

Is Gender Inequality Exclusive to the East?

اللامساواة بين الجنسين هل هي حكر شرقي؟

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الملخص:

لطالما ارتبطت مسألة اللامساواة بين الجنسين بالمجتمعات الشرقية، حيث يُنظر إليهما على أنها نتيجة للعوامل الثقافية والتقاليد السائدة. ومع ذلك، فإن هذه الظاهرة ليست حكراً على الشرق، بل هي إشكالية عالمية تتجلى بأشكال مختلفة في الدول الغربية أيضاً. فعلى الرغم من التقدم القانوني والمؤسسي الذي حققته الدول الغربية في مجال المساواة، لا تزال الفجوة في الأجور، وصعوبة وصول النساء إلى المناصب القيادية، والتمييز الضمني في بيئات العمل قائمة.

يكشف هذا البحث عن أوجه التشابه والاختلاف في تجليات هذه اللامساواة بين الشرق والغرب، مسلطاً الضوء على العوامل البنيوية التي تعيد إنتاج الفجوة الجندرية في سوق

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العمل، سواء كانت ثقافية، اقتصادية، أو سياسية. كما يناقش البحث كيف أن الخطابات الرسمية حول المساواة في الغرب تخفي أحياناً ممارسات تمييزية مستترة، قد تمنع النساء من الوصول إلى مواقع السلطة رغم كفاءتهن. يخلص البحث إلى أن معالجة هذه الإشكالية تستوجب تجاوز القراءات النمطية التي تحصرها في بعد ثقافي محض، والبحث عن حلول تضمن عدالة أعمق تتجاوز الإطار القانوني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم اجتماع الشغل؛ الجندر؛ اللامساواة؛ الشرق.

Abstract:

The issue of gender inequality has long been associated with Eastern societies, where it is seen as a result of cultural factors and prevailing traditions. However, this phenomenon is not exclusive to the East; rather, it is a global problem that manifests in different forms in Western countries as well. Despite the legal and institutional progress achieved by Western countries in the field of equality, the gap in wages, the difficulty for women to access leadership positions, and implicit discrimination in work environments still persist. This research reveals the similarities and differences in the manifestations of this inequality between East and West, highlighting the structural factors that reproduce the gender gap in the labor market, whether cultural, economic, or political. The research also discusses how official discourses on equality in the West sometimes conceal hidden discriminatory practices that prevents women from reaching positions of power despite their competence. The research concludes that addressing this issue requires going beyond stereotypical readings that confine it to a purely cultural dimension and searching for solutions that ensure deeper justice.

Keywords: Sociology of work; Gender; Inequality; East.

Introduction:

Gender equality has been and continues to be an issue ardently defended by many in a stypical way—particularly in discussions concerning equality across various fields, with a particular emphasis on employment rights. However, this discourse often takes on a predominantly political character, failing to distinguish between the cosmic legitimacy of equality as a fundamental human principle and the inherent physiological and social differences between the sexes, which cannot be disregarded when addressing this issue. Therefore, the sought-after form of equality must be contingent upon acknowledging these differences. As Alain Touraine aptly phrased it: "Equal and different."¹ This gender distinction is frequently considered a distinctively Eastern phenomenon, a result of the socio-cultural heritage of the East. In contrast, Europe is seen as an exemplary model of gender equality in the labor market. However, this perception is untrue. Gender-based employment distinctions persist, even in Europe, especially regarding wages and assigned responsibilities. Although salary disparities between men and women have decreased since the 1960s, they still exist. Sociologist Margaret Maruani, a specialist in the sociology of labor, asserts that "in the world of work, gender equality is trampled upon, and women remain submerged in a swamp of injustice."²

The rigidity of terminology like "trampled upon" or "swamp of inequality" raises a degree of intellectual astonishment, particularly from an academic perspective. Such terms are rarely used by sociologists, and they imply a certain lack of objectivity on the part the researcher. The concept of a "swamp of inequality" prompts us to reconsider the issue from a different angle. The underlying implication of such terminological classifications is that men have intrinsic professional advantages over women in terms of recruitment numbers, salary, and promotions. But is the male advantage an objective reality? If it exists, is it based on men's merit and competence, or are there other underlying variables unrelated to professional qualifications? Moreover, do men perceive

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women's employment differently than women perceive themselves and their own professional roles? Or is there a common societal perception—influenced by various historical, cultural, and economic factors—that influences both genders in the same way?

I. Gender Inequality in the Workplace: Is it a uniquely Eastern phenomenon?

Initially, the sociology of labor was predominantly masculine or gender-neutral, largely disregarding women and their contributions to the workforce. In the foundational discussions of labor sociology³, the "second sex" was not mentioned. Even in economics, labor has typically been analyzed without regard to the female workforce. For instance, in the early twentieth century, economists defined labor as follows: "Labor is the work performed by man, utilizing his full physical and moral capacities to produce wealth and services."⁴ Throughout labor history, women have been assigned to a secondary role, with their integration into society generally ignored until sociologists and psychologists began to address the issue.⁵

Discussions about women's rights have frequently been framed through political rhetoric that, in most cases, is distant from reality. Since its independence, Tunisia has witnessed the political instrumentalization of women, starting with President Bourguiba's iconic unveiling of a woman's hair as a sign of modernization. President Ben Ali continued this tendency by developing women's organizations and integrating women into his electoral campaigns, albeit superficially. Following the 2011 revolution, Tunisian political parties sustained this strategy in the 2011 and 2014 elections. This political exploitation of the male/female dichotomy is by no means exclusive to Tunisia. The use of gender inequality as an electoral tool or as part of a political agenda—often devoid of substantive social or practical implementation—exists in both Eastern and Western societies. These societies promote not only gender binaries (male/female), but also class binaries (rich/poor) and civilizational binaries (East/West).

This perspective has conferred a perceived advantage to men due to their biological superiority. Western society's approach to women developed with the advent of the concept of "gender" in the 1970s which was originally introduced as a psycho-sociological term. Gender theory sought to move beyond basic biological and sexual categorizations, instead highlighting gender as a social and cultural construct. This new term describes characteristics and behaviors that are considered sociologically and psychologically appropriate for men and women. The 1970s, hence, marked the beginning of a redefinition of femininity based on psychological and cultural terms rather than through purely biological distinctions.⁶

"If the conditions for obtaining and maintaining employment remain fundamentally marked by gender discrimination, it is because, at its core, the right to work is an absolute principle for men but a negotiable one for women." This statement encapsulates the perspective of labor sociologists on women's employment, particularly in Europe. Sociologist Margaret Maruani, a specialist in women's employment, highlights this inequality, suggesting that the phrase "work is an absolute principle for men"⁷ recalls the Qur'anic verse: "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women"⁸ (Surah An-Nisa, 34). Furthermore, women's employment in European countries has historically not been on equal footing with men's in terms of quality. For instance, in the 1960s, researcher Gilbert Madeleine conducted a study involving 14,600 female workers across 129 industrial establishments. Her findings emphasized the speed and precision required in their tasks, as well as the repetitive nature of their work⁹. She did, however, note a phenomenon known as "dévalorisation sociale" (social devaluation) associated with female labor, which can be attributed to traditional assumptions about women's social standing. According to sociologist Nicole Gadrey, in many professional activities, women frequently lack the technical skills essential for integration into specific occupations. This inequality is also evident in professional progression, as women's positions are usually limited to repetitive and routine tasks.¹⁰

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Numerous European academic studies have highlighted the persistent devaluation of women in the workforce, particularly within institutions, factories, and industrial settings. Women are often stereotyped as lacking the intellectual or physical capacity to perform tasks at the same level of efficiency as men. This perception extends to salary structures and assigned responsibilities, reinforcing gender inequalities. As sociologist Nicole Gadrey points out, "The category of unskilled employees is overwhelmingly composed of women."¹¹

A study conducted by Dominique Méda and Sophie Ponthieux further confirms the existence of gender-based wage disparities, which have remained unchanged since the 1990s. In 2002, the salary difference between men and women was 25.3%, with no notable improvement since 1990.¹² Contrary to expectations, globalization has not mitigated these disparities; instead, women's employment has become a key factor in shaping globalization policies. Gender (le genre) served as a fundamental organizing principle within neoliberal globalization¹³. In fact, gender disparities have deepened, particularly given globalization's utilitarian logic, which prioritizes "maximum profit with minimal labor costs."¹⁴ This phenomenon extends beyond the use of women as a mechanism for managing economic crises through overwork and underpayment; it also includes the ongoing mobilization and reconfiguration of concepts like gender, race, and social class to reinforce new forms of social division in global labor markets.¹⁵

II. Labor gender inequality in Eastern countries: Is it a social necessity or an antiquated way of thinking?

Many believe that Tunisian women have a better standing than women in the rest of the Eastern world, thanks to legislative achievements made since the country's independence under President Bourguiba's leadership. Since then, the political approach has focused on using women as a tool for political propaganda, advocating for women's rights and equality as official state policies. While Tunisian women appear to be making more progress than their counterparts in other Arab nations, recent statistics indicate that certain Gulf

countries are in a more favorable position. According to the 2016 report by the World Economic Forum, Kuwait ranks first in the Arab world (117th globally) in terms of gender equality, followed by the UAE at 119th, Qatar at 122nd, and Bahrain at 123rd. Tunisia, on the other hand, ranks fifth (127th worldwide). According to Tunisia's Minister of Women, Family, and Childhood, Naziha Laabidi, the proportion of women in higher-level jobs is only 29.7%, while men have a 70% representation¹⁶. These figures suggest a need to reassess the social status of Tunisian women, as the legislative progress that has accompanied significant social advancement for women may be concealing an unspoken reality. This disparity can be attributed to the failure to align intellectual and cultural progress with legislative advancements. Development must be comprehensive, promoting women's professional success while also releasing them from inherited cultural limitations. Eastern societies are often regarded as macho par excellence. Some feminist models from certain "backward" Eastern societies are used as instances of the regressive tendency of Eastern, particularly Islamic, societies. However, the emphasis is rarely placed on countries where women have achieved major rights, such as Tunisia, Lebanon, or others.

The concept of masculine domination is often viewed as a unique trait of Eastern Islamic societies, when in fact, according to Pierre Bourdieu, masculine domination is a worldwide phenomenon. Bourdieu argues that masculine dominance finds all the necessary circumstances to sustain its practices across societies. Men's globally recognized presence is supported by the structural organization of social systems, as well as the activities of production and reproduction. A gender division for productivity and reproduction consistently gives men the greater share.¹⁷ Masculine dominance is a concept present in various societies, regardless of their intellectual, social, or educational backgrounds. In the past, this dominance was mostly manifested materially. Women were frequently abused physically and verbally with social consent and they were forced to abandon their education and limit themselves to domestic responsibilities. Today it has evolved into symbolic

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dominance, which is achieved through the creation of representations, images, and stereotypes. As masculine domination today is essentially symbolic, it is necessary to adopt an analytical perspective that seeks to understand women by analyzing the masculine discourse that speaks about them.¹⁸

Referring back to several field studies that address gender-related labor issues, it appears that masculine discourse about women and their employment promotes masculine dominance by positioning women's natural place as the home. In a field study conducted in 2003 on the issue of unemployment in Tunisia, 63.3% of male respondents considered women to be responsible for exacerbating the phenomenon of unemployment.¹⁹ Moreover, 36.4% of them explicitly stated that the optimal solution to tackle unemployment was for women to return to their homes and engage in the natural roles they were created for. Some participants gave the following straightforward responses:

- What are the solutions to overcoming the unemployment crisis?
- To reduce the number of women.
- What factors contribute to job search difficulties?
- There are too many women in the country.²⁰

On various situations, we notice that males continue to apply old cultural assumptions passed down through generations, which associate specific tasks with women and favor men. The legislative structures developed during the independence era, such as the Personal Status Code, failed to eradicate or significantly alter these preconceptions. Consequently, the image of women in Arab and Tunisian mentalities has not undergone a radical transformation. As it is often stated, "The woman's primary role is to bear children in order to renew the biological resources of the family."²¹

This eastern cultural legacy remains ingrained in Arab and Tunisian minds, leading men to be more motivated to find employment, while women prioritized marriage above work. A field study conducted in 2010 among students and graduates revealed that men are more concerned about unemployment

and more eager to secure a job than women. For women, unemployment is not as pressing a concern as marriage. 14.5% of female respondents stated that their unemployment did not worry them as much as the unemployment of their partner, and they preferred their partner to find work first, as it would ensure marriage.²² Moreover, the research found that a segment of the study sample prefers that men always be given priority in employment opportunities. For instance, if there are fifty vacancies for a job requiring a master's degree, and forty men and forty women apply, it is believed that the forty men should be hired first, followed by the selection of ten women. This practice would not only solve male unemployment but also open opportunities for women who were not selected by increasing the pool of potential husbands. According to this perspective, women, through their work, are only expected to support themselves. It remains unacceptable—whether in a mental or cultural sense—for a woman to establish a home and bear the responsibility of supporting a man, consequently avoiding the stigma of "spinsterhood," which is as stressful for women as unemployment is for men. In fact, the societal pressures of being classified as a "spinster" have far greater psychological and behavioral impacts on women than the experience of unemployment.²³

In Eastern societies, the relationship between men and women is primarily defined by cultural imaginations and inherited traditions before being shaped by laws or state policies. The preference for men remains entrenched in the Tunisian mindset, passed down through generations via socialization, behaviors, and discourse within the family and society. All of these aspects reinforce the centrality of men, their eligibility for employment, and their dominance over women. The feminine image adopted by society cannot be changed merely by laws or policies; rather, it is essential to alter the perceptions, ideas, and representations that shape this image. Only through such change can women acquire great status and full equality with men. Equality should not merely be a political slogan raised at certain times or a legal framework that conceals behind it a fragile social and economic reality for women. As

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long as gender equality is merely an electoral slogan, a parliamentary project, or a legal text, but conceals underlying violence against women, discrimination in employment or treatment, and the many forms of physical, psychological, symbolic, or cultural violence perpetrated against women, we are forced to re-evaluate the status of women in Tunisia and Eastern societies. A deeper reflection is needed to enhance women's status.

Conclusion:

It is the unconscious reproduction of male dominance that controls the collective consciousness of many societies, especially the Eastern ones. Consequently, we must determine what can be done in order to redefine gender identity, redistribute roles and rights, and bring about the desired societal change. Should we address both genders according to the concept of sex, acknowledging the biological differences associated with sexual distinction? Or should we approach them based on the concept of gender, or perhaps should we consider this dichotomy from a purely human perspective, where both have equal rights and duties, without discrimination or male dominance over women, except through mistaken concepts and distorted cultural legacies?

Male supremacy in Eastern Islamic societies is often attributed to the alleged view of women in Islamic thought, which many regard as discriminatory. However, this perception is flawed, and it is necessary to change it, in order to rectify the stereotype that Islam is oppressive to women and perpetuates male dominance. Islam explicitly acknowledges the equality of men and women. Prophet Muhammad stated, "Women are the counterparts of men," affirming full equality between the sexes, emphasizing their equivalence on all functional and social levels, and thus raising awareness and recognizing their importance in building society. Our most important role is to help eliminate the masculine society that has for years marginalized women at various levels. "The male, as Tournier says, excluded women from public life and created his own civilization without relying on it, a masculine civilization based on masculine values."²⁴ This societal change occurs not through

legislative revisions or political discourse, but rather by attempting to change the influence of cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation. A number of false ideas have been spread across generations by both the family and religious institutions, contributing to the reproduction of largely masculine societies.

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