Dynamics of Gender Inequality in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia

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A Summary Report

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The Gender and Development Initiative was launched in 2014 by faculty in the International Affairs Program and Department of Economics at Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA

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ESRC Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF)

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

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

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

- What are the impediments to women’s access to jobs?
  - Studies on MENA and South Asia have identified the persistence of patriarchal social norms and family laws. How do these interact with economic conditions, i.e., what are the economic preconditions for the persistence of patriarchal norms and associated regulations.
  - How relevant is the absence of work-family reconciliation policies and how does this affect female employment under different labour market institutions in the three regions?
  - What are the implications of trade policies and structural changes on female employment? How do these interact with workplace discrimination, other legal impediments to FLFP and the physical and social infrastructure for working women?
• What are the effects on household well-being of women’s lack of employment and income?
  o What is the relationship between female employment, poverty and inequality under the different social policy regimes of the three regions?
  o Is there a relationship between the persistence of one-bread-winner families in the three regions and the persistence of income and consumption subsidies?
  o How are national policy-makers addressing these matters? To what extent is low FLFP a matter of public discourse?
• What is the relationship between gender inequality and social stratification, and what are the implications for the dynamics of income inequality?
  o How can we best conceptualize social stratification and labour market segmentation in our sample countries and how does gender inequality map onto (align with) broader social inequality?
  o What are the implications of these factors for the dynamics of inequality within households and among individuals and women? In other words, how can research bring horizontal inequalities to bear on explaining vertical inequalities?
  o How do women’s organizations and trade unions address social and gender inequality?
• What are the data requirements for addressing the above list of questions, and what gaps need to be filled?

Our activities include a preliminary workshop (London, March 2017) and two conferences, collaboration within thematic working groups, the production of research briefs on our findings, and a final report offering new and innovative frameworks for research on gender and the dynamics of inequality. The overriding objective is to establish a network and platform for the formulation of more comprehensive theories and methodologies to enable longer-term investigation by the network and other researchers and to create an infrastructure for continuing research.

For more information about the project, please contact Professor Massoud Karshenas (mk@soas.ac.uk).