



Country Brief 1



International Labour Organization
Regional Office for Arab States

Advancing Women's Employment in Lebanon: ILO in Action

This Country Brief is part of a series that looks at the current and ongoing research and policy advocacy activities of the International Labour Organization (ILO) on gender equality in the world of work in Arab States. It highlights the overall employment context, the underlining concerns, the results achieved and future plans.

ILO highlights in Lebanon

ILO has five initiatives on gender equality and decent work in Lebanon ongoing during 2008-09:

- Gender equality and workers' rights in the informal economy,
- Social care needs and service provisions,
- Protecting the rights of women migrant domestic workers,
- Capacity building for gender mainstreaming in the Ministry of Labour, and
- Training on women's entrepreneurship development.

Gender equality and worker's rights in the informal economy

In January 2007, the ILO and the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) launched a two-year regional initiative entitled "Gender Equality and Workers' Rights in the Informal Economies of Arab States",¹ which adopts a gender equality and workers' rights perspective.

The majority of workers in Lebanon work informally (61 per cent): 57 per cent of women and 62 per cent of men.
Yaacoub, 2008

A number of factors in Lebanon continue to fuel the growth of the informal economy. From the standpoint of entrepreneurs, there are no real incentives to register an establishment: owners are not entitled to any social protection; taxes and administrative fees are high and corruption abounds throughout the process. There are no tax breaks for micro- and small businesses; and little capital or credit is available. And since taxes on employees decrease profits, informal and migrant workers become far more attractive to employers.

From the perspective of workers, higher unemployment rates lead to increasing concessions from the most vulnerable to accept lower terms and conditions of work as they are forced to compete with foreign migrant workers. There is no real legal oversight mechanism that ensures workers are granted their basic rights, and few advocate on their behalf. Trade unions are fragmented and consumed in political party struggles, weakening them and undercutting workers' interests.

More than half the workers in Lebanon do not have insurance, one-third of women and 56 per cent of men.
Aractingi and Ghorra, 2008

The findings suggest that the current social welfare and protection system has proved inoperative. A number of contributory social schemes exist, but they exclude groups of workers like informal workers and foreign migrant workers. Government social protections and benefits terminate upon retirement and are not adapted to the needs of employees.

¹ The initiative was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND) and the ILO.



System reforms are needed if all working residents in Lebanon are to be protected, irrespective of gender or nationality, including contributing family workers. Huge gaps exist in social protection, especially for informal workers. The findings also spotlight the particular vulnerabilities of Palestinian refugees, Syrian workers, women migrant domestic workers and more recently also Iraqi refugees. The need for organizing unorganized workers, especially unprotected workers, emerge as a strong recommendation for follow-up with trade unions. A policy round table is scheduled with representatives of the relevant institutions as well as workers' and employers' organizations to discuss the findings and raise awareness.

Social care needs and service provisions

Lebanon has experienced rapid demographic changes on account of the political and economic upheavals over the last three decades. These shifts have resulted in the transformation of families and households, gender roles and working patterns. These changes, in addition to cuts in basic social spending, have brought about an increasing need for quality, accessible and affordable care for children, the elderly, ill and disabled. In the absence of comprehensive, integrated social welfare systems and a corresponding increase in public, private and not-for-profit provision of services, care needs in Lebanon have outpaced and overwhelmed the few services that do exist.

More women are in the labour force between the ages of 20-29, while their numbers decline in later years due to child-care responsibilities and employer preferences for hiring men.
Sugita, 2008

The ways deficits in social care services impact on women's labour force participation was identified as a priority by ILO based on findings from two regional initiatives and consultations with policy makers, workers' and employers' organizations, women's advocates and researchers in the region. A key finding suggests a strong connection between specialized skills available among young unemployed women and the social services needed. The second point links unpaid care responsibilities to women's informal work arrangements, such as home-based work. Further analysis reveals that women migrant domestic workers play a vital role in Arab States in general,

Box 1. Data Needs

- **Improved labour market data is needed to better understand the high rates of economic inactivity among women in Lebanon.**
- **Questions on informality of jobs must be included in household, labour force and establishment surveys to understand the extent and nature of exclusion and vulnerabilities.**

and in Lebanon in particular (see next section). Four major lessons emerge from the Lebanon case study:

1. Appropriate state social policy responses targeting improved care services are vital to improving women's access to the workplace. To help workers better reconcile their work and family responsibilities, paternal leave benefits and other family-friendly policies need to become increasingly common in national labour policies and laws, especially in the private sector.
2. With the steady demand for paid care services, social and legal protections are necessary to safeguard care workers' rights. Domestic workers, local and foreign, need to be included in labour laws and social security laws.
3. High-level policy commitment is needed to fill growing social care gaps with a skilled national labour force. Graduates in fields relevant to social care service provision (e.g. social work, sociology, psychology and physical education) are over-represented among the unemployed, with an overwhelming majority being young women. They can fill the services gap in social care granted appropriate regulatory frameworks, incentive mechanisms and training.
4. The collection of better data will enable governments to create the most appropriate labour and social policies. Updated comprehensive information on care providers, types of care and comparative costs and benefits needs to be mapped out. Quantitative and qualitative sex-disaggregated data need to be collected and analysed to capture paid and unpaid care work.

Protecting the rights of women migrant domestic workers

In the fall of 2005, the Ministry of Labour (MOL) requested technical support from ILO in improving the human and labour rights of women migrant domestic workers in the country and exploring policy actions that could mitigate their difficult circumstances. Key stakeholders were brought together in an awareness-raising workshop which resulted in recommendations. The Prime Minister established a National Steering Committee under the auspices of the MOL to follow up on the recommendations and serve as a participatory policy dialogue platform with the participation of line ministries, the syndicate of placement agencies and international and national non-governmental organizations. The Steering Committee formed three technical working groups to identify regulatory and institutional deficits and develop context-appropriate tools for migrant domestic workers.

Formation of a Women Workers' Department in the Ministry of Labour

Unemployment among women, especially young educated women, is growing rapidly in Lebanon. There are numerous factors that hinder women's fuller participation in the labour force requiring more active MOL involvement in putting appropriate policies, legislation and programmatic interventions in place. The Ministry needs to strategically focus on ways to improve laws, enhance employability, generate employment, reverse negative perceptions on working women and prevent discrimination in the workplace especially in the private sector.

To facilitate appropriate and targeted interventions for women, the Ministry agreed with the ILO that an operational Women Workers' Department was crucial. An initial one year initiative has been designed to help establish and strengthen the Department, which includes technical assistance and capacity-building related to policy advocacy; legislative assessment; and improved sex-disaggregated data collection, knowledge sharing and dissemination. Staff members are being trained by the ILO International Training Centre in Turin on the principles of gender equality and decent work and its applications.

Box 2. Activities on Women Migrant Domestic Workers

- **A workers' information guide in nine languages (English, Arabic, French and languages of six sending countries).**
- **Draft legal proposal to change pertinent articles in the Labour Code and relevant laws to include domestic workers.**
- **Draft comprehensive standard unified labour contract available in workers' languages, signed by the worker and employer and applied across Lebanon.**
- **Draft bilateral agreements between Lebanon and labour-sending countries to adopt the contract.**
- **Plans to establish a code of conduct for members of the placement agencies' syndicate.**

Following a similar initiative in Yemen, the Women Workers' Department is expected to become the focal point for relevant information, guidance and support on women's employment issues. It is envisioned as a catalyst in mapping and sharing initiatives, good practices and lessons learnt, as well as providing resources through the activation of a knowledge management system and a knowledge-sharing desk. The Department will be equipped to conduct and disseminate relevant studies and engage in policy dialogue with other departments — such as those in charge of labour inspections and of foreign workers — and other ministries and authorities.

Training on women's entrepreneurship development and gender equality (WEDGE)

Women may not always benefit from conventional business training, which puts an emphasis on the relationship between individuals and businesses, a perspective more suitable to businessmen. The intermediacy of the household between individuals and businesses, and the role of economic cooperation among entrepreneurs is crucial for women owned businesses and need to be integrated in such training. The ILO's "GET Ahead for Women in Enterprise" Training Package and Resource Kit targets poor women who want to be, or already are, engaged in small-scale business through market oriented business

services. It emphasizes the importance of the household and cooperatives in ensuring success of women entrepreneurs.

Women entrepreneurs in conflict settings confront unique mobility constraints and security challenges that threaten their lives and livelihoods.

UNOPS/ILO, 2008

The ILO has recently adapted the “GET Ahead” materials and started implementing training activities on women’s entrepreneurship development linking three Arab countries in crisis: Iraq, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Lebanon. Activities in Lebanon focus on war-affected areas in the South and the Nahr El-Bared Palestinian camp. In March 2008, a training-of-trainers workshop was held in Amman using the adapted “GET Ahead” approach.

The training has created a pool of trainers familiar with ILO materials on enterprise development for women in the context of crisis. Upcoming training utilizing the “GET Ahead” package will be conducted in the Palestinian camp of Nahr El-Bared in synergy with the recovery activities that the ILO and other UN agencies are implementing. Throughout these initiatives, special attention will be on how to conduct value chain analysis taking into consideration gender concerns across the production process, demonstrating that what may often seem like a market access issue might actually have its roots earlier in the process or be related to gender concerns.

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