Middle East Addresses Underemployment of Older Individuals

By Katie Nadworny
July 15, 2020

With an aging population and a growing number of older people out of the workforce, Persian Gulf states and other countries in the Middle East have started to address the issue of underemployment of older individuals.

"There are a number of new laws that have been introduced in the Gulf region to specifically facilitate employment at old age, post-retirement," said Shereen Hussein, Ph.D. She is associate director and professor of care and health policy evaluation at the Personal Social Services Research Unit at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England, and a medical demographer who studies population aging.

"But we have to realize that the retirement age in the Gulf region is very, very low," leading to a larger number of workers who have technically aged out of the workforce, she said. Also, the new laws addressing employment of older workers apply only to nationals, not migrants or foreign workers.

Factors for Continued Employment

Even the individual opportunities for workers can depend on both gender and the wealth of the country. Hussein has interviewed stakeholders throughout the region and found examples of this.

"When I was in the Gulf, I met quite a few older men ... who are well-educated, and they still have lots of consultancy work in their 70s and 80s," she said. "And similarly, in other countries in the region, you've got doctors and academics who have gone to retirement, but then they are able to secure part-time consultancy work." Much of the accessibility of consultancy work depends on pre-established professional networks.

In Cairo, she continued, "people can set up their businesses, and they can carry on working if they have the means to be working. But they have to be in charge of the business, in hiring all the people." Otherwise, it can be hard to find consultancy work the way people can in the Gulf.

Mustapha Said, the senior specialist in workers' activities at the Beirut branch of the International Labor Organization, pointed out that pension systems can put older individuals who want to continue working at a disadvantage.

Throughout the region, there is not much of a legal framework to protect and empower older workers. There are some attempts to offer more protection, such as reforming social security in Jordan, Said stated. But he said these protections are still limited.

Participation in the workforce differs significantly depending on the sector. Many older people continue to work out of necessity in informal-sector jobs that are largely low-skill positions and offer little support and protection for workers.

[SHRM members-only toolkit: Introduction to the Global Human Resources Discipline](https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/introglobalhr.aspx)
Reason for Working

"We always think ... participation in the labor force is a good thing at old age, which it is in the majority [of] case[s]." Hussein said. "However, when you think about inequalities and poverty and income and working at old age, it might not be a good thing."

The important aspect to focus on is choice, she noted. "We need to differentiate between the ability to work because somebody wants to participate, or someone who is forced to work because [he or she] has to secure income. In the region, you have people working until they die."

It's important to recognize that there are older individuals who work out of necessity and those who wish to work to continue to capitalize on their expertise. Both need to be addressed to improve the climate for older employees in the Middle East, she said.

Katie Nadworny is a freelance writer in Istanbul.