

“Gender and Work in MENA: Research Capacity Building Activities”

Mid-Term Evaluation

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“Gender and Work in MENA: Research capacity building activities”

Mid-term Evaluation

Introduction

This is a mid term evaluation of the program entitled “Gender and Work in MENA: Research capacity building activities” carried out by the Population Council under a grant from the IDRC for two years. The program involves two training workshops, two research grant competitions, a publication based on the findings of the research grants and an end of program conference.

The evaluation seeks to assess the activities that have taken place so far, namely two training workshops and one grant competition and because this is an evaluation of a project in progress, it mainly focuses on the process aspect of the program and not on any substantive outcomes. However, based on the evaluator’s experience with other capacity building programs, an attempt will be made to provide some insights into what similar concepts and work modalities tested by other programs have produced, so that the managers of the Gender and Work program would take them into account, if appropriate, in thinking about the future of the program..

I will begin by describing the methods used to undertake the evaluation. This will be followed by a brief review of the overall context of the program, in terms of the theme of gender and work and the environment within which it grew. In the following section I analyze and evaluate the two main components of training and research grants pointing to areas of strength and weakness. **Suggestions are made along the way and highlighted and specific recommendations are referred to in the body of the evaluation but not separately in bullets (as requested) in order not to affect the flow of the argument.** In

the final section, I present conclusions and ideas of a more general nature for streamlining the program.

I. Methodology:

To evaluate the program, I relied on personal interviews, review of documents and my current and previous experience with similar capacity building programs.

First I reviewed project documents: proposals and reports submitted to IDRC as well as those drafted by trainees and grantees to apply to the program. In deciding what to review, I made sure to include samples of all categories devised by the manager that cover accepted and rejected applicants as well as other categories of applicants under consideration or who have been asked to resubmit. Within these categories, the choice was more or less randomly made, unless there was a reason to pay special attention to a specific case. I also visited some key websites, including IDRC's and other research institutions.

The next step was to conduct a number of interviews with applicants, trainees and grantees. I relied in the preparation of the list of interviewees on the apt assistance of the program's administrator, Mrs. Ola Hosny who prepared a diversified list and after consultation, we agreed on the proposed names. All face to face interviews took place at the Population Council's office in Maadi. For individuals who could not come to Maadi or who were located outside Cairo or in other countries, we arranged to have skype chats.

Preparations to undertake the evaluation coincided with the program's launch of the second round of training which offered me a good opportunity to attend some sessions, observe the proceedings and have face to face conversations with participants. Whenever possible, I tried to speak with participants individually in a quiet place, but when this was not feasible, I had mini focus group discussions with three or four participants during the lunch break.

Finally I formally interviewed or had chats for clarification with project staff at the Population Council. These included the manager of the program, Dr. Ghada Barsoum, Dr. Rania Rouchdy, Dr. Asmaa El Badry and Mr. Ali Rached (instructors), and Mr. Karim Fannous, trainee and program assistant.

The task of evaluating the program has been facilitated by my previous and present experience managing and consulting research competitions, and my close knowledge of regional capacity building programs¹. In addition, my familiarity with some of the Population Council's staff and its work programs, was an asset. Having left the Council four years ago, however, many things have changed and new staff has come on board who I did not know. This proved to be quite convenient. There was a sense of healthy familiarity that facilitated the staff interviewing process but, at the same time, did not entail conflict of interest that would compromise the results of the evaluation. For me personally it was interesting to examine the new directions the Council has taken and in what ways it has developed. Among other interests, the emphasis on Gender and Work is an example of a new thematic area that developed in recent years under the leadership of the previous regional director, and which seems to continue to grow at the present time under the new director, Safaa El-Kogali..

In this connection, I would like to acknowledge the transparent assistance I received from members of the Gender and Work program staff who were open in the discussions. They facilitated my task and provided me with all the documents I requested without any hesitation.

Finally, as I was working on this report, the manager of the Gender and Work program shared with me a progress report she prepared for IDRC which included, among other things, an elaborate statistical description of the accomplishments of the program until the present time in terms of the gender, geographical and disciplinary backgrounds of the participants and grantees. Since this information is available for both the Population Council and IDRC, I have decided not to repeat it in this report. However, to recap some of the main achievements, the program has been strong on the gender dimension as, for example, 71.5% of the trainees in the first workshop were females. Also, there has been a

¹ The Council's ME Awards program from 1991 to 2003 and my current experience as research consultant to the Middle East Research Competition in Tunisia and to the Arab Council for Social Sciences, under establishment.

broad diversity in terms of educational level of the participants who included a variety of individuals at different stages of their education, as well as different age levels. Moreover, a praise-worthy attempt has been made to include employees in key government agencies in Egypt. Finally, the program succeeded in including nine participants from Arab countries out of a total of 28. A very similar picture appears from the first research grants competition.

II. The Context:

There is no doubt that gender and work, and particularly the study of the context of women's participation in the labor force is a crucial subject of study both on the academic front as it opens new theoretical grounds worthy of study, and for its obvious policy implications. While its importance has grown in recent years particularly with the increasing liberalization of the labor market and new opportunities and constraints this has created, it is expected to provide even richer possibilities as an area of study, as the world economic crisis unravels and begins to make its impact felt.

In Egypt, the recent interest in work in general, among other subjects, has been enhanced by the collection of a series of ELMPS data (1988, 98 and 2006) which offers scholars and interested individuals a rich opportunity for data analysis. When we speak about the ELMPS it is impossible not to mention the big momentum the study of work has received from Ragui Assaad, former director of the Population Council who has been nurturing expertise in this area and opening new horizons of study by forming and mentoring a young generation of researchers and scholars and encouraging analysis of the data to address various aspects of the subject. He has also given the work a regional dimension by his access to relevant and comparable data in Arab countries, that include, among others, Sudan, Syrian, Yemen and Palestine.

It is in the context of the above that I evaluate the gender and work program which mainly builds on the strength of the quantitative data analysis tradition established by Ragui Assaad, which he confidently passed on to the Population Council during his tenure. In recent years the Council recruited individuals with strong quantitative skills and continued to encourage projects and publications around the work data, to the extent that the Council, among a few other places, such as ERF, is now being recognized as the resource center for statistics on

gender and work. Mostly the training staff and instructors are to themselves a product of this endeavor. Their location in one place within the Council and the opportunity this has offered to exchange professional interests and expertise, has enormously facilitated the process of launching this program. The reputation of the Council as a center of expertise has been repeatedly voiced by the interviewees who were proud to be associated with this regionally recognized and renowned authority. In general, however, beyond statistics, we not much is known about Arab women's daily experience with work and even less about women, work and citizenship which is the overarching theme of the IDRC grant

Moreover, the training component of the program has had the advantage of not beginning from a scratch as it benefited from piloting it in collaboration with the Social Research Center when, in June 2007, statistical analysis training introducing the ELMPS data was organized. Similarly, on the research grants side, the program benefited on the organizational terrain (letters to applicants and grantees etc..) from the rich and long experience of the MEAwards program, located for years in the Population Council.

In the next section, I will focus on two key issues: The target beneficiaries and content of the training and research grants programs..

III. Training workshops

1)Target group

The target group for the training program are recent PhD holders and post docs in social sciences. However, the call for participation and proposals adds that the minimum requirement is MA and students working towards their MA are also eligible to apply.

With all the compunction about the generally poor quality of education in the Arab countries and lack of rigorous social science training that characterizes Arab institutions of higher learning, this is still a very large group of eligible individuals at different stages of knowledge acquisition and skill levels. It practically includes for example, university teaching and research staff on one end, and students with BA degrees possibly in their first year of MA on the other. The participants also included individuals working in government organizations

and NGOs as well as students. No one training program, no matter how inclusive and comprehensive, can possibly address the different needs of these disparate individuals who are at different stages of learning. Similarly, there is a stark difference between the academic institutions in which the applicants/trainees/grantees sit. Some of the trainees come from local provincial institutions while others are studying in some of the best academic institutions in Europe. The latter obviously have had international exposure and better research and training opportunities and resources, to the extent that one would wonder if there is indeed a need to include them at all in this training. This discrepancy in target beneficiaries also has repercussions on the content of the program, as will be explained below.

2) Content

The training component is structured in such a way that on the first day all participants get to obtain some background information about gender and work as an area of study, go over definitions and introduce the data sets, which was very much appreciated. By the end of the first day, participants are expected to have had a clear idea about the structure of the training which splits, starting the second day, into quantitative and qualitative tracks.

The quantitative component is strong in terms of the variety and selection of topics, level of content and diversity of instructors. Most notably, because the instructors have had a chance to work with the data themselves, they have been able to offer their well-grounded technical experience in dealing with their topics such as empowerment, education and wage differentials etc.. They indeed provided the trainees with several ideas for potential areas of work. These benefits were particularly felt by those trainees who were somewhat advanced, had the right level of quantitative knowledge and background and were able to follow the lectures, as will be explained below.

For the majority of trainees I interviewed the training workshops were associated in their minds with STATA, the software used to analyze the EMPS data which the organizers are encouraging participants to use because of its potentials and flexibility. However, the overwhelming majority of training participants have had no previous experience with STATA and those of them who did work on data analysis, have been working with SPSS.

With that in mind, the participants could be divided into three groups: 1) those who were open to learning the new program and had the background necessary to do so (although they were not sure they could continue to use it mainly because it is not available in their institutions and no one else uses it), 2) those who had an interest in learning STATA but did not have the necessary background, felt they could not cope and so joined the qualitative group 3) those who had no interest in quantitative methods and were clearly there for the qualitative lectures.

Depending on what the organizers have in mind about how they will take this project further, they will have to decide what to do with groups 1 and 2. The large majority said that STATA was difficult to learn and needed much follow up. Group one has voiced the view that for the learning process to be effective, STATA needed to be introduced in their work institutions through Population Council's sponsored intensive training so there would be a critical mass of STATA trained staff that could support each other. They did not feel confident enough, with the training they got from Gender and Work, to convey what they learned to their colleagues and students, which, incidentally, is one of the main ways to ensure institutional capacity building that could be a potential outcome of the program. Group 2 were keen on acquiring the new technical knowledge but were challenged by its difficulty and expressed the view that they needed to have a more introductory and less advanced type of training.

Recommendation: The Population Council might wish to consider taking the training to institutions in the region to ensure building the capacity of a larger number of people and reach a wider audience.

The qualitative component of the training – with the exception of the introductory lectures of the initiative and the meaning of work by Ghada Boutros on the first two days, which were given in plenary, could benefit from more substantive input and streamlining.. The material offered is excessively introductory and unchallenging and most of the participants seemed to be familiar with it. My interviews have shown that, with few exceptions, it did not satisfy the expectations of participants, several of whom were, as mentioned earlier, advanced students or university staff. Some have stated that although they were familiar with the material, it was useful for them to listen to it again. However, since the program is in a

position to be a pioneer in the area of gender and work, its role is not expected to be merely to reinforce previous ideas, but to upgrade participants' knowledge and open new horizons and areas of thinking. One of the Population Council's instructors told me that there was an obvious interest in the subject of empowerment among the quantitative group.

Recommendation: Since this topic is very pertinent to the question of gender and work and has been extensively addressed by sociologists and anthropologists in the international and local literature, and since it is not without methodological and measurement challenges, it might be good for the qualitative group to address it by taking the training on it to a more advanced level.

Recommendation: Another related point is that since Gender and Work is part of the IDRC Women's Rights and Citizenship program, it is important that the organizers emphasize the link between work and citizenship, by providing, even in an introductory fashion, some of the theoretical and empirical debates about these links while focusing on the regional context. This would on one hand serve the purpose of IDRC in broadening the interest in and understanding of economic and political citizenship and on the other, for the beneficiaries to grasp the broader context of their training and why it is important to study work and gender. I also suggest that some basic readings about be distributed to participants prior to the workshop to provide some shared background knowledge and prompt more informed discussions during it. The IDRC website has some useful materials, some of which has been conveniently translated into Arabic, that can serve this purpose.²

In the second training, following the presentation by the instructor to the participants in the qualitative component, a discussion followed on donor agendas and policy implications of research which was emphasized by the lecturer. This is certainly one valid perspective and may even be useful so long as the audience understands why the organizers believe policy

ألحوكوة و مواطن قال ورافى الشرق ا. وسطوشوالفلقوباد. فلانين قديمات اذنة علن الاجواع ودرلس اتال وراة
هيرقبن اهج درلس اتال وراة - جامع قبوردو

Governance and Female Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa, Dr. Valentine Mogaddam, Professor of sociology and women's studies; director of the women's studies program, Bourdeau university.

and donor relevance is a concern of priority, and if it is the case, then **I suggest the facilitators devote some time to explain the policy importance of gender and work, which is perfectly legitimate.** I noticed, however, that because several participants were in the academic track, they had a different view of why research is conducted and the need for fundamental and basic research.

I also had the chance to review some of the forms and documentation related to the training workshops. I have the following comments which the organizers may wish to take into account in future distribution

Call for participation in the training workshops and call for proposals was appropriately sent in English, French and Arabic to the data bases compiled by the Population Council's communication unit, and was disseminated as well by word of mouth to individuals in various locations and to the SYPE advisory committee that met in June 2008. And yet, the program did not receive a large number of proposals for research grants. **Recommendation:** While the limited number of applications may be attributed to the lack of interest etc., the organizers should rule out that the call for applications did not reach the addressees.

Recommendation: The Arabic call for proposals needed improvement with the language and style. This is very important to preserve the image of the program particularly as it is distributed in the Arab countries where the Arabic language is strong and valued.

Registration form: In addition to the request for biographical data (which should be provided in the CVs), the form asks for previous experience working with data sets and statistical packages. The purpose of this form is not obvious, for although it requests specific information that could be useful in the preparations for the workshop, the information is collected only *during* the workshop which defeats the purpose of collecting it. Moreover, it is clear that many of the participants did not understand the questions on the form and gave the wrong answers.

Recommendation: Since the program is clearly dealing with individuals who are not strong in English, the form should be written in Arabic.

Evaluation form: The evaluations of the first training workshop are generally very positive and in my conversations with participants, they praised the competence of the instructors and the general organization of the event.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the program director shares the results of the evaluation with other instructors and trainers for even though the program director was sure to have a look at the evaluations, other staff involved in the training were not informed about the results of the evaluation and were consequently not given the chance to think of innovative ways to present their material.

IV. Research grants:

Like the training program, the call for proposals is addressed to the same miscellaneous group of individuals essentially ranging from those who only have a BA and studying towards their MA and others with a Ph.D degree and so, my comments above regarding the target audience for training still apply here.

In total, the program received some 25 to 27 proposals, 19 of which were put before the committee and the rest was judged by the manager to be too weak to be submitted to the committee. In general, this is a not a large number of proposals. However, since, unlike other programs in social sciences that deliberately favor keeping an open agenda, this program *focuses* on the specific theme of gender and work, **it might be a good idea if in the call for papers the organizers provided some examples of topics they would like to encourage and that would be of interest to the committee, perhaps along the lines of the themes in the proposal to IDRC.**

1) The proposals

Even though the call for proposals referred to the need for methodologically sound and theoretically grounded proposals, with few exceptions, the proposals were lacking in rigor and literature review, as noted in some proposals, was particularly poor. This might again reinforce the idea that the organizers are mainly interested in establishing the tradition of data analysis, rather than in teaching applicants how to write good proposals and raising their research writing skills. With few exceptions, the committee did not make major comments to

improve in substantive rather than formal ways, the above components. This is somewhat worrisome as the grantees are expected, later on in the process, to write up their findings in preparation for publication and will be expected to present the above elements in an attractive fashion.

2) Preparations

The process of preparing the proposals for review by the selection committee has been undertaken basically by three persons: the manager of the program, a research assistant and an administrative assistant. Both the manager and the research assistant read the proposals before they are submitted to the committee. The manager divides the proposals in categories based on their quality but as she indicated, the committee did not always stick to her categorization and shuffled proposals around. The assistant on the other hand, summarizes the proposals pointing out their weakness and strength, and writes her comments on a sheet of paper that is also put before the committee. Whether or not the committee reads these comments and to what extent they have an influence on their views is not clear. **The point I want to make here is that perhaps the secretariat would consider sending these comments for improving the proposals more systematically *before* the selection meeting so that applicants can improve their work and increase their chances of acceptance. This is usually a useful intervention, but requires a great deal of organization of time.**

3) Composition of the committee:

Three imbalances stand out with regard to the composition of the selection committee. First, it comprises five individuals all of whom are staff of the Population Council or closely associated with it. Initially it was thought (also mentioned in the proposal) that the committee would ensure some regional representation, but that did not take place and was compensated for by providing mentors from the relevant research countries (see more on mentorship below). Second, in terms of discipline, the members are predominantly economists/statisticians and only one (the manager of the program) has a qualitative background. Finally, among the committee members, one member, one committee member stands out as the most senior, then next to him, are four more junior researchers.

Recommendation: I strongly recommend to diversity the composition of the committee in terms of discipline, Council vs, non- Council and geographical representation in order to ensure more visibility and transparency

I would also like to make an argument here for a regional presence since this is a regional program that has indeed succeeded in attracting individuals from various Arab countries. While it is an excellent idea to have mentors from the grantee's country of research which serves the important purpose of assisting the grantee in the field etc., it is still of great value to have individuals from different countries *review and select* proposals, and the first (mentorship) does not substitute for the second (regional representation). Ensuring regional presence serves the crucial purpose of integrating regional scholars, of a higher level, in work in this area. The experience of regional selection committees in other research programs points to the very rich exchange that takes place around the review of proposals that brings out areas of similarities and differences between countries, and opens new possibilities for research and common learning. Moreover, on all runs, short, medium and long, having regional committee members would serve to expand the circle of the program, disseminate information about it, and eventually help create focal points that would eventually become the program's key links in the different countries.

4) Mentorship

The provision of mentors for the grantees is a brilliant aspect of the program. This creative idea serves the specific purpose of the program and is exemplary for other capacity building endeavors in this region. Involving senior mentors helps overcome the problem of generational divide between senior and junior researchers and also exposes the more senior to state of the art notions and techniques, which we should not assume they are aware of.

Three categories of applicants are dealt with after the selection of proposals to be funded takes place: those who receive straight grants, those who have promising proposals but still need to revise them and finally, those whose proposals are short of major requirements. For group one and two, the program either assigns a mentor or asks the grantee to find one. To formalize the process, the program provides financial incentive to the mentors but at the same time, and particularly with group 2, makes the payment contingent upon successful

submission of proposals in the following round. This makes the mentor a stakeholder and encourages both mentor and applicant to work harder for a better submission. Also some moral pressure is involved here that serves as an incentive, since as senior scholars, the mentors would not wish to jeopardize their academic reputation by getting involved in a sloppy process. The role of the mentor, I would assume, starts immediately with helping the grantees understand the written comments of the committee, which in some cases, are not totally comprehensible to the applicant (e.g. comments such as “the proposal needs to be more focused”).

Recommendation: It is constructive of the program to send written comments to all applicants, including those who have been rejected. This particular group is naturally a pool to draw from for the training workshops.

V. Areas where more work could be done

To recap, the interviews I conducted are generally very positive and most interviewees said they were satisfied with the program and would recommend it to others. At the same time, the program does address an important thematic issue and brings up a good modality for capacity building for which there is always a room. I have made some specific recommendations in the discussions above. In the next section, I will provide remarks of a **more general nature** in the spirit of streamlining the program and improve its delivery to future beneficiaries should there be an opportunity for continuation and/or expansion.

As it is now, the approach of the Gender and Work program towards capacity building needs some streamlining. The program has the potential of providing a comprehensive capacity building program as it has components of training, research, publication and networking, but the links between the different components need to be firmly established, and it has to be clearly understood and demonstrated how one component not only leads to the other, but also serves to reinforce it. Without strongly encouraging the trainees to apply to the research grants program, and without putting the knowledge they acquired through training to test by writing proposals, there is no concrete way to discern the impact of the training. The point is that the training is supposed to open new research areas and encourage trainees to submit proposals to the research competition. However, only a few trainees

submitted research proposals and took grants (am I right? I don't have my notes here). If the organizers decide to keep the two programmatic components which I recommend, the link between training and grants has to be strengthened. If, however, the managers decide to focus on training only without offering research grants then other means should be thought of to gauge its impact.

The formation of a critical mass or expert group around the issue of gender and work, which the organizers stated was their aim, requires that they decide on a course of action: if they want to spread the word about gender and work, enlarge the circle of interested individuals, and raise their research capacities and skills, or alternatively work vertically, systematically and intensively with a group of people at a more advanced level, to create future experts on the subject. I believe there might be some tension in the approach presently adopted with a stream of them favoring the second approach of nurturing and mentoring a group of bright and dynamic while others are more populist in their preferences and leanings. By including western-institution-based students with others from local organizations, the organizers seem to have – practically - opted for the solution of combining “centers of excellence” with upgrading local capacities. At least in theory, however, this is a conundrum that most capacity building programs face and are not always successful in resolving. As I explained above, these beneficiaries are not homogenous in their needs and it would be important for the program to operate on the basis of a needs assessment in order to intervene on sound basis. This is where using the data sheets in the beginning to design the program rather than at the end, might prove to be useful. I would like to reiterate, however, that the program's concern for disadvantaged individuals from local and provincial institutions is laudable and it would be good to find the means to sustain it, if for no other reason, then at least for the fact that it breaks social divisions and educational hierarchies and dualities.

The other point has to do with program niche. It is obvious that the quantitative component and introducing STATA is the program's edge and source of strength. However, I would also like to draw attention that the quantitative component should be always updated and rejuvenated especially given that other organizations e.g. GERPA,³ in Tunis, are organizing

³ Quote: “This is to inform you that GERPA is organizing a training workshop from July 26 -30 in Tunis. The training workshop will be on Stata/econometrics and will cover techniques and methodologies used in

similar training programs on STATA. The gender and work program should seek to create its own niche and identity vis a vis other regional programs.

Finally, although it may be the job of the end of project evaluator to come up with indicators to measure the impact of the program, it may be useful for the managers of Gender and Work to start thinking now of what they would like to see their program impacting after they have had the chance to implement all its components. Capacity building, as we all know, is a prolonged, extended and cumulative process (which explains why it is difficult to measure). However, the experience of other regional capacity building programs such as MEAwards and MERC has shown that an ideal capacity building program is one that includes a chain of skill and knowledge upgrading as well as opportunities for dissemination and publication and networking that target the individuals at different stages of their career and can best be examined over a whole professional or academic trajectory. Some of the relevant outcomes include individual and institutional capacity building, quantity and quality and tangible products.

the the first and second competition projects. The course will be offered by Dr. Michael Binder, a prominent professor of economics and econometrics. We would like to inquire about your ineterest in participating in the course. Please note that, as usual, your travel expenses, accomodation and course fees will be covered by GERPA. Please let us know asap of your intention to participate in the GERPA Summer Traing". Unquote