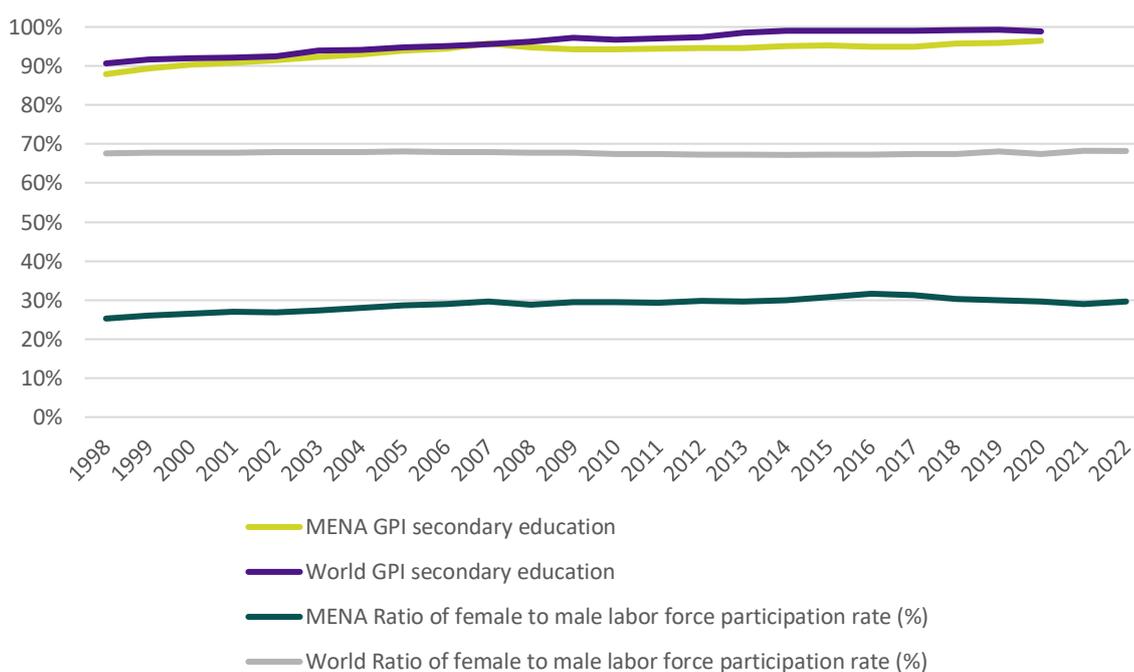
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Bank Development Indicators

The puzzle on the MENA paradox becomes even more complex if we distinguish between secondary and tertiary educational attainment. As shown in the two graphs below, there is a general parity of the GPI in the various MENA countries as regards secondary education (in the last 10 years the general trend has settled around the value 1). As regards the tertiary education indeed, the educational gap is for many countries in favour of women: many countries indeed are well above the value of 1 already starting from 2010, with some notable cases such as Qatar, that in 2021 displays a GPI of 1,83, but also Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait.

Figure 3: School enrolment, secondary (gross), gender parity index (GPI)
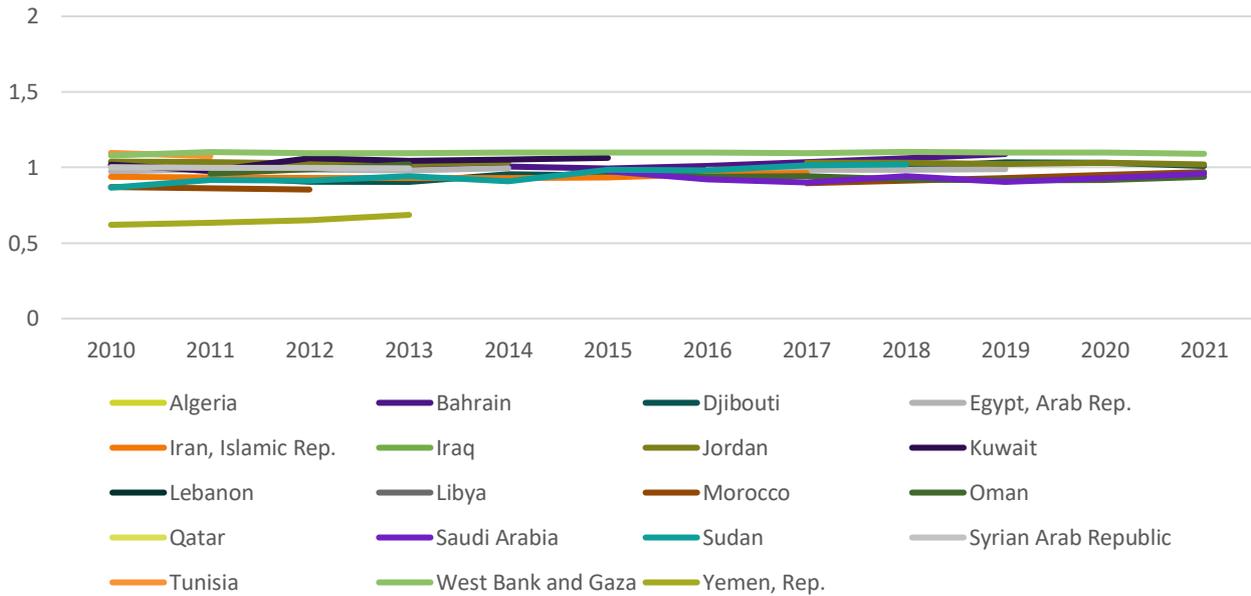
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Bank Development Indicators

Figure 4: School enrolment, tertiary (gross), gender parity index (GPI)
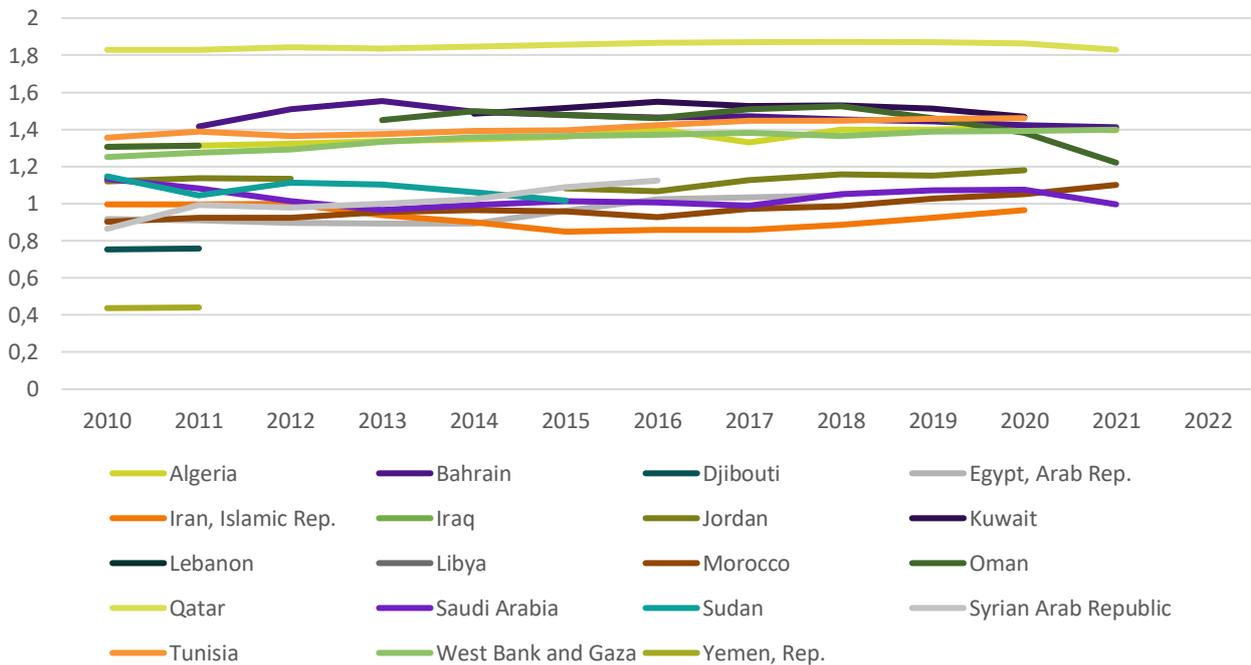
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Bank Development Indicators

Figure 5 below indicates that over the past 25 years, the two sub-regions have performed about the same in terms of tertiary education GPI on average, with the Mashreq region improving relatively over the past 5-6 years. However, this does not translate into a similar trend in terms of female labour market participation, with the Middle Eastern countries performing relatively worse on

average than those in the Maghreb, and in general with very low female participation levels to the labour market (Figure 6).

Figure 5: School enrolment, tertiary (gross), gender parity index (GPI)
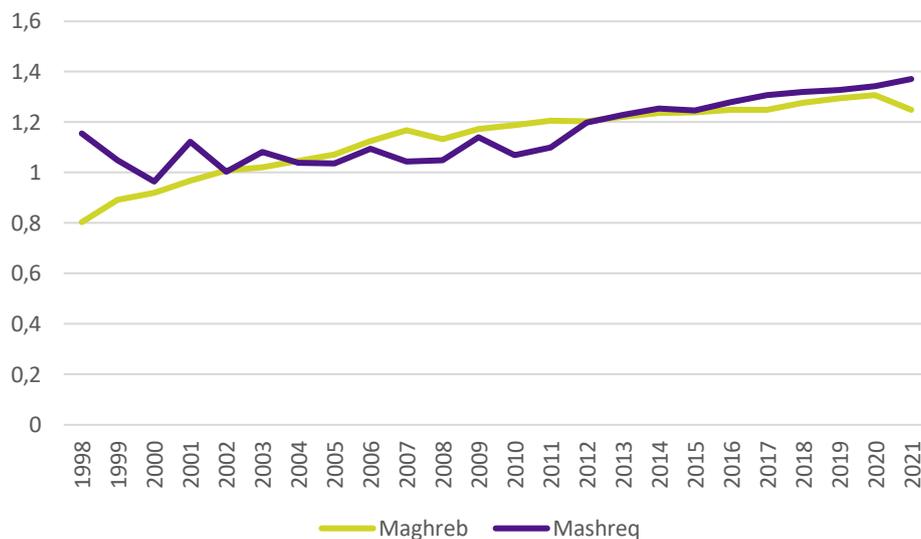
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Bank Development Indicators

Figure 6: Ratio of female to male labour force participation rate (%)
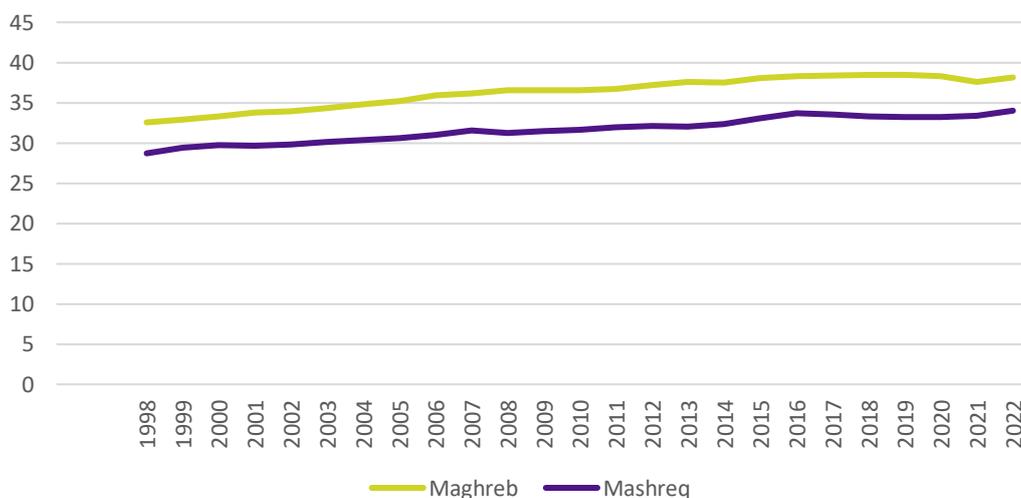
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Bank Development Indicators

Lastly, the MENA paradox is multifaced and does not encompass only the controversial relationship between high female educational attainment and low female labour force participation. Indeed, as also discussed in depth during a KII, MENA countries have gone through the demographic transition, with fertility rates that have decreased in the region (and this is true especially for the Mashreq economies) as well as the average age of women at marriage during the last decades (Nazier, 2019).

Figure 7: Fertility rate, total (births per woman)
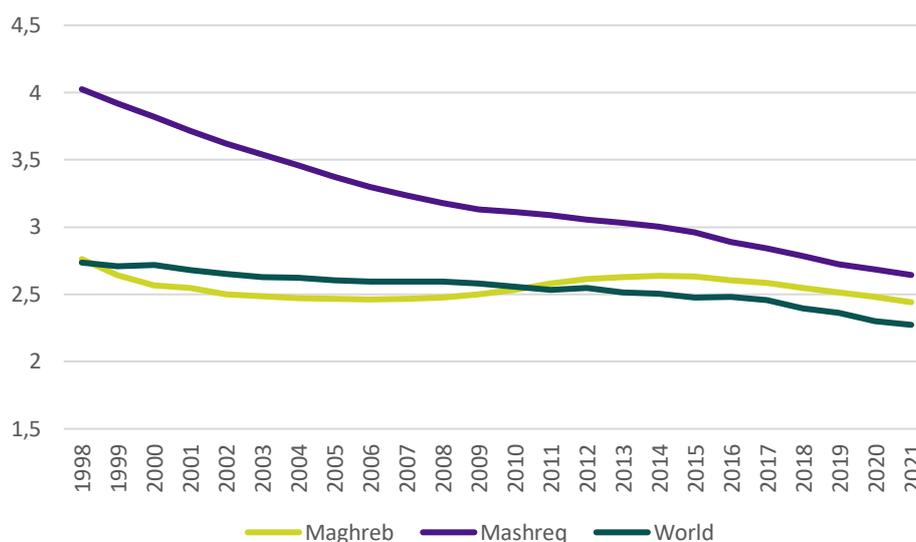
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Bank Development Indicators

4.2 Demand-side factors

In order to interpret the MENA paradox, several studies investigated labour market's demand-side factors. Although the focus of our analysis is mainly on individual attitudes and preferences, it is important to acknowledge that aspirations are strictly interconnected with demand-side barriers due to collective social norms. For this reason, structural and demand-side factors which are likely to influence women's participation in the labour market are summarised hereafter.

1) **Public sector shrinking:** women in MENA region on average are more willing to work in the public sector rather than in the private sector, as compared to other regional averages. This happens because public sector usually offers jobs with more attractive compensation and welfare schemes than the private sector, including for example childcare services, health coverage, education benefits, pensions schemes. As reported by key informants, employment in the public sector offers comparative advantages in terms of work-life balance with respect to the private sector. After marriage women often withdraw from work in the private sector (Nazier, 2019). Also, in public sector women have more guarantees to be paid equally to similarly qualified men. However, the shrinking of the public sector due to years of budget deficits in many MENA countries have led to its decrease in size, which then decreased its capacity to attract new cohorts of highly educated women (Assaad and Barsoum, 2019).

2) **Discriminatory laws and practices in the labour market:** in most MENA countries, laws and regulations in the labour market are biased against women. For example, in many cases, legal employment rights of these countries prohibit women from working in jobs considered as dangerous or harmful to women's health or morals. Moreover, many countries do not have paid paternity leave and potential employers are not prohibited by law from asking about family status. Furthermore, as already mentioned, welfare schemes are often very limited. In the private sector maternity leave tend to be inadequate and may prevent employers from hiring women since the firm has to bear the cost; similarly, job leave for caring sick relatives is not guaranteed by the law (Abbott and Teti, 2017).

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3) **Financial inclusion**: Another obstacle to increase female participation to the labour market is limited financial inclusion for women. Indeed, women entrepreneurs in the MENA region struggle to secure credit for their entrepreneurial activities. This challenge arises due to the prevailing conventional lending policies, the absence of collateral, and a sense of mistrust between female entrepreneurs and bankers. The combination of these factors contributes to inhibiting women's access to financial resources required for their business activities (Morsy and Youssef, 2007).

4) **The curse of natural resources**: several MENA countries are intertwined with the oil economy, either because they produce and export it, either because they export labour to oil-rich countries and get their remittances in return. This, according to some scholars (Moghadam, 2006), has contributed to the reinforcement of the male-breadwinner model of family: in order to gain political support, governments tended to redistribute oil-generated income to citizens through subsidies, tax breaks, social programs and employment schemes, thus reducing the importance of a second source of income within the households. Moreover, another implication that follows from the dominance of the oil sector in the region is linked to the Dutch Disease phenomenon[7]: oil-related sectors are capital-intensive and since, especially in the past, men tended more frequently to have degrees in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematic) fields[8], it was the male workforce that was absorbed more when oil-related sectors increased, while women, more frequently employed in light manufacturing sectors, saw their unemployment rate rise (Karshenas and Chamlou, 2016; Hassan, 2023).

5) **Restrictions on women's mobility:** the lack of safe, reliable transportation and concerns of public harassment is a significant limitation on women's economic participation. Also, Islam's codes of modesty, which require women to have permission from their husbands to travel, can also impede women's mobility (World Bank, 2012).

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[7] The term originates from the experience of the Netherlands in the 1960s, where the discovery of natural gas led to currency appreciation and challenges in other industries. The Dutch disease is an economic concept that explains the apparent paradoxical relationship between the exploitation of natural resources and the decline of the manufacturing sector. This phenomenon is associated with the negative consequences that can arise when a nation's currency experiences a significant increase in value due to factors like resource booms. As a result, the increased value of the currency can harm other sectors of the economy, particularly manufacturing, making their products less competitive in the international market. This mechanism is the one that also played out in many MENA countries, where a greasing of oil-related sectors led to an appreciation of local currencies, which then consequently undermined the productivity of many other export sectors, such as light manufacturing.

[8] Male predominancy in STEM fields is a tendency that is going to be inverted. Indeed, between 34% (Egypt, Saudi Arabia) and 56% (Oman) of STEM graduates are women, a much higher presence in the filed than in the US (22%) or Europe (34%) (Arabnet, 2019).

4.3 Attitudes towards gender equality

Descriptive statistics derived from the World Value Survey[9] allows to have a deeper understanding on how the context and socio-demographic characteristics shape agent's attitudes and preferences towards gender equality. Hereafter, we report the distribution of the variables of interest across countries and across gender for the last available wave (wave 7 2017-2022[10]). As we can see from the graphs below, it is true that in almost all the countries surveyed, men tend to have attitudes towards gender equality that are more in line with the patriarchal system than women. However, the percentages of women who agree is also very high, and in most cases well over half. Specifically, the first two dimensions, related to women's responsibilities as housewives and mothers, are those which receive higher support, with 74.88% and 75.77% of respondents agreeing respectively (Figure 8 and 9). Coherently with the MENA paradox, the dimension receiving the lowest level of support is the one that looks at the importance of advanced education for boys and girls. Here, the average of affirmative responses is 33.04% (Figure 10). Considering our sample of countries, the one showing the highest levels of support with respect to the six statements is Egypt, with an average of 74.03% respondents agreeing; this suggests that in Egypt the patriarchal attitudes are more prevalent than in other countries. On the contrary, the country which tends to have more equal views on gender roles is Lebanon, with 50.64% agreeing with the six statements on average.

Figure 8: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement " Being a housewife is just fulfilling as working " (by country and by gender)
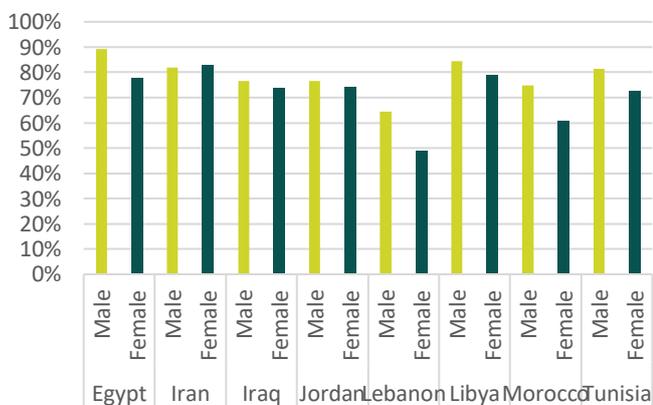
Figure 9: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement " Pre-school child suffers with working mother" (by country and by gender)

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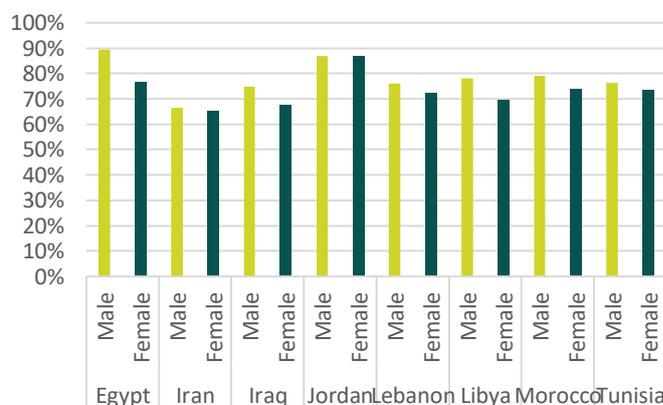
[9] Analysed sections focus on the attitudes about the role of women in the household, in child-rearing, in the community and in politics.

[10] For the last wave of WVS (2017-2022), data on 8 MENA countries are available; these include Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.

Figure 10: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement "University is more important for a boy than for a girl" (by country and by gender)
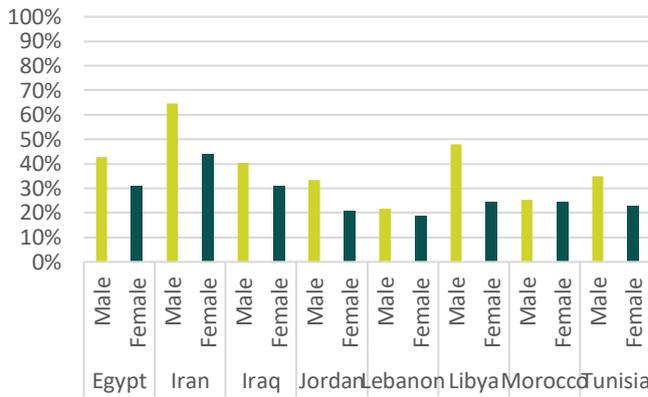
Figure 11: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement " Problem if women have more income than men" (by country and by gender)
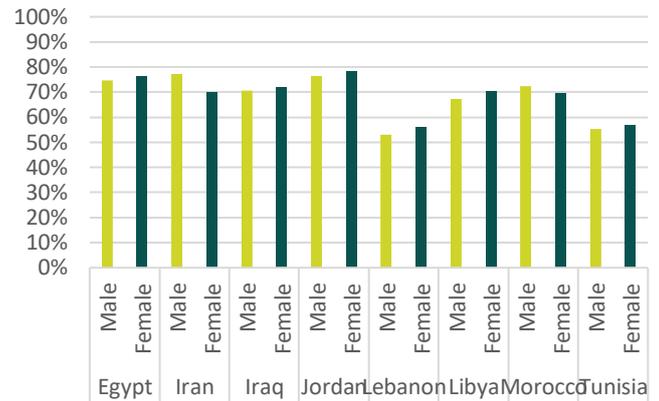
Figure 12: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement " Men make better business executives than women do" (by country and by gender)
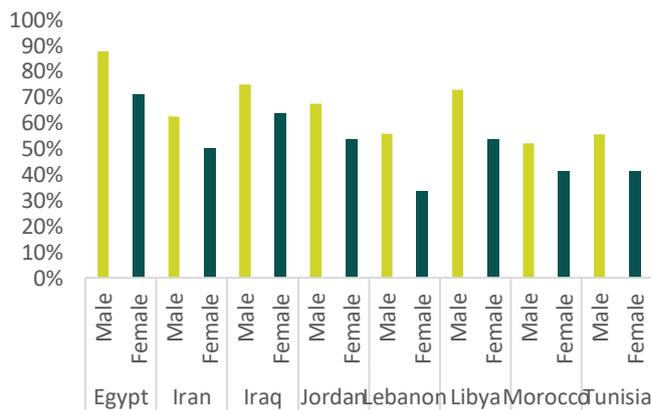
Figure 13: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statement " Men make better political leaders than women do" (by country and by gender)
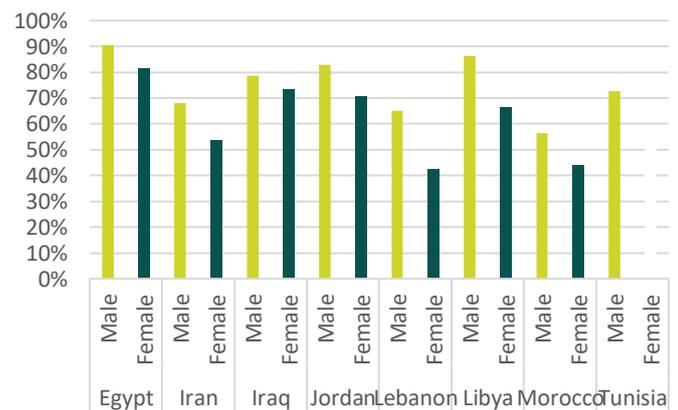
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

Considering the association between level of education and attitudes towards gender equality (Figure 14, with aggregated data from all MENA countries in the dataset), we observe that lower education is correlated with less equal views on gender roles at home and on women's economic and political decision-making power. However, we can see how the difference between those with low and high levels of education is ultimately quite small, suggesting that the internalisation of social norms is extremely widespread, regardless of the education level.

Figure 14: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statements. (by educational level)
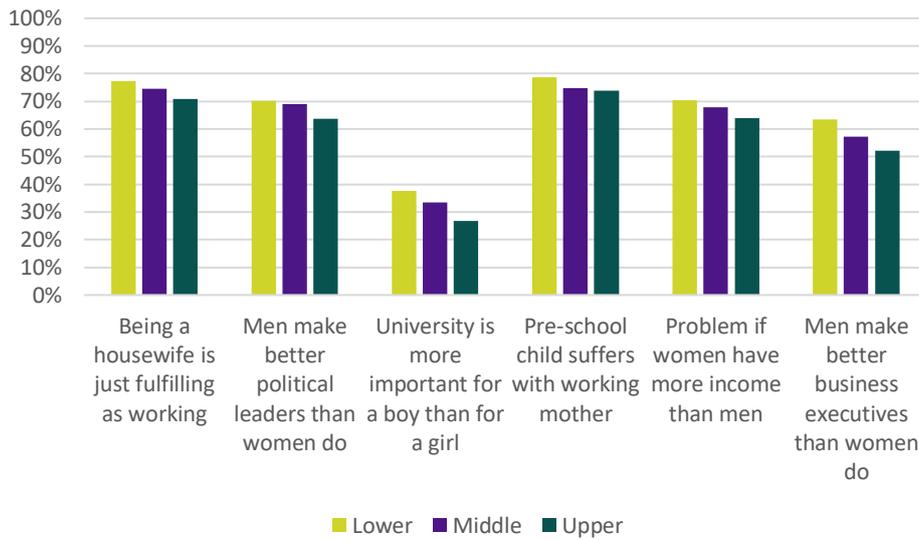
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

It is also interesting to see how parental education correlates with attitudes towards gender equality. In fact, Figures 15 and 16 show that as the level of education of the father and mother increases respondents tend to have an attitude more inclined towards gender equality. To give an idea, 32.5% of respondents whose fathers have only early childhood education agree with the statement "Pre-school child suffers with working mothers", while the percentage decreases 26.34% if the fathers' level of education is upper secondary and decreases to 20% if fathers have a master's degree. This association follows an almost linear correlation, with the only tricky exception of the Doctoral title of parents, which tend to go in the opposite direction.

Figure 15: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statements (by father's level of education)
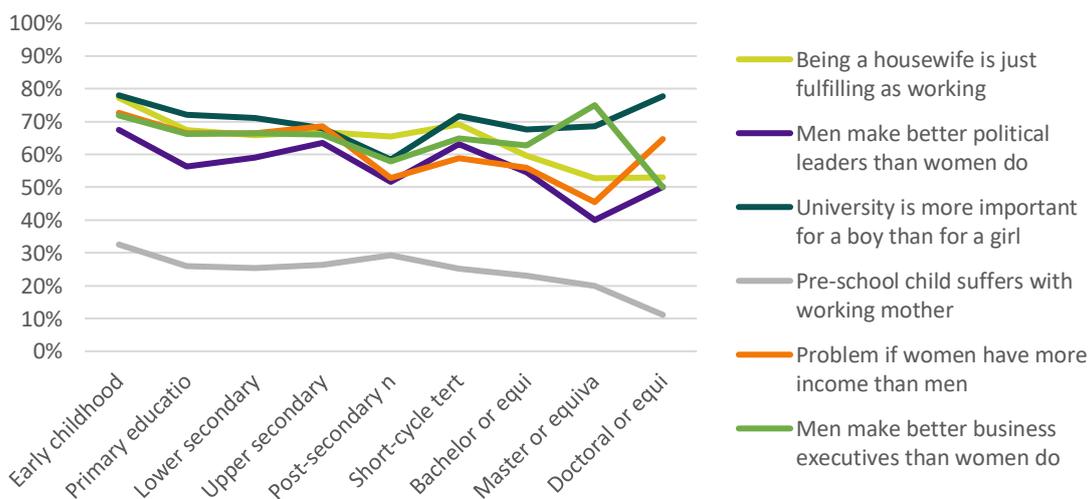
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

Figure 16: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statements (by mother level of education)
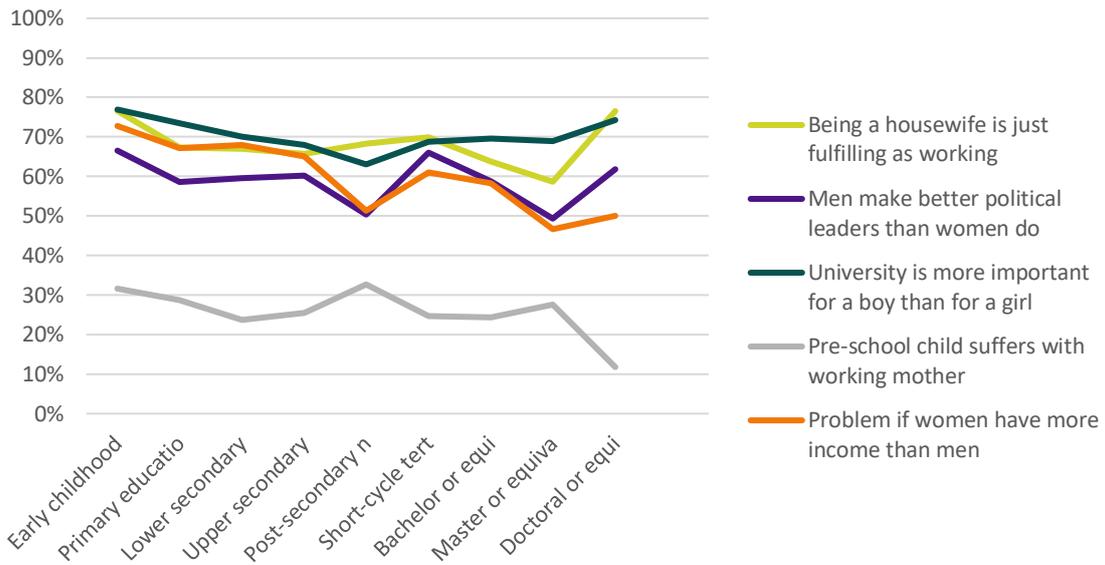
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

We also see, although the difference is not very great, that attitudes tend to vary according to milieu, with a higher prevalence of gender equality attitudes in urban areas than in rural areas.

Figure 17: Percentage of respondents who agree with the statements (by milieu)
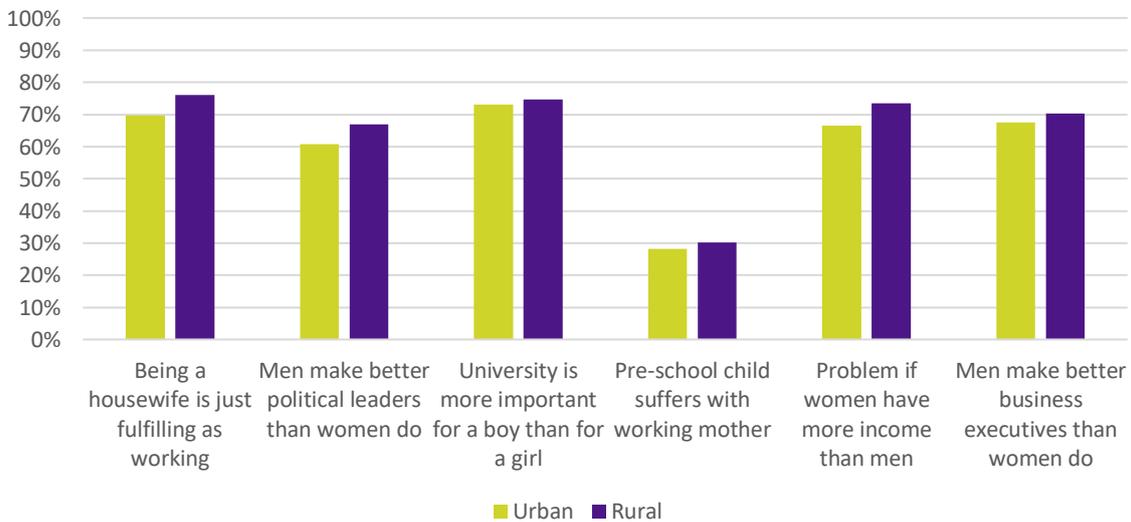
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

To conclude, in Figures 18 and 19 we report trends in attitudes towards gender equality over time, comparing MENA countries with EU countries. As we can see, worldviews closer to the patriarchal model display a decreasing trend. This also seems true for EU countries included in our working sample; however, between the sixth and seventh waves(2010-2014 and 2017-2022), some percentages (such as those who say they agree with "*Being a housewife is just fulfilling as working*", "*Pre-school child suffers with working mother*" and "*Problem if women have more income than men*") seem to be rising again.

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In general, notwithstanding the aforementioned decline, which may indicate a degree of alignment in the stances towards gender-role attitudes between MENA countries and EU nations, the MENA region persistently exhibits markedly more traditional attitudes towards gender equality compared to their EU counterparts. Moreover, as pointed out during a KII, trends regarding attitudes and preferences are likely to take a considerable period of time for witnessing a relevant change.

Figure 18: Gender-roles attitudes across time, MENA countries
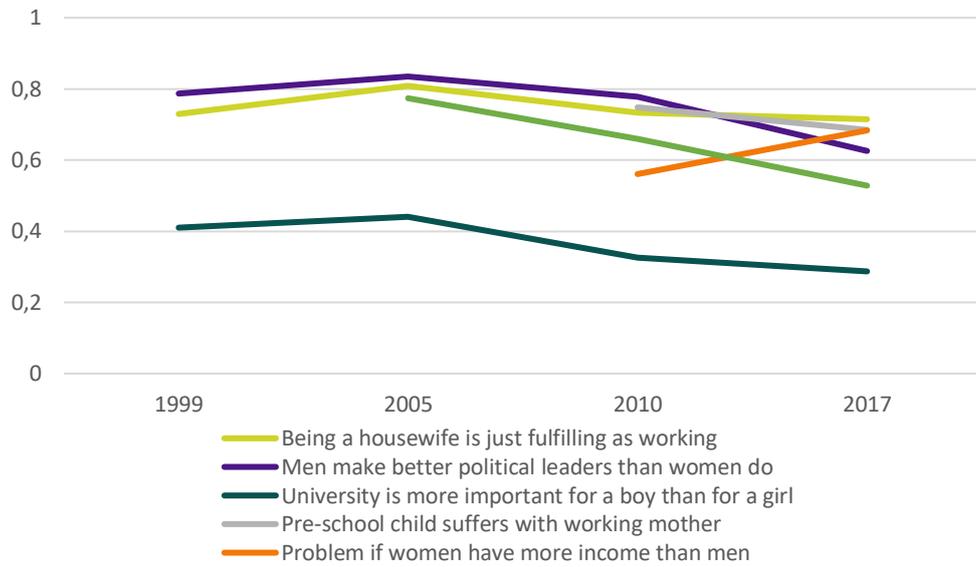
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

Figure 19: Gender-roles attitudes across time, EU countries
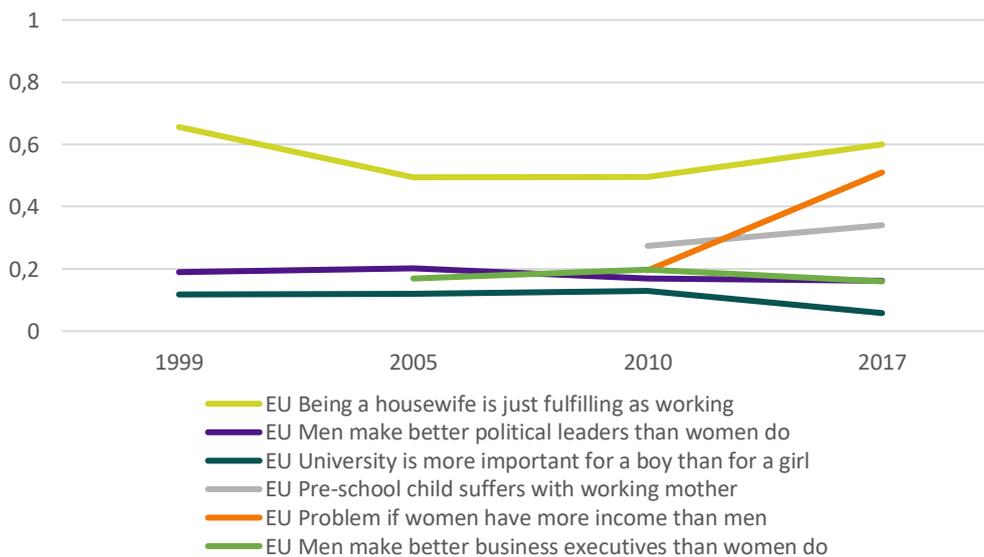
Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

4.4 Socio-economic behaviours

We initiate our inquiry with a bivariate analysis, wherein we contrast attitudes towards gender equality between individuals outside the labour market and those actively engaged within it[11].

As we can see from Table 3 below, if we look at the whole sample (first three columns) we do not find any particular significant difference between respondents inside and outside the labour market; however, if we restrict the sample including only female respondents, differences among the two groups emerge, with women outside the labour market that have significantly more patriarchal attitudes compared to women in the labour market.

Table 3: Differences in attitudes between those in and out the labour market, full sample and females

		Full sample			Female		
		Out of the labour market	In the labour market	Difference	Out of the labour market	In the labour market	Difference
1.	Being a housewife is just fulfilling as working	0.72	0.71	0.01	0.7	0.59	0.11***
2.	Men make better political leaders than women do	0.62	0.63	-0.01	0.59	0.47	0.12***
3.	University is more important for a boy than for a girl	0.29	0.28	0.01	0.24	0.19	0.05***
4.	Pre-school child suffers with working mother	0.67	0.68	-0.01	0.67	0.6	0.07***
5.	Problem if women have more income than men	0.69	0.67	0.02*	0.69	0.67	0.02
6.	Men make better business executives than women do	0.52	0.54	-0.02*	0.48	0.38	0.1***

Note: * $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, ***$p<0.01$. Countries included in the sample are Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan. Respondents outside the working age (65+) have been excluded from the working sample.

Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

Through a multivariate analysis, we included both the set of variables on attitudes on gender equality and socio-demographic controls to examine their correlation with the labour market status of respondents.

Table 4 below show results of probit estimation where the dependent variable is a dummy that takes the value of 1 when the respondent is active in the labour market and 0 otherwise. Note that in these first analyses, we included only data from the most recent wave of WVSs (2017-2022). Column 1 reports results with robust standard errors, while in column 2 standard errors clustered at the country level are considered in order to take into account potential spatial correlations of the error term; finally, column 3 includes country fixed effects: estimates remain constant through the various model specification, indicating that results are quite robust across different specifications.

As we can see from estimates below, women have less possibilities to be in the labour market, while divorced people are more likely to be in the labour market than married ones. Moreover, being widowed or single is associated with a lower probability to be in the labour market. Living in rural areas decreases individual chances to work, while education positively correlates with being active in the labour market. Interestingly, having more conservative views on the role of women as housewives, *ceteris paribus*, is associated with a lower probability of being in the labour market: this means that with the same level of education, coming from the same milieu, with the same age etc., gender-roles attitudes closer to the patriarchal model play a role in determining outside-of-job-

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[11] Self-employed, employees and employers, regardless of their formal/informal status are considered as active in the labour market, while unemployed, students and housewives are considered as outside the labour market.

market status of respondents. The same dynamic is valid for the attitude on women political representation; those who report to agree with the statement "*Men make better political leaders than women do*" report lower probability to be in the labour market compared to others.

Table 4: Multivariate regressions on the probability to be in the labour market, all respondents.

VARIABLES	(1) All respondents	(2) All respondents	(3) All respondents
Female	-0.397***	-0.397***	-0.386***
	(0.00888)	(0.0384)	(0.00872)
Age	0.00298***	0.00298*	0.00229***
	(0.000615)	(0.00177)	(0.000605)
Living together as married	0.0510	0.0510	0.0139
	(0.226)	(0.290)	(0.190)
Divorced	0.146***	0.146***	0.128***
	(0.0403)	(0.0513)	(0.0392)
Separated	-0.0467	-0.0467	-0.0512
	(0.0598)	(0.0714)	(0.0590)
Widowed	-0.116***	-0.116**	-0.101***
	(0.0357)	(0.0548)	(0.0348)
Single/Never married	-0.104***	-0.104***	-0.138***
	(0.0165)	(0.0209)	(0.0162)
Rural	-0.0235*	-0.0235	-0.0230*
	(0.0131)	(0.0187)	(0.0130)
Education	0.100***	0.100***	0.0984***
	(0.00868)	(0.0306)	(0.00896)
Being a housewife is just fulfilling as working	-0.0303**	-0.0303*	-0.0252*
	(0.0151)	(0.0161)	(0.0147)
Men make better political leaders than women do	-0.0419***	-0.0419*	-0.0361**
	(0.0147)	(0.0244)	(0.0144)
Duty towards society to have children	-0.0163	-0.0163	-0.000252
	(0.0146)	(0.0141)	(0.0144)
University is more important for a boy than for a girl	-0.0300**	-0.0300	-0.0151
	(0.0134)	(0.0261)	(0.0134)
Pre-school child suffers with working mother	0.0243	0.0243	0.00893
	(0.0151)	(0.0249)	(0.0148)
Problem if women have more income than men	-0.00440	-0.00440	0.00886
	(0.0136)	(0.0132)	(0.0134)
Men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarse	-0.0368*	-0.0368*	-0.0136
	(0.0188)	(0.0194)	(0.0182)
Fixed Effects	-	-	Country-level FE
Standard Errors	Robust	Clustered at the country level	Robust
Observations	5,319	5,319	5,319

Note: * $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, ***$p<0.01$. Countries included in the sample are Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan. Respondents outside the working age (65+) have been excluded from the working sample.

Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

It is also interesting to see what happens if we divide our sample into male and female respondents (column 1 and 2 in Table 5 respectively). The marital status has a different impact between male and female; indeed, for the former group, separated, widowed and single men show lower possibilities of working than married men, while for women, only divorced women are more likely to work compared to married ones. In order to interpret such differences, it is useful to refer to the so-called "social contract" which is included within the patriarchal norms of marriage. As reported during a KII, marriage may have an opposite effect on labour market participation based on gender: indeed, the married woman is responsible for reproductive and care tasks in the family, and she may not work if it is not necessary for the economic management. On the other hand, the married man is obliged to economically support the woman and her offspring. Quantitative results are in line with this explanation with respect to gender roles and labour market participation.

Education shows a positive and significant correlation with labour market participation, especially for women. As expected, more conservative views on gender equality seem to play a more significant role in determining the participation to the labour market for women as compared to men, as shown by the two negative and significant coefficients associated to the first two gender equality-related variables. This is in line with what found by Hayo and Caris (2013), which find that women with more traditional views on gender roles are more likely to be out of the labour market.

Table 5: Multivariate regressions on the probability to be in the labour market, subsamples by gender.

	(1) Male	(2) Female
Age	-0.00207**	0.00496***
	(0.000886)	(0.000787)
Living together as married	-0.259	0.170
	(0.251)	(0.197)
Divorced	-0.0323	0.188***
	(0.0691)	(0.0421)
Separated	-0.181**	0.0575
	(0.0781)	(0.0711)
Widowed	-0.272***	-0.0203
	(0.0784)	(0.0368)
Single/Never married	-0.287***	0.0143
	(0.0208)	(0.0228)
Urban/Rural habitat	-0.0268	-0.0205
	(0.0169)	(0.0191)
Education	0.0408***	0.153***
	(0.0119)	(0.0124)
Being a housewife is just fulfilling as working	-0.000894	-0.0524***
	(0.0198)	(0.0191)
Men make better political leaders than women do	-0.00552	-0.0596***
	(0.0199)	(0.0191)
Duty towards society to have children	0.00764	-0.0119
	(0.0201)	(0.0193)
University is more important for a boy than for a girl	-0.0516***	0.0270
	(0.0170)	(0.0200)
Pre-school child suffers with working mother	0.0356*	-0.0112
	(0.0195)	(0.0198)
Problem if women have more income than men	-0.00743	0.0226
	(0.0176)	(0.0186)
Men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarse	-0.0227	0.0165
	(0.0290)	(0.0219)
Standard Errors	Clustered at the country level	Clustered at the country level
Fixed effects	-	-
Observations	2,781	2,538

When distinguishing between the two sub-regions, estimates are still consistent with general evidence on the MENA region (Table 6). In fact, we observe that many of the coefficients continue to be significant and point in the same direction. Attitudes towards gender equality continue to have a significant weight especially in the Mashreq area, rather than in the Maghreb, indicating that the general result in Table 4 above, might be driven by respondents living in countries from the Mashreq area.

Table 6: Multivariate regressions on the probability to be in the labour market, subsamples by subregion.

	(1) Maghreb	(2) Mashreq
female	-0.296***	-0.435***
	(0.0174)	(0.00951)
Age	0.00549***	0.000955
	(0.00109)	(0.000732)
Living together as married	0.136	
	(0.222)	
Divorced	0.157***	0.0630
	(0.0542)	(0.0592)
Separated	-0.0193	-0.0603
	(0.0984)	(0.0728)
Widowed	-0.105*	-0.0879**
	(0.0609)	(0.0437)
Single/Never married	-0.130***	-0.120***
	(0.0260)	(0.0207)
Rural	-0.00941	-0.0319**
	(0.0217)	(0.0159)
Education	0.132***	0.0916***
	(0.0135)	(0.0110)
Being a housewife is just fulfilling as working	-0.0236	-0.0476***
	(0.0249)	(0.0182)
Men make better political leaders than women do	-0.00450	-0.0498***
	(0.0240)	(0.0179)
Duty towards society to have children	0.0125	-0.0265
	(0.0241)	(0.0178)
University is more important for a boy than for a girl	-0.0272	-0.0265*
	(0.0237)	(0.0158)
Pre-school child suffers with working mother	-0.0529**	0.0548***
	(0.0260)	(0.0182)
Problem if women have more income than men	0.0421*	-0.0225
	(0.0219)	(0.0166)
Men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce	-0.0232	-0.0102
	(0.0282)	(0.0246)
Standard errors	Clustered at the country level	Clustered at the country level
Fixed effects	-	-
Observations	1,870	3,448

Evidence on the relationships between attitudes towards gender equality and labour market participation remains valid when we extend the sample to all four of the latest waves of the WVS and, in some cases, results are even stronger in indicating a significant correlation. Indeed, as we can see in Table 8, even including year fixed effects, respondents with more patriarchal attitudes are less likely to work than others. Again, this evidence holds also when we restrict the sample only to female respondents from MENA countries (column 2). Interestingly, what is true for MENA countries, is also true for European ones. In fact, as can be seen by comparing column 2 with column 3, for the same level of education, age etc., even in Europe it seems that having attitudes closer to a patriarchal model of society decreases the likelihood of women participating in the labour market.

Table 7: Multivariate regressions with time and country fixed effects

VARIABLES	(1) All respondents MENA	(2) Only female MENA	(3) Only female EU
female	-1.505***	-	-
	(0.0225)		
Age	0.00661***	0.016***	-0.003*
	(0.00110)	(0.0014)	(0.00176)
Marital status = 2, Living together as married	-0.460	0,074	0.331***
	(0.336)	(0.39)	(0.0728)
Marital status = 3, Divorced	0.250***	0.465***	0.088
	(0.0836)	(0.091)	(0.0746)
Marital status = 4, Separated	0.0185	0.312*	0.084
	(0.137)	(0.167)	(0.110)
Marital status = 5, Widowed	-0.233***	-0.069	-0.466***
	(0.0599)	(0.0647)	(0.102)
Marital status = 6, Single/Never married	-0.444***	0,106***	-0.162***
	(0.0300)	(0.041)	(0.0526)
Urban/Rural habitat	-0.0259	-0.106***	
	(0.0219)	(0.032)	
Education	0.372***	0.546***	0.421***
	(0.0254)	(0.0356)	(0.0894)
Being a housewife is just fulfilling as working	-0.107***	-0.160***	-0.167***
	(0.0256)	(0.0349)	(0.0374)
Men make better political leaders than women do	-0.056**	-0.079**	-0.202***
	(0.0283)	(0.0372)	(0.0595)
University is more important for a boy than for a girl	-0.042*	-0.058*	-0.150**
	(0.0224)	(0.0346)	(0.0753)
Men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce	-0.0830***	-0.078***	-0.284***
	(0.0790)	(0.040)	(0.0520)
Standard errors	Robust	Robust	Robust
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	19,183	9,879	5,176

Note: * $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, ***$p<0.01$. All countries from MENA and EU regions have been included in the regression.

Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

Finally, we analysed how attitudes towards gender equality correlate with fertility rates (Table 9). As we can see, those who agree with *"Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working"* and *"Duty towards society to have children"* tend to have more children than others. Similarly, living in rural areas is associated with a higher probability of having children, while the level of education correlates in the opposite direction. Overall, this evidence is consistent with results on labour market participation, and it allows to shed lights on complementary aspects related to the work-life balance. To note that, although not shown here, attitudes towards gender equality seem not to contribute significantly to fertility rates determination in European countries (all coefficients about attitudes were not significant), a fact that can be due to the very low fertility rates (and therefore low variability) in EU countries included in the sample.

Table 8: Multivariate regression on fertility levels

	(1) MENA
Female	0.0584*
	(0.0337)
Age	0.0333***
	(0.00162)
Divorced	-0.994***
	(0.0972)
Widowed	-0.241**
	(0.103)
Single	-1.946***
	(0.0384)
Urban/Rural habitat	0.179***
	(0.0358)
Education	-0.132***
	(0.0249)
Being a housewife is just fulfilling as working	0.0654*
	(0.0397)
Men make better political leaders than women do	0.00615
	(0.0397)
Duty towards society to have children	0.0809**
	(0.0389)
University is more important for a boy than for a girl	-0.0721*
	(0.0373)
Pre-school child suffers with working mother	0.0623
	(0.0397)
Problem if women have more income than men	-0.00615
	(0.0372)
Men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce	0.00139
	(0.0480)
Constant	0.635***
	(0.124)
Fixed effects	Country level
Observations	5,636
R-squared	0.526

Note: * $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, ***$p<0.01$. Countries included in the sample are Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan.

Source: Authors' elaboration from World Value Surveys

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The present research investigated the relationship between attitudes and preferences towards gender equality, the context where people live and their socio-economic behaviours. The focus on the MENA region is motivated by two main reasons. First, this area represents a strategic territory for the Italian cooperation; second, the region constitutes an interesting case study for this type of analysis as we consider the 'MENA paradox'. The adoption of mixed methods allowed us to integrate quantitative and qualitative findings, thus achieving a deeper understanding on the main processes related to women's empowerment and aspirations in the region.

Our results suggest that many countries in the MENA area exhibits a higher prevalence of conservative attitudes regarding gender equality when compared to other low- and middle-income regions, although obviously the region displays a great heterogeneity across countries. These attitudes and preferences are influenced by various socio-demographic factors, including gender, individual educational attainment, parental educational background, and the milieu. For instance, we find that, on average, respondents living in rural areas tend to have attitudes towards gender equality closer to a more patriarchal model compared with people living in urban areas, while a higher level of education is associated with attitudes closer to gender equality. The same applied to fathers' and mothers' level of education. Among countries with recent data available, Egypt appears to be the more conservative, while Lebanon stands on the opposite side.

Socio-demographic characteristics correlate also with the participation to the labour market and fertility rates. For instance, living in rural areas decreases the individual chances to work, while education increase them (especially for women). The marital status instead has a different impact between men and women: if married women show lower probability to be in the labour market compared to single women (while for instance being divorced is associated to a higher probability), single men are less likely to be in the labour market compared to married ones.

Notably, also attitudes towards gender equality play a significant role in shaping socio-economic behaviours, particularly among women. Women with more conservative attitudes toward gender equality are less likely to participate actively in the labour market. This observation holds true even when other factors such as gender, age, education, and social milieu remain constant. Multivariate analyses reveal that, *ceteris paribus*, individuals with conservative attitudes, especially regarding women's roles within the family and their political representation, are more likely to remain outside the labour market. Furthermore, individuals holding views further from gender equality tend to have higher fertility rates.

In light of these results, it becomes evident that addressing gender disparities in the labour market requires not only addressing structural barriers but also understanding the attitudes and aspirations of individuals involved in development efforts. Some policy recommendations to address the prevalence of conservative positions on gender equality in the region can be proposed[12]:

1. **Educational Initiatives**: Our analysis reveals that education inversely correlates with attitudes aligned with traditional gender roles, and that it significantly contributes to increasing women's participation in the labour market. Therefore, it is urgent to continue

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[12] Policy recommendations are based on the conclusions of the research as well as on the debate that followed the presentation of results during the online workshop.

promoting women's participation in high-quality, accessible education programs and to encourage their participation in all fields of education. Additionally, we should develop and implement educational programs that promote gender equality principles from an early age. This involves integrating gender equality into school curricula and providing training for teachers with a gender-sensitive approach. These actions can foster more progressive attitudes toward gender equality among future generations and counter the influence of individual and parental education levels on conservative beliefs.

2. **Addressing Care Responsibilities and Promoting Gender Equality in Workplace**: Based on our multivariate analysis, marital status has contrasting effects on men and women, with women tending to reduce their labour market participation after marriage. To tackle this issue, it is crucial for governments to implement policies supporting work-life balance, particularly for married women. Such policies should encompass affordable childcare services, flexible working hours, and parental leave to dispel the perception that marriage negatively impacts women's careers. There is also the need to encourage employers to adopt policies and practices that promote gender equality at work. This includes closing the gender pay gap, offering equal career advancement opportunities, and fostering work-life balance to mitigate the influence of conservative attitudes on women's participation in the labour force.

3. **Public Awareness Campaigns**: Launch public awareness campaigns that challenge conservative gender norms and stereotypes, especially concerning women's roles in the family and political representation. These campaigns can include media, social media, and community-based initiatives to change societal attitudes.

4. **Collaborative Efforts and Long-Term Commitment**: International cooperation and development efforts in this field often lack coordination. Hence, we advocate for more coordinated interventions, fostering collaboration between academia, government, civil society organizations, and international agencies to comprehensively address gender inequality. Collective efforts can amplify the impact of gender equality initiatives and ensure a bottom-up approach that includes the voices and aspirations of women in the development process. Also, we have seen that attitudes towards gender equality display a dynamic that change very slowly in time. This means that long-term commitment from donors is crucial for programs aimed at changing attitudes on gender roles. Transforming such norms requires sustained efforts over an extended period. Donors who commit to long-term support provide stability and consistency, allowing organizations and initiatives to develop comprehensive strategies, conduct thorough research, and implement effective interventions.

5. **Data Collection and Monitoring**: Lastly, there is the need to continuously collect and analyse data on gender attitudes, labour market participation, and fertility rates to monitor progress and adjust policies accordingly. Specifically, we highlight two priority topics for which there is the need to collect more data: first, data on women's personal aspirations are scarce. Although this implies to collect very sensitive information, the efforts is likely to be translated into very informative data for targeting development programmes aligned with local population's aspirations. Second, there is the need to collect detailed data on both informal work and care work, where women are overrepresented with respect to men, since in many cases these sectors are neglected by national statistical offices. Regular analysis of this kind

of data could be useful to obtain an evidence base more representative of the real-life situation and, thus, to measure the effectiveness of interventions.

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