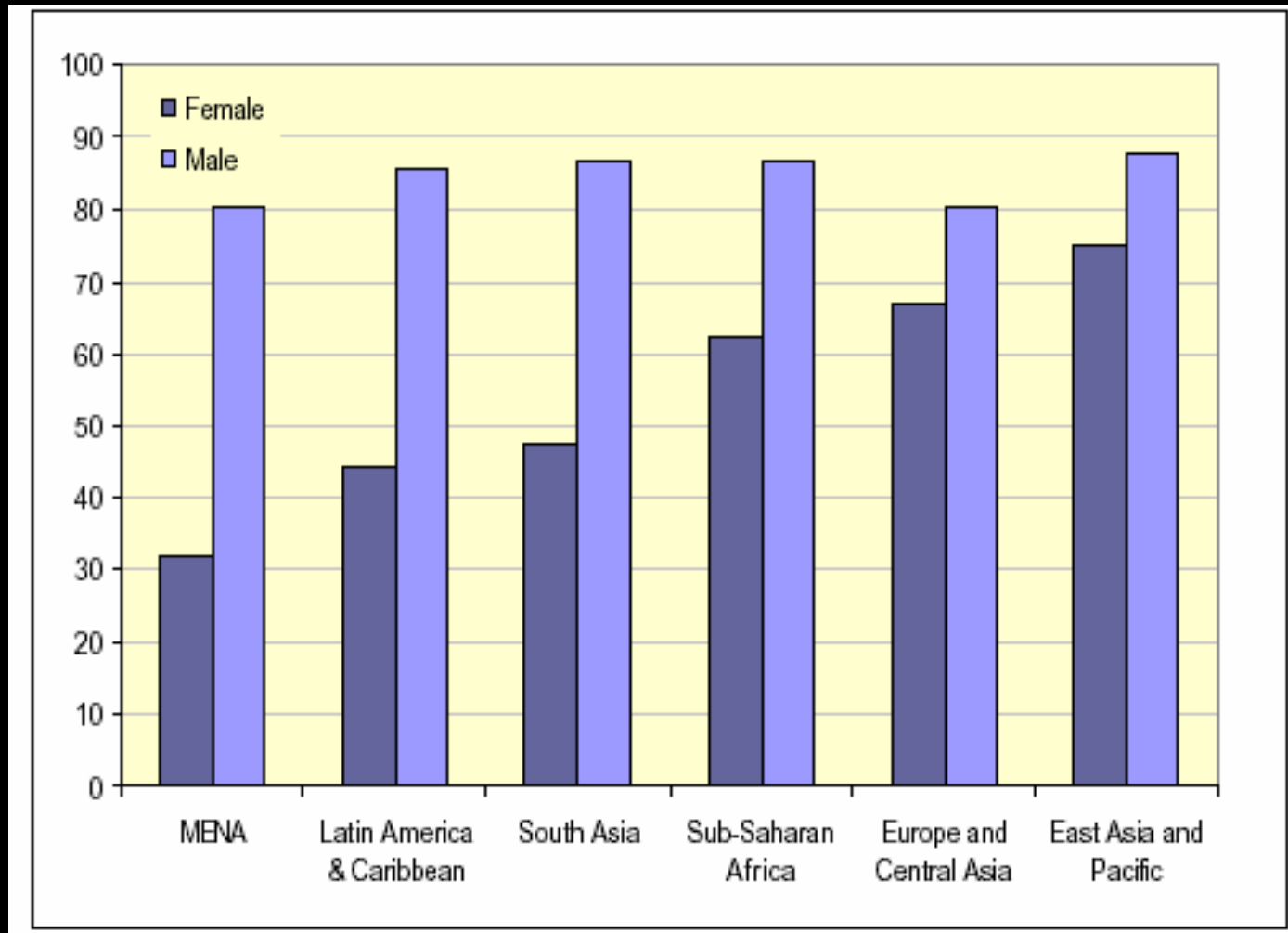


Obstacles to Female Employment in MENA

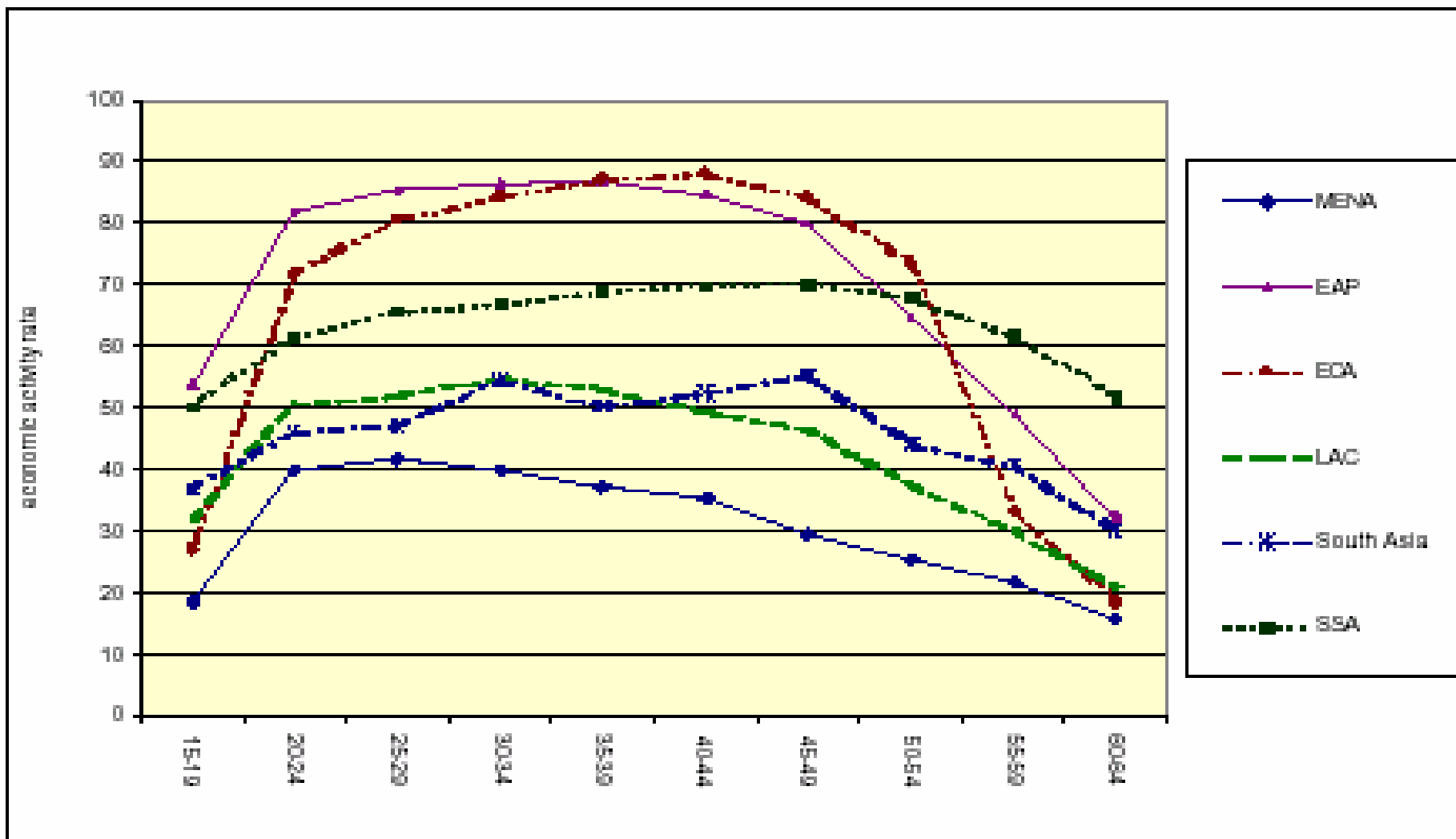
and Ways to Overcome Them

By
Ragui Assaad

Female labor force participation rates in MENA are among the lowest in the world

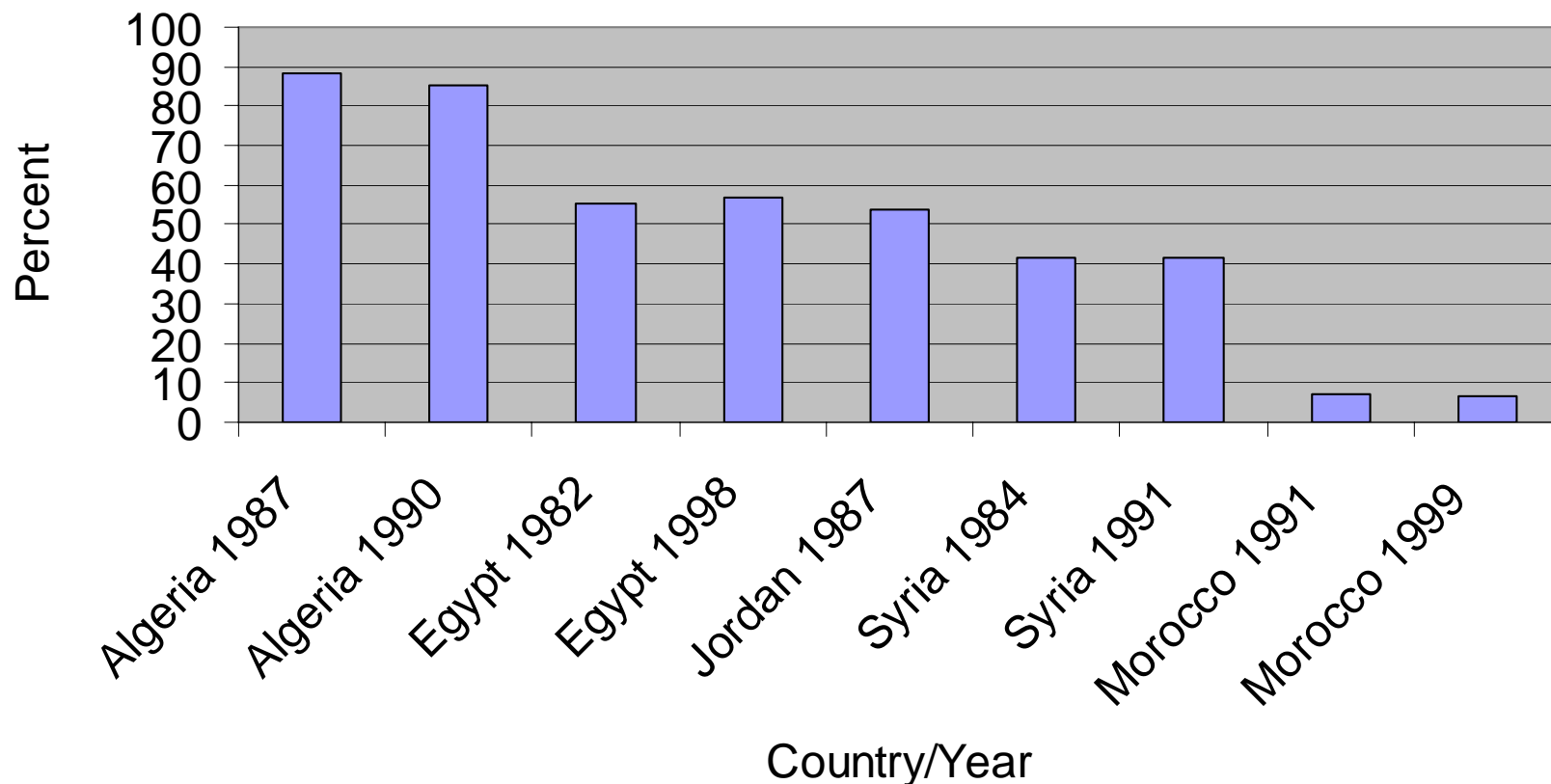


Women's participation peaks earlier than in other regions with the peak occurring at close to the age of marriage and childbearing

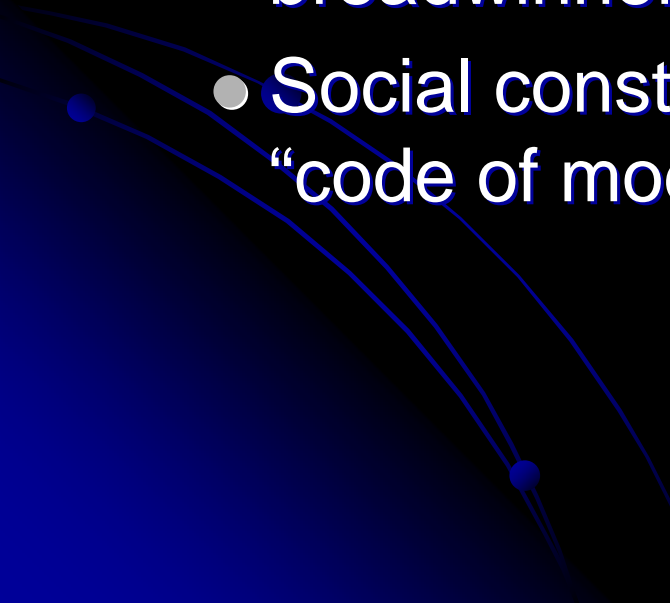


Women workers in MENA tend to be concentrated in the public sector, which has poor future growth prospects

Female Public Employment as Percent of Total Female Employment



Traditional Argument

- Traditional gender paradigm constrains female labor supply
 - Primacy of women's familial role
 - Gender norms that define the man as breadwinner and woman as homemaker
 - Social constraints imposed on women by the "code of modesty"
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Complicating the Traditional Argument

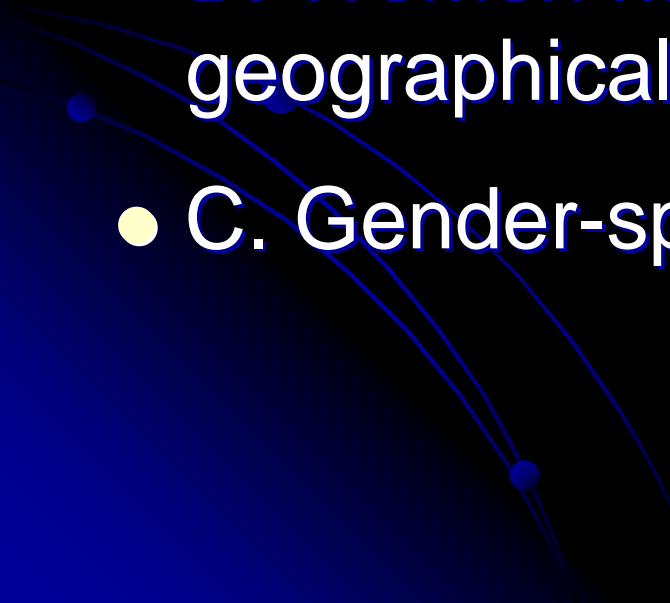
- Traditional argument holds some kernel of truth, especially for married women, but ...
 - Female unemployment rates are much higher than those of males in most MENA countries
 - Increased educational attainment is driving increasing female participation in the labor force
 - Delays in marriage are lengthening the window between school completion and marriage, a time when women seek employment outside the home
 - Some MENA countries, such as Morocco and Tunisia, have achieved significant increases in female employment in the private sector
- Thus, labor supply appears to be less and less a constraint to increased female participation

Main Argument

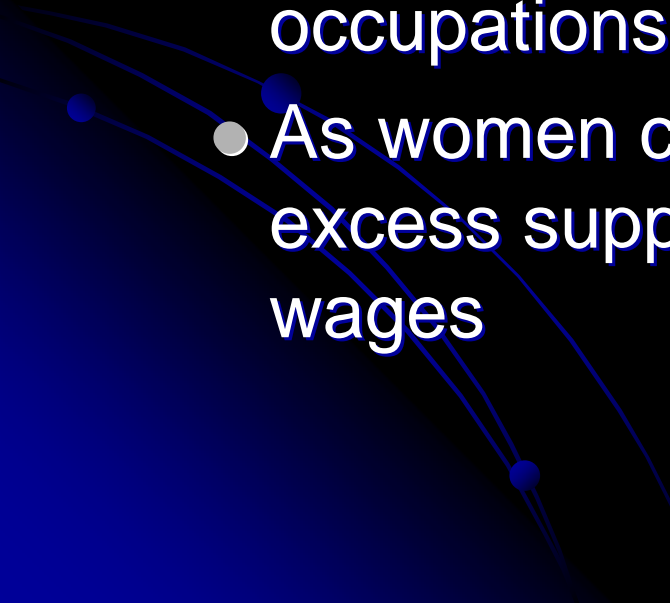
Low and stagnant female participation rates are as much the result of the institutional structure of MENA labor markets and the nature of labor demand in the region as they are the result of limitations on female labor supply

Changes in the institutional structure of the labor market and in the patterns of labor demand by gender have lagged considerably behind steady increases in female labor supply

I. The Institutional Features of MENA Labor Markets

- A. Labor markets in MENA are highly *segmented* along gender lines
 - B. Women have more limited job and geographical mobility
 - C. Gender-specific labor regulations
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A. Labor Market Segmentation

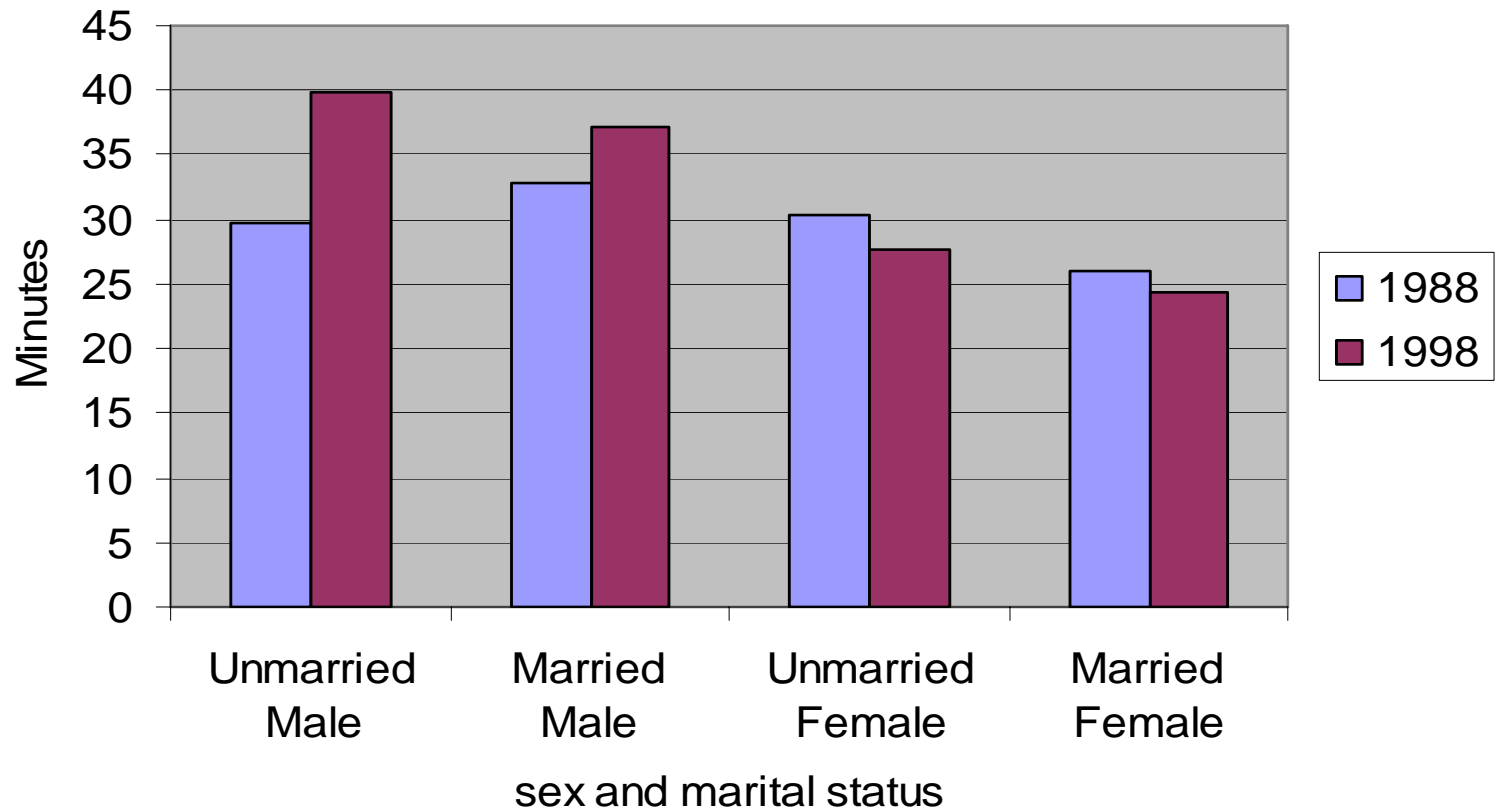
- Norms about “gender appropriate” employment restrict women’s participation to narrow segments of the job market
 - Job markets are highly segmented along gender lines, with women confined to a few occupations and industries
 - As women crowd into these segments, the excess supply of labor results in depressed wages
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B. Limited Job and Geographical Mobility

- Gender norms relating to women's modesty and autonomy significantly limit women's job and geographical mobility
- These norms are sometimes codified in legislation that requires a husband's or father's permission to apply for a passport or to seek work
- Women's domestic burdens can constrain their ability to commute and therefore their access to the labor market beyond their local area

Women in Egypt were not able to increase their geographical mobility at a time when men had to significantly increase theirs

Egypt: Average Commuting Time in Minutes, 1988 and 1998



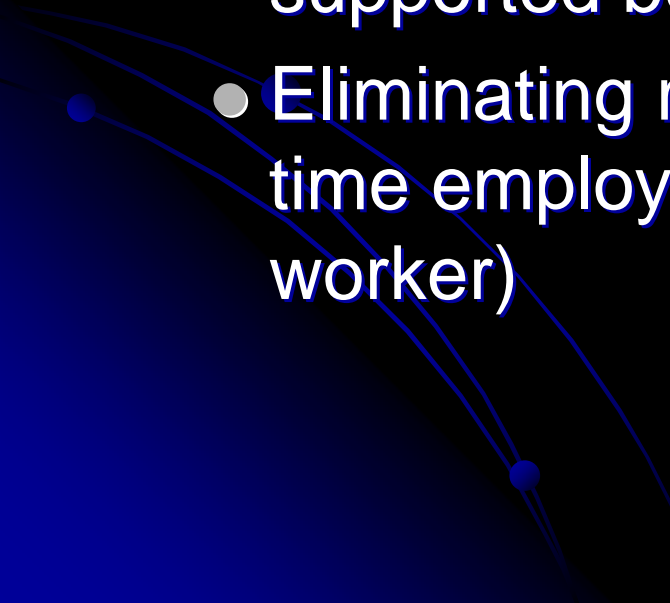
C. Gender-Specific Labor Regulations

- Gender-specific employer mandates include:
 - Employer-paid maternity leave
 - Childcare requirements based on number of female employees
 - Restrictions on work hours that apply to women only
 - Restrictions on types of job women can engage in
- Any regulation that imposes additional costs on employers for hiring women is a potential barrier to women's employment

II. The Gendered Pattern of Labor Demand

- Segmentation of labor market along gender lines makes it necessary to look at labor demand by type of job
- Labor-intensive manufacturing and agri-business exports have typically been main avenues for expansion of female employment in the developing world
- With the exception of Tunisia and Morocco, MENA trade policies have discouraged this kind of trade
 - The textile and garments sector accounts for 73 percent of the increased female share in non-governmental wage employment in Morocco in the 1990s
 - In Egypt, a reduction in the share of trade in GDP in the 1990s was accompanied by a defeminization of non-governmental wage employment

Overcoming Barriers to Female Employment in MENA

- Through changes in labor market policies:
 - Eliminating gender-specific employer mandates and replacing with socially-supported benefit schemes
 - Eliminating regulations that discourage part-time employment (by imposing fixed costs per worker)
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Overcoming Barriers to Female Employment in MENA

- Through improvements in infrastructure and service delivery
 - Improving services that reduce women's domestic burdens, like access to safe drinking water
 - Improve access to labor saving technologies in the home
 - Provision of public transports to improve access to job markets beyond local area (possibly with sections dedicated for women only)
 - Being aware of gender-implications of land use and industrial development policies