

Gender and Economic Isolation in an Era of Globalization

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A growing literature examines the impact of globalization on women. Far less discussion though has focused on the fact that various communities have been deliberately excluded from the global economy by externally imposed sanctions and other types of economic restrictions. Drawing on the literatures on women's employment, globalization and sanctions, I first provide a theoretical framework within which to explore this question, and then examine three case studies of communities upon which some kind of economic isolation has been imposed from outside in recent years. These three case studies include Iran, Iraq and Palestine. Numerous analysts have remarked on the fact that female labor force participation rates in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are quite low, particularly relative to education levels. Most analysts have argued that prevailing gender norms can explain this outcome, ignoring the roles that the structure of local economies and the relationship between local and global economies may also play in explaining these trends. Noteworthy also is that in recent years, female labor force participation rates have risen considerably, in all but a handful of MENA countries. I argue that externally imposed economic isolation can explain the persistence of low labor force participation rates in three Middle East communities – Iran, Iraq and Palestine. I then turn to an analysis of panel data (census and labor force) for two of the communities in question (Iran and Palestine – such detailed data are not available for Iraq, unfortunately) to examine in greater detail the complex ways that economic isolation can affect local labor markets, and the implications this can have for women with varying levels of education. My data suggest that not only does economic isolation reduce overall levels of female labor force participation, but also that there are distinct class differences in terms of how economic isolation affects female employment. In some fields a defeminization may occur, since in times of severe economic crisis, men's unwillingness to do 'women's work' may be reduced. This research not only provides a more nuanced look at how economic isolation has affected members of various communities in Iran, Iraq and Palestine, it also provides insight into broader theoretical question of globalization both by examining the extreme case of forced economic isolation (the opposite of globalization), but also by illustrating that while globalization and economic isolation are at opposite ends of the economic spectrum in some sense, they are also inextricably linked, since increasing globalization also leads to communities becoming increasingly vulnerable to the threat of economic isolation.