

JOB MARKET FRICTIONS IN IRAQ



EMPLOYERS AND JOBSEEKERS' DECISION-MAKING

March 2024



Implemented by:



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary	4
Previous studies on gender in the labour market	5
Sample selection	6
Characteristics of jobseekers and employers	7
Jobseekers	7
Employers	9
Design of the experiment: building resumes and vacancies	11
Experimental results: Employers' preferences	12
Direct question	12
Indirect question	13
Correlations behind job offers	14
Bias toward female jobseekers by employers' sector	15
Job offers and correlations with employers' characteristics	16
Experimental results: Jobseekers' preferences	19
Correlations behind job applications	19
Conclusion	22
Recommendations	23
Appendix	24
References	29

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report addresses the critical issue of low female labour force participation in Iraq, a country with the third lowest proportion of economically active women among 189 countries in 2019 (World Bank, 2020). Women's labour participation is only 11 per cent compared to 68 per cent for men, and female unemployment nearly doubles the male rate (ILO, 2022). Women are also heavily concentrated in the public sector and specific occupations such as education and services. They are significantly underrepresented in the private sector and self-employment (IOM, 2019). The limited opportunities for women in the private sector tend to answer to beliefs that see women as primary caregivers, responsible for domestic duties and children (Bertrand, 2020). Women also tend to show higher risk aversion, lower reservation wages and less optimism over future earnings (Cortés et al., 2023).

This report draws upon a wealth of literature and a novel study conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to explore the multifaceted barriers to women's employment within the labour market. IOM conducted an audit study in the Iraqi labour market, utilizing hypothetical resumes to examine employers' preferences for male and female jobseekers. An audit study analyses behaviours challenging to detect in observational data, such as discrimination and decision-making (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004). This methodology has proven effective in highlighting the effects of gender and race on labour market outcomes in over 26 countries (Galos and Coppock, 2023).

The study sample contains 234 employers and 477 jobseekers in the Iraqi labour market who evaluate hypothetical resumes and job openings, respectively. The experiment identifies employers and jobseekers' preferences for hiring and applying for vacancies across various characteristics, including gender, age, business sector, migration status, education level, working experience and market perceptions. Participants answered questions about their interests and conditions for offering a job or applying for a vacancy. The randomization of candidate attributes and variation of gender and migration status for interviews allows us to estimate the average marginal component effects from these variables on applying for a job or accepting a vacancy (Horiuchi et al., 2021; Hainmueller et al., 2013).

The aggregate results indicate no statistically significant bias from jobseekers or employers concerning gender or migration status, although many employers express preferences for male (42%) and host community (22%) applicants. The literature on gender discrimination in the labour market shows heterogeneity by socioeconomic variables, over which treatment effects can average and be indistinguishable from zero at first glance (Milkman et al., 2012). Women tended to have higher rates of job offers in agriculture, while men were offered more jobs in manufacturing. Gender-based occupational segregation and its costs for economies are widely studied in the literature. Research has shown women across the globe tend to work in low-productivity sectors, with agriculture being dominated by women in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East (Carranza et al., 2023). As seen in this IOM study, the advantage of men in male-dominated fields and women in female-dominated fields may camouflage at the aggregate level a dynamic of segregation by sectors based on gender biases, which constrains women to lower productivity and lower pay jobs (Borrowman and Klasen, 2019; Galos and Coppock, 2023).

The secondary findings from the study align with expectations about employers and jobseeker's decision-making, reinforcing our belief in the validity of the data. For employers, the candidate's working experience strongly predicts the probability of getting a job offer. Employers with higher education are more likely to hire more candidates. For jobseekers, the salary and geographical proximity of the vacancies were the most important predictors of their likelihood of applying.

This report identifies the multifaceted barriers to female labour force participation in Iraq, underscored by sector-specific gender biases. The insights from the IOM's audit study provide evidence for developing targeted interventions to dismantle these barriers. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from policymakers, the private sector and society to foster a more inclusive and equitable labour market. This report highlights the need for strategies that enhance women's access to education, training and diverse employment opportunities to unlock the full potential of Iraq's workforce and contribute to the country's socioeconomic development.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON GENDER IN THE LABOUR MARKET

The low female labour force participation in developing countries is a multifaceted issue linked to economic, social and educational factors (Fernandez, 2013; Goldin, 2014). Social norms and gender roles often reduce women's participation in the workforce (Croson and Gneezy, 2009). Differences in the types of jobs and industries that men and women typically work in, the roles they are expected to play, and the division of labour based on gender continue to play a crucial role in shaping the workforce (Blau and Kahn, 2017). Women have lower salaries and employment rates in male-dominant professions, while women benefit from working in predominantly female positions (Galos and Coppock, 2023). Limited access to quality education and vocational training restricts the skill sets available within the population, making it challenging for individuals to secure employment in sectors that require specialized knowledge or expertise (Klasen, 2019). These disparities not only reflect existing norms and expectations about gender roles but also have significant implications for economic inequality and the professional opportunities available to individuals based on their gender (Baerlocher et al., 2021).

Gender inequality reduces income and productivity by excluding talented entrepreneurs or workers from the labour market (Kögel et al., 2023; Hsieh et al., 2019). For example, women can improve firm performance in sales, especially when leading an enterprise with a significant proportion of female employees (Flabbi et al., 2019). For small and medium enterprises (SMEs), having women on their board of directors can increase their return on assets and board efficiency (Martín-Ugedo, 2014). At the aggregate level, extensive evidence exists that gender gaps can worsen macroeconomic variables, including income per capita (Cavalcanti & Tavares, 2016).

Gendered preferences among jobseekers may reinforce the effect of biases among employers when firms do not make appropriate accommodations. Jobseekers are not only interested in wages when looking for a job (Maestas et al., 2023). Commuting time and office amenities are among the most critical factors in the probability of acceptance or application for a job. Women are less likely to accept a job when there is a long commute time and more likely to apply for a job when the job offers flexible working hours (Le Barbanchon et al., 2020). Alongside flexible hours, the possibility of paid maternity leave and access to low-cost childcare also increases women's motivation to participate in the labour force (Del Rey et al., 2020; Jones & Wilcher, 2024).

In countries struck by conflict, the conditions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees also generate friction in the labour market. Displaced men faced higher unemployment, and displaced women faced lower labour force participation (Kondylis, 2010). These differences with host community members persist over time. IDPs are more likely to be unemployed, have consistently lower wages than similar locals and are more likely to work in informality 20 years after displacement (Torosyan et al., 2018). These disadvantages are also more vital for displaced women than men (Ivlevs and Veliziotis, 2018).

In this report, IOM built profiles of possible jobseekers to study employers' preferences for women and men in the Iraqi labour market. IOM also presented jobseekers with hypothetical vacancies to explore their preferences for employers. Understanding employers and jobseekers' preferences is essential to increasing job matching by aligning opportunities with skills, interests and career aspirations (Carranza et al., 2022). Previous research has used hypothetical resumes to examine the effect of gender and race in the labour market (Lippens et al., 2023).¹ The idea behind audit studies (also known as correspondence studies) is to create two hypothetical profiles with equally relevant characteristics, such as age, education years and experience, where the only difference is the variable presumed to lead to discrimination, such as gender and race. A typical way to reveal the characteristic presumably driving the discrimination is by presenting the name. The canonical study in the United States of America built identical resumes in terms of characteristics and randomized names to find that African American names (for example, Lakisha and Jamal) received 50 per cent fewer callbacks for interviews than White-sounding names such as Emily and Greg (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004).²

This report contributes to the literature by examining employers and jobseekers' preferences in Iraq, a country trying to rebuild after a severe conflict. The report presents evidence of the socioeconomic challenges and cultural nuances affecting women's workforce participation in a Middle Eastern economy where data and analysis remain scarce. Previous studies have examined the impact of social norms, gender roles and the division of labour on employment disparities. However, a lack of comprehensive data and analysis specific to the Iraqi labour market remains.

¹ Audit studies have found that jobseekers can be discouraged in the labour market by characteristics of the hiring process, the organizational structure, or, mainly, vacancy specifics (Deivis et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2016; Powell and Butterfield, 2015).

² One limitation of audit studies is called deception, which means that subjects (e.g. employers) do not know that they are being studied (for a broad discussion about deception, see Bischof et al., 2022). Some audit designs avoid the deception problem, such as Krawczyk and Smyk (2016) and Kessler et al., (2019), by telling subjects that the study uses hypothetical profiles.

SAMPLE SELECTION

IOM randomly selected 464 out of 24,780 jobseekers in a list of people looking for a job in 2023. For employers, IOM chose 234 out of the 1,654 SMEs that received the Enterprise Development Fund (EDF) by 15 January 2023, and interviewed them with their informed consent. The EDF in Iraq, initiated by IOM, is an important effort to stimulate economic recovery and development through the support of SMEs. Since its inception in 2018, the EDF has funded 2,579 businesses, created 11,747 jobs and improved 13,714 existing jobs across Iraq, distributing over 40 million in grants United States dollars (USD) (IOM, 2023a). The programme targets primary, secondary and tertiary sectors with a high demand for labour, aiming to address critical financial access gaps exacerbated by conflict, economic crises and the COVID-19 pandemic (IOM, 2023b).

Women were oversampled among jobseekers, with 57 per cent female and 43 per cent male participants.³ Most jobseekers in the sample come from Anbar (39%), Ninewa (30%), Diyala (10%) and Kirkuk (6%). The selection of employers follows a randomized stratified design in four sectors: agriculture (36%), services (24%), manufacturing (23%) and commerce (19%). The final selection of employers has 76 per cent male and 24 per cent female managers following the actual distribution of the EDF businesses. The 234 SME owners are in Anbar (1%), Baghdad (12%), Basrah (12%), Dahuk (5%), Diyala (6%), Erbil (6%), Kirkuk (12%), Missan (1%), Najaf (1%), Ninewa (26%), Salah al-Din (3%), Sulaymaniyah (5%) and Thi-Qar (5%).

From the beginning of the interview, jobseekers and employers know they evaluate hypothetical vacancies and profiles.⁴ Resumes show names, migration status, age, education, proximity to the job site and experience. Vacancies present owners' names, ages, education, location of job posts, sectors and a range of monthly salaries. The names and surnames come from the 80 most common jobseekers' names in the IOM database. The names are a proxy of gender since only names that distinctly identify women and men become part of the list to fill the hypothetical resumes and vacancies. The final full-name list comes from a random combination of names and surnames.

³ The total number of jobseekers in IOM's list is 23 per cent women and 77 per cent men.

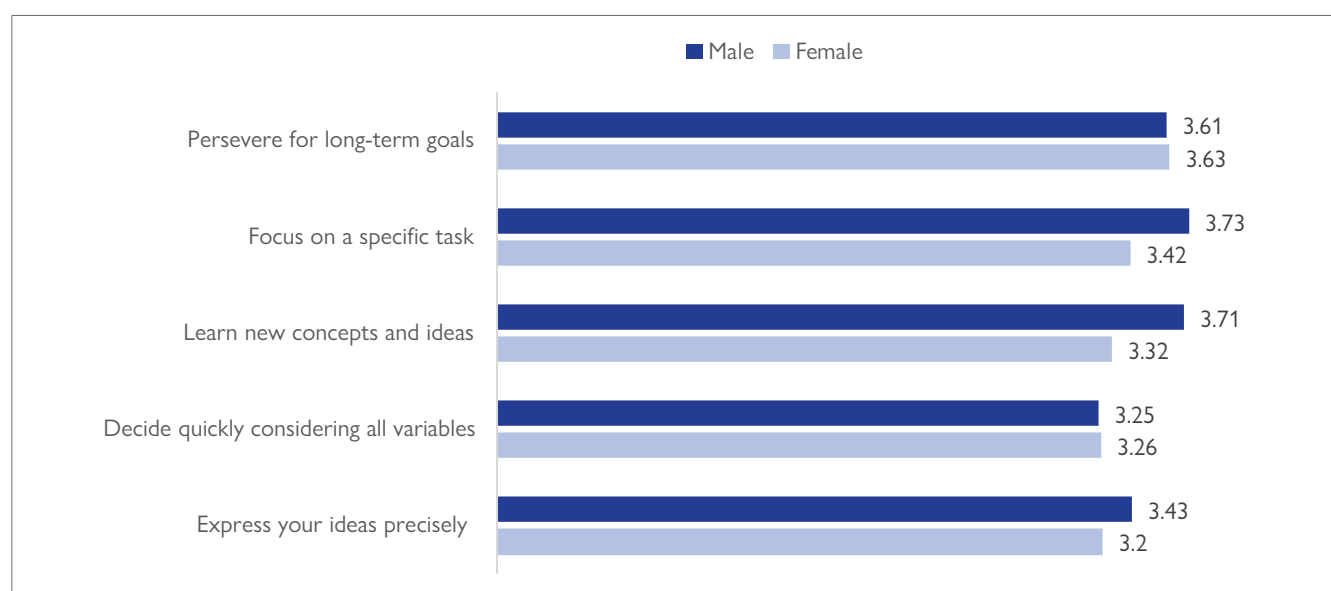
⁴ Figure A-1 shows the initial instructions and informed consent for jobseekers and employers. Figure A-2 presents the examples of hypothetical profiles and vacancies.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JOBSEEKERS AND EMPLOYERS

JOBSEEKERS

Most jobseekers reported primary school (29%) as the highest level of education, followed by being illiterate and high school (20% each). IOM asked jobseekers to evaluate their abilities from one as “not good” to five as “extremely good” in different socioemotional skills. On a scale of 1 to 5, women evaluated themselves with an average of 3.6 in persevering in obtaining long-term goals, 3.4 in focusing on specific tasks, 3.3 in learning new concepts and ideas, 3.27 in expressing ideas precisely and 3.26 in deciding quickly considering all variables. Men gave themselves a higher average score than women in “expressing your ideas,” “learning new concepts and ideas,” and “focusing on a specific task” (Figure 1).⁵ This finding is in line with previous studies, which found that women’s self-assessment is usually lower than men’s, even when women and men have equal skills (Hargittai and Shafer, 2006; Koellinger et al., 2011; [Adamecz-Völgyi and Shure, 2022](#)). However, more women evaluated them slightly higher than men in ‘persevering for long-term goals’ and “deciding quickly.”

Figure 1: Auto-assessment of abilities



Notes: 261 female and 216 male respondents.

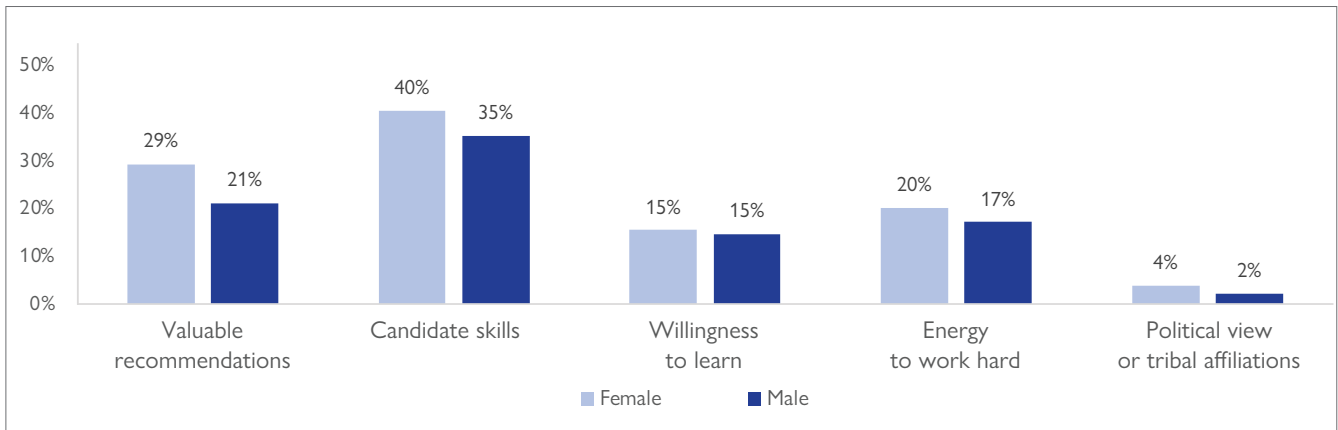
Within the sample, 41 per cent of jobseekers have three or more years of experience (23% for women and 18% for men), and only 11 per cent reported no experience (5.5% each). Among jobseekers who reported having experience, agriculture is the sector with the highest proportion of participants (33%), followed by general commerce (29%) and manufacturing (26%). Furthermore, most female jobseekers are unemployed (60%) or employed with daily wages (26%), while few women are business owners (9%) or employed with contracts for one year or more (5%). Men are mainly employed with daily wages (41%), unemployed (35%) or business owners (20%). Only 4 per cent of men have formal contracts.

Among those who have applied for a job, 56 per cent of women and 44 per cent of men said finding a job is difficult.⁶ Respondents highlighted that the essential characteristics that employers look for are the candidates’ skills (40% of female jobseekers and 35% of male), trustworthy recommendations (29% female and 21% male), and level of energy to work hard (20% female and 17% male). A tiny sample of respondents selected political views or tribal as one of the attributes employers look for in the labour market. There is not a significant variation across gender (Figure 2).

⁵ Most women and men have three and two children, respectively. On average, children are 0–6 years old (63%) or 7–12 years old (48%).

⁶ Only 2% of female and 6% of male jobseekers have never tried to find a job.

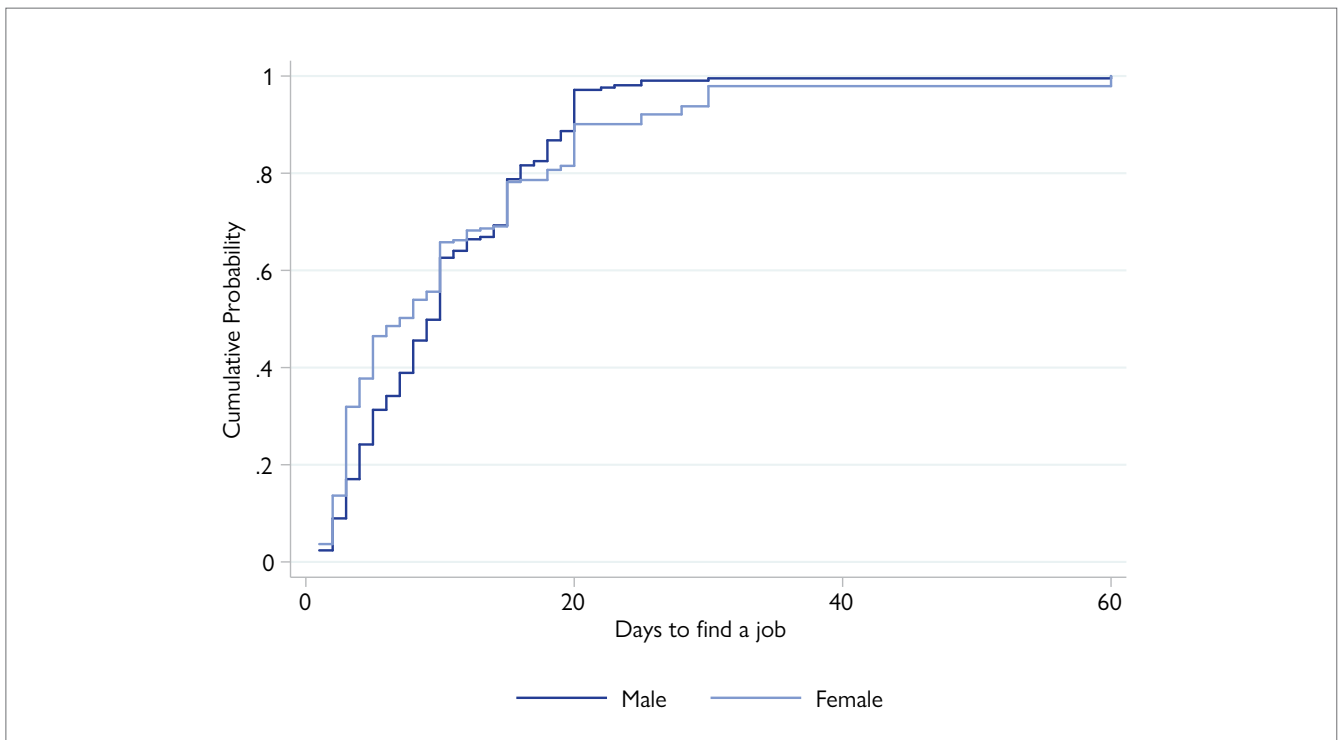
Figure 2: Jobseekers' beliefs about critical characteristics demanded by employers



Notes: 261 female and 216 male respondents. The graph displays the results of a multiple-selection question.

About a third of respondents have searched for a job during the last month (35% of women and 30% of men) and have filled out applications to look for a position (32% of women and 28% of men).⁷ On average, women fill out more applications (5 days) than men (3 days). Figure 3 shows the cumulative distribution of days it takes men and women to find a job. Females and males have a median time of 8.5 days and ten days to find a job, respectively. However, the variation, measured through the standard deviation, is higher for women (106) than men (48). At the beginning of the distribution a higher proportion of women find jobs in less than seven days (46% versus 38%). Yet, at the lower end of the distribution, the worst-performing 20 per cent of women take longer to find a job than the worst-performing 20 per cent of men. Overall, 95 per cent of male jobseekers find jobs in less than 20 days, while 83 per cent of females do so in the same period.

Figure 3: Cumulative distribution function (CDF) for the typical number of days to find a job by gender



Notes: 261 female and 216 male respondents.

7 Jobseekers leave or resign voluntarily due to finding a better salary (51%) or never voluntarily quit (22%).

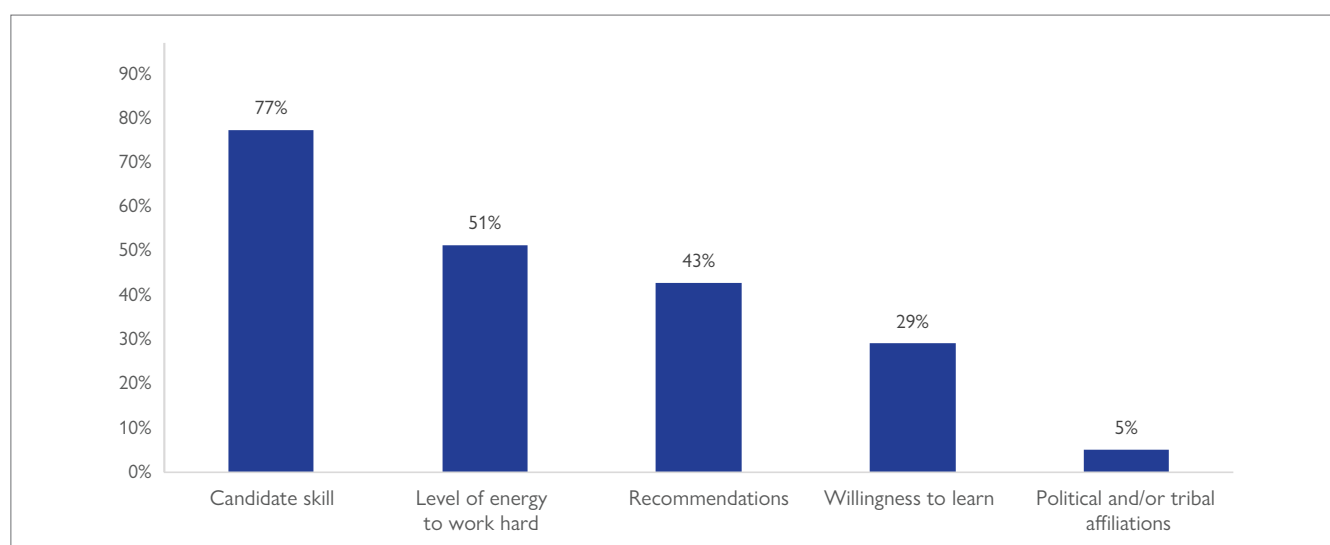
EMPLOYERS

Employers had high school (28%), university (23%) or primary school (22%) education. A lower percentage of business owners had technical-level education (17%) and could only read and write (10%).⁸ The median monthly profit was USD 3,000 in both 2021 and 2022, and the average monthly profit was USD 8,892 (standard deviation of USD 16,443) in 2021 and USD 10,706 (standard deviation of 19,284 USD) in 2022. The fact that the average is about twice the median provides evidence that the profit distribution is positively skewed. Income distributions skewed to the right are standard in developing countries, and evidence income inequality (Benhabib and Bisin, 2018).⁹

On average, SMEs had three workers in December 2022 and seven in 2023. Businesses also reported that most of their workers have a high school or primary school (32% each), technical education (21%) and university (15%). SME owners also stated that about half of their employees have been in the business for one to two years (45%), followed by six months to one year (39%), and more than two years (9%), with a low percentage of employees working for less than six months (7%).¹⁰ About a third of employers reported never having hired any female workers.

SME owners reported that they are looking for the following characteristics in the labour market: candidate skills (77%), energy level to work (51%), recommendation by someone they trust (43%) and willingness to learn (29%). Few employers have said that political affiliations are the reason for hiring (Figure 4). About 30 per cent of applicants claimed to have found all the requested skills in the labour market (27%). The missing skills in the labour market are numerical skills (50%), communication skills (45%), skills to concentrate on specific tasks (39%), agility in understanding new concepts (33%) and skills to maintain interest and persevere (8%).

Figure 4: Essential characteristics employers look for in the labour market



Note: Multi-selected question, 234 employers.

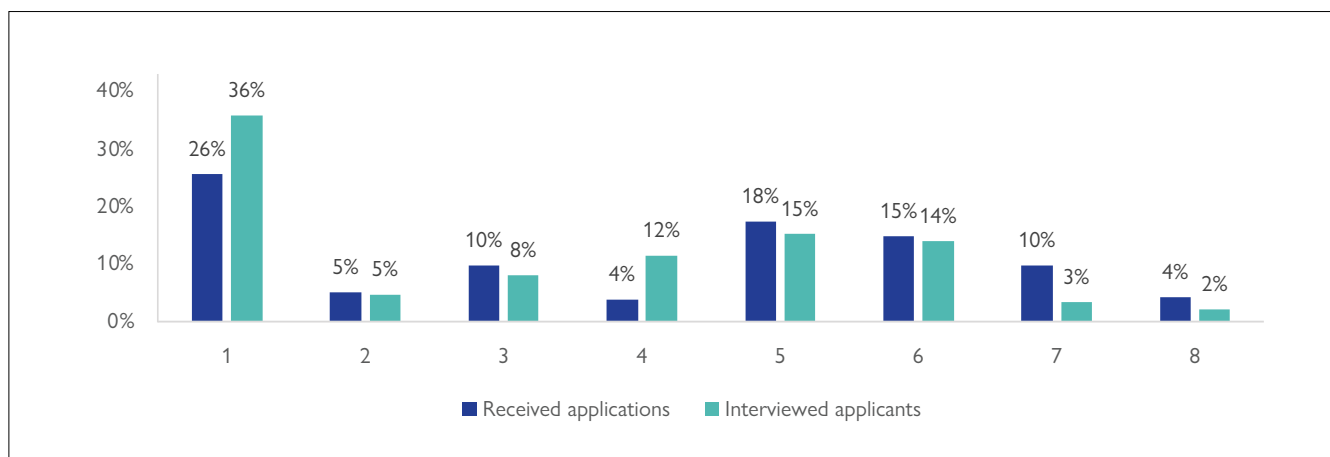
On average, businesses in the sample received five applications to fill a vacancy and interviewed four people to hire somebody. Yet, over a quarter of employers received one applicant (26%) and more than one third made a single interview to fill a vacancy (36%). Most employers do not receive more than seven applicants to fill one vacancy (Figure 5). About one third of employers said 100 per cent of applicants accepted the job offer, the remaining employers tended to answer between 30 and 60 per cent (41%), and the mean was 68 per cent of applicants. Half of employers fill a vacancy in less than one week (53%), a third in two weeks (34%) and less than 13 per cent in three or more weeks. In economies recovering from conflict, like Iraq, a quick vacancy-fill rate is a common attribute, reflecting a solid supply of workers in the labour market (see Mansour (2010) and Kondylis (2010)).

8 IOM interviewed managers and SME owners.

9 The average wage is USD 338 for qualified employees and USD 272 for unskilled workers. The median monthly wage is USD 300 for skilled and unskilled workers in both December 2022 and February 2023.

10 Despite the level of education that employers reported on employees, most SME owners reported having skilled workers (99%) and few unskilled employees (28%). Employers value years of labour market experience more than accumulated education (Bils and Klenow, 2000).

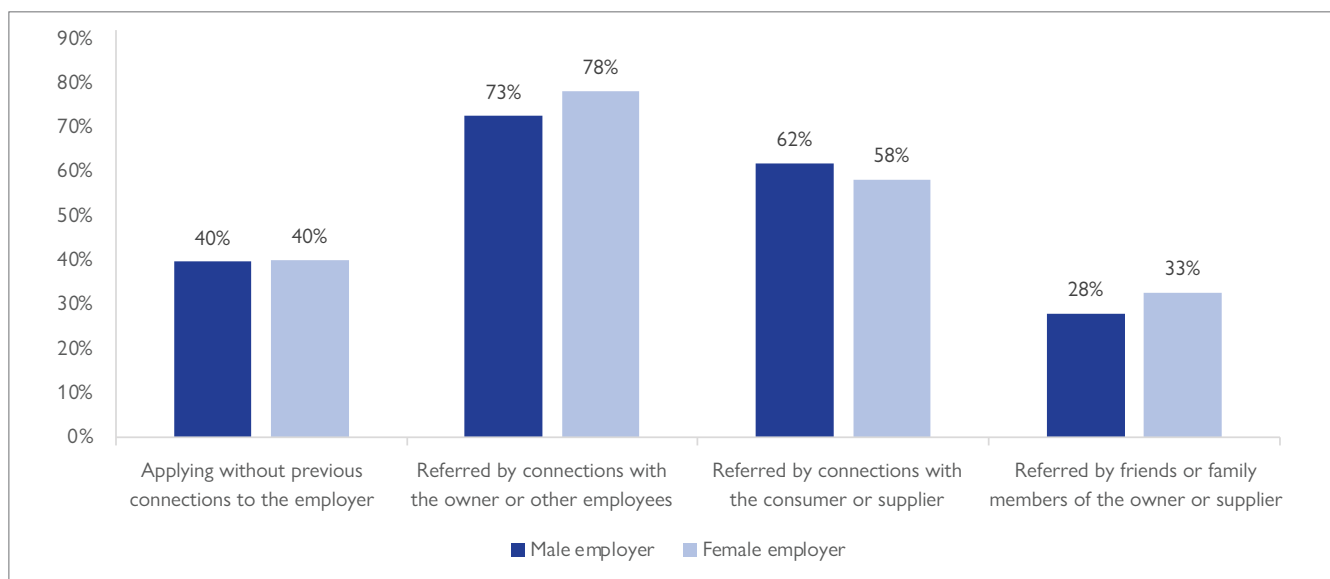
Figure 5: Applications and interviews to fill a vacancy



Notes: 234 employers.

The main method of hiring new employees is through connections with the SME owner or other employees in the company (74%, Figure 6). Recommendations from consumers or suppliers (61%) and contacts via owners’ relatives are also virtual channels for hiring new jobseekers (29%). However, 40 per cent of SME owners reported that candidates applying without connections are another channel for hiring new employers, showing evidence of openness to other recruiting pathways.¹¹

Figure 6: Main methods to hire new jobseekers by the gender of employers



Notes: Multi-selected question; 55 female and 179 male employers.

11 Entrepreneurs said that finding a better salary in a new job is the most common reason workers leave (43% for women and 71% for men). Other causes of job changes are finding a better-located job (16% and 13% for men and women) and a better job opportunity (6% for men and 4% for women).

DESIGN OF THE EXPERIMENT: BUILDING RESUMES AND VACANCIES

IOM created a pool of hypothetical resumes with the names of candidates revealing their gender, age, experience, education, migration status and commuting distance to the job post. Similarly, the hypothetical vacancies present the SME owners' name, age, experience, education, migration status, sector, number of workers and wage range. The variables are randomly assigned to each hypothetical resume and vacancy, respectively. Table 1 shows the description of each variable:

Table 1: Descriptive of the variables in the hypothetical resumes and vacancies

Panel A: Hypothetical resumes

Name	Reveals the gender
Age	19–58 years old
Experience	No experience, less than one year, one to two years, and three to five years
Education	Only reading and writing, primary, high school, and university
Migration status	Host community, internally displaced person, and returnee
Distance to the job	Close and far away

Table B: Hypothetical vacancies

Name	Reveals the gender
Age	25–61 years old
Experience	No experience, less than one year, one to two years, and three to five years
Education	Only reading and writing, primary, high school, and university
Migration status	Host community, internally displaced person, and returnee
Distance to the job	Close and far away
Sector	Agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, and service
Number of workers	1–2 employees, 3–4 employees, 5–6 employees, 7–8 employees, 9–10 employees
Wages	11 categories, from USD 100 to 650

The resumes and vacancies follow the characteristics of real jobseekers in IOM's database. For example, 25 per cent of hypothetical resumes have one year of experience since the same proportion of real people stated one year of experience in the data and 19 per cent of vacancies show a salary between USD 251 and 300. Appendix B illustrates the distribution of experience, education and migration status divided by women and men for resumes and vacancies. Most hypothetical resumes present candidates with three to five years of experience (31%), primary school (37%), return to their origin before displacement as the migration status (46%) and living close to the job location (53%). Hypothetical vacancies display SME owners who mostly have gone to university (36%), are members of the host community (50%), have five to six years of experience (26%), and work with three to four employees (45%).

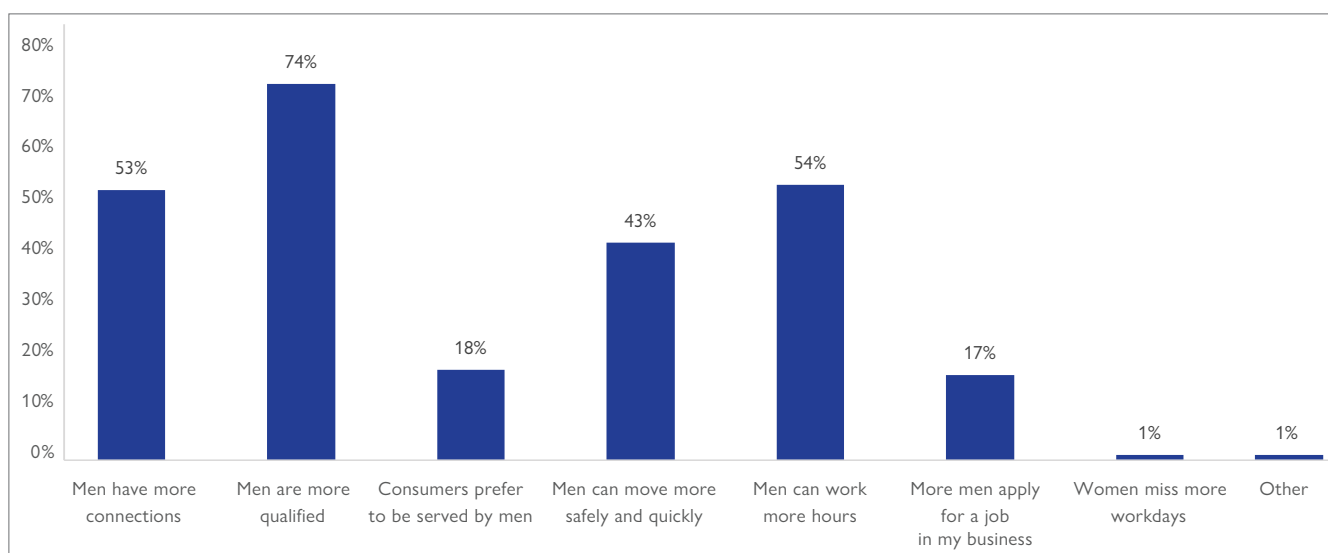
On average, the only difference between female and male resumes is gender. Appendix C shows no difference in means between women and men in age, experience, education, migration status and distance to the job. This table shows that employers choose between female and male jobseekers with the same characteristics, on average.

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS: EMPLOYERS' PREFERENCES

DIRECT QUESTION

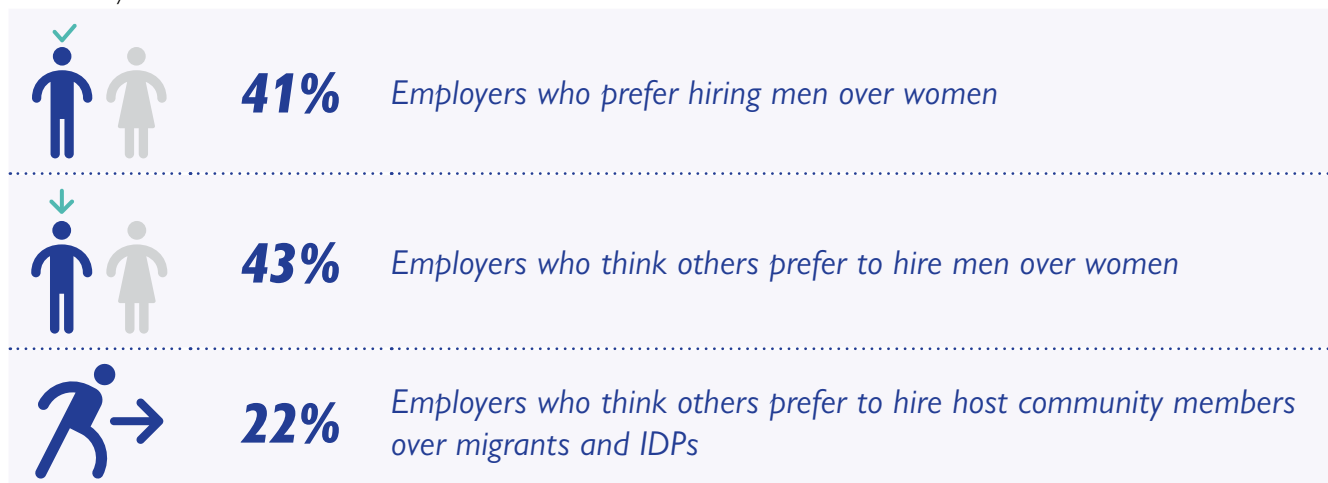
Before showing the hypothetical resumes, enumerators asked employers if they believe other SME owners prefer hiring men over women.¹² About 43 per cent of businesses reported that other employers in the same sector prefer to hire men instead of women. A similar number of SMEs said they prefer to hire men over women (41%). Figure 8 shows that believing that men can be more qualified is the principal reason to hire men over women (74%), followed by men can spend more time working than women (54%), men have more connections (53%) and men move faster than women in the city (43%). Some SME owners said consumers prefer men to women (18%), and more men than women apply for jobs (17%). Few entrepreneurs said women ask more for off days (1%).

Figure 7: Reasons to prefer to hire men over women



Notes: Multi-selected question. Only 96 employers answered that they prefer to hire men over women. The other employers did not report that they prefer women over men.

Regarding migration status, IOM asked employers if they believe other SME owners prefer hiring candidates from host communities over returnees or IDPs. About 22 per cent of businesses reported that other employers in the same sector prefer to hire host community members.

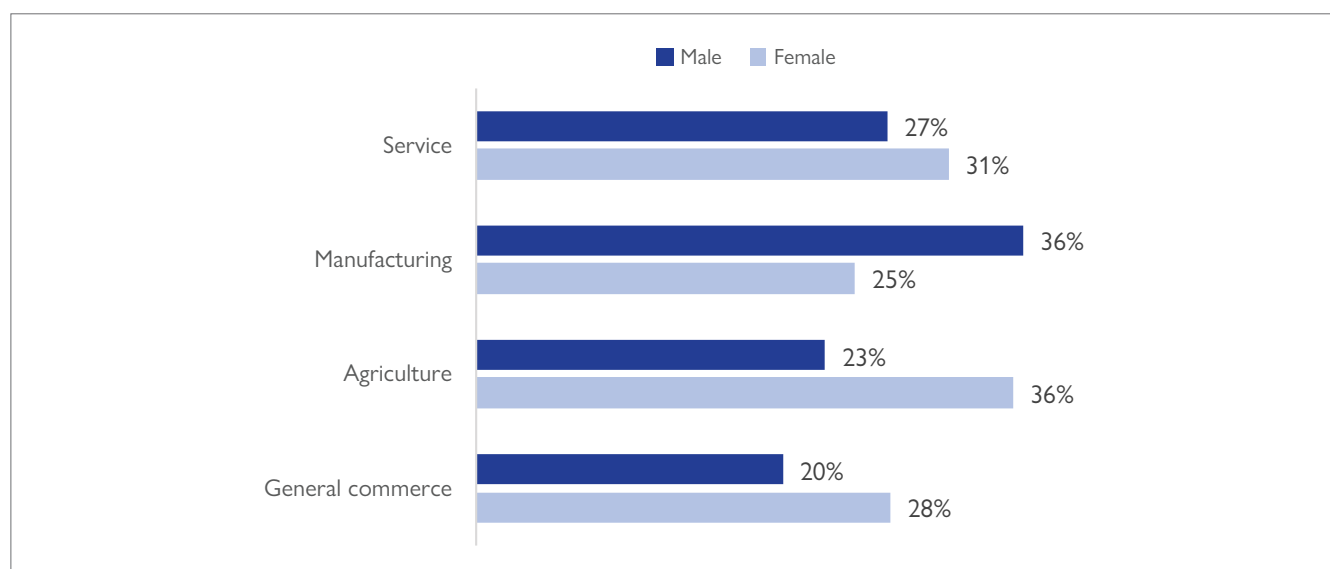


12 The exact question is, "Do you think other employers in your sector prefer to hire men over women?" Two answers: "yes" or "no."

INDIRECT QUESTION

The literature has shown that people might not reveal preferences when asked direct questions on sensitive topics such as gender (Bertrand and Duflo, 2017). To test whether Iraqi employers reveal their preferences with direct and indirect questions, IOM presented SMEs with six hypothetical resumes to decide if they would make a job offer. On average, 29 per cent of female resumes received a job offer, while 28 per cent of male resumes did. Men received more job offers than women in manufacturing (Figure 9). Agriculture shows the broadest gap between men and women of 13 percentage points (pp), followed by manufacturing (11 pp), general commerce (8 pp) and service (4 pp).¹³

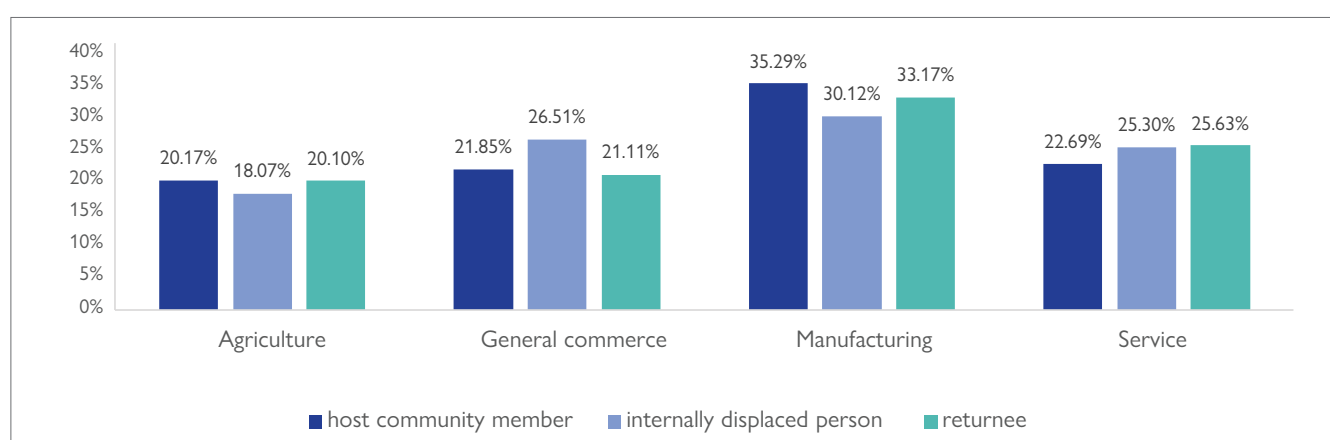
Figure 8: Job offers by gender and sector



Note: Employers evaluated 729 female resumes and 711 male profiles. In total, 414 resumes received a job offer, 213 females and 201 males.

Another dimension that employers evaluated is profiles from host communities, IDPs and returnees. Although there was no clear preference for one migratory group across sectors, IDPs were hired the most out of the three groups in general commerce (27%) and the least in manufacturing (30%) and agriculture (18%) (Figure 10). It is typical for IDPs in Iraq to work in different sectors after their displacement (IOM Iraq, 2022).

Figure 9: Job offers by migration status



Note: Employers evaluate 729 female resumes and 711 male profiles. In total, 414 resumes received a job offer, 205 returnees, 124 host community members and 85 IDPs.

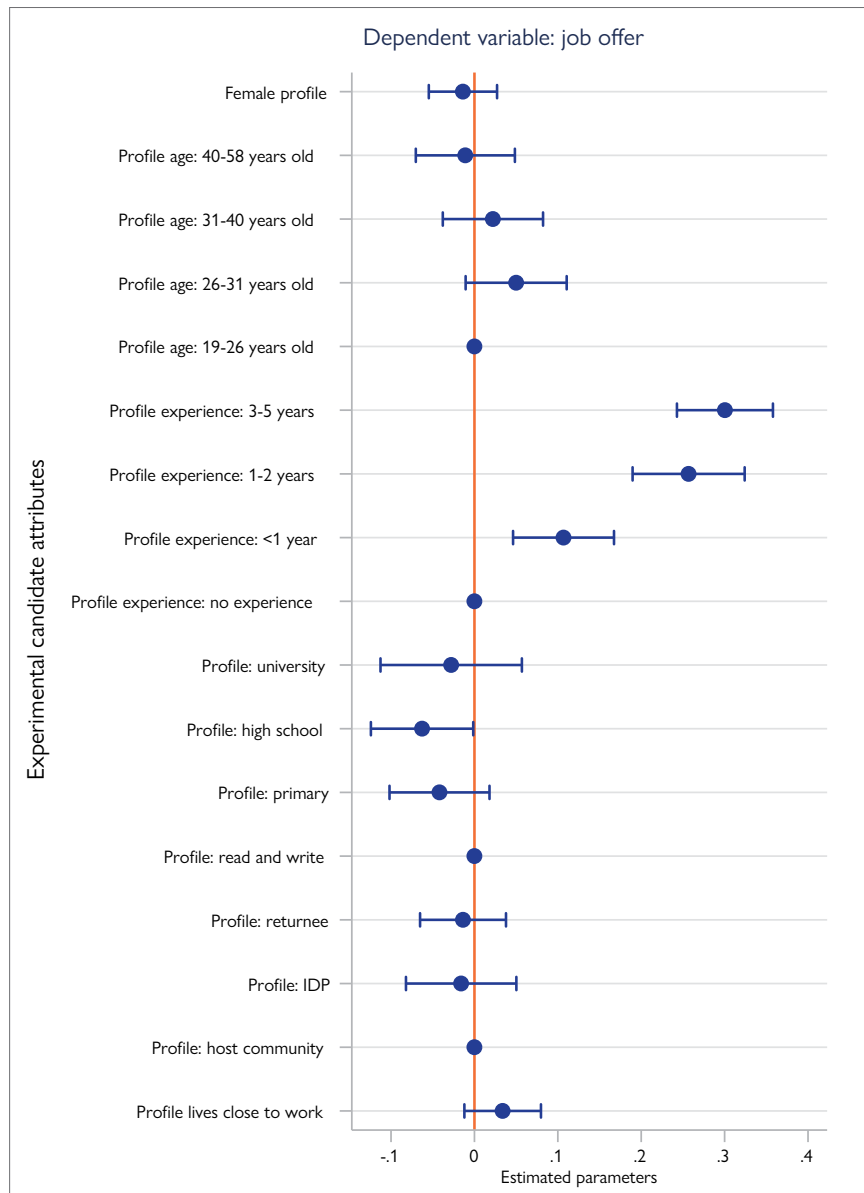
¹³ By governorates, women in Anbar (0.3 pp), Basrah (2.2 pp), Kirkuk (2 pp), Salah al-Din (0.6 pp), Missan (1.7 pp), Ninewa (0.9 pp) and Sulaymaniyah (2.6 pp) received more job offers than men. In the rest of the governorates, men received more job offers.

CORRELATIONS BEHIND JOB OFFERS

The final sample contains 234 real employers who evaluate 1,435 hypothetical profiles (between 6 to 8 profiles per employer). This study uses a conjoint experiment tool to detect the effect of the variation in the characteristics (such as gender, age and education) of the hypothetical profiles. This approach simultaneously estimates the impact of different pieces of information about the candidates on the employers' likelihood to offer a job. Given that the experiment follows a conjoint design, the estimated coefficients correspond to average marginal component effects (AMCE) (see [Hainmueller et al. \(2013\)](#) for more details). The dependent variable equals one when an employer offers a job and zero otherwise. The independent variables are profiles and employers' characteristics such as age, education, experience and migration status.

Figure 11 shows the average marginal effects for the randomly assigned attributes of profiles, which, due to the design and estimated model, have a causal interpretation. The fixed characteristics of respondents (or employers) were also included in the regression (see results in Appendix C), and given their purely descriptive nature, they will be helpful when searching for heterogeneous effects.

Figure 11: Job offers from employers depending on jobseekers' characteristics



Note: The figure displays estimated AMCEs on job offers with 95% confidence intervals. The regression controlled for fixed effects for governorates, employer's sector, survey round, and employer-fixed characteristics. Additional controls include the average number of interviews to hire an employee and business profit in 2021 and 2022. The regression has 1,383 observations, with 678 male and 705 female resumes.

Employers base their hiring choices on specific attributes of candidates, with work experience being the most crucial factor (Massey, 2014). Compared to applicants without experience, those with three to five years of experience are 30 pp more likely to receive a job offer. Candidates with one to two years of experience see a 26 pp increase in their hiring probability, while those with less than one year of experience have an 11 pp higher chance of being selected. The literature reveals that experience is critical when hiring a candidate (Heckman et al., 2005).

In this study, women are less likely to receive a job, but the coefficient is not statistically significant. Not finding an effect statistically significant in Iraq does not imply that all SME owners prefer women over men. Indeed, 41 per cent of SMEs said they prefer to hire male candidates.¹⁴ The literature provides alternative mechanisms for such results, for example, the possibility of men overestimating other men's rejection of women working outside the home, which leads them to hide their support of women in the labour force and conceal what is secretly a smaller bias than one may hypothesize (Bursztyn et al., 2020).

Compared with host community members, IDPs and returnee candidates did not have a statistically significant lower likelihood of being offered a job. However, other research across a range of settings has found considerable evidence of discrimination in the labour market against IDPs and returnees. Forced displacement has been associated with long-term labour market disadvantages, a higher likelihood of long-term unemployment and informal work (Ivlevs and Veliziotis, 2018). In Iraq, IOM has found that several years after the conflict, returnees have the same employment rates as 10–12 years ago, but 1 in 10 households reported discrimination of their members in the labour market (IOM, 2023c).

The last two aggregate results, concerning IDPs and gender, contradict previous literature by showing no discrimination or bias (Azmat and Petrongolo, 2014; Bamieh and Ziegler, 2023; Myers et al., 2024). Some plausible explanations include survey subjects, who, being EDF recipients, encompass a particular group of employers that are not representative of the Iraqi labour market. There is also a possibility of a socially accepted bias by men who, privately, are less strict about women working outside the home than may appear, as seen in Saudi Arabia (Bursztyn et al., 2020).

The applicants' age does not significantly affect employers' recruitment decisions. The literature found mixed evidence of dependencies between occupations, age and productivity, and reported no impact in the manufacturing, services and metal manufacturing sectors (Göbel & Zwick, 2011).¹⁵ Employers also tend to show a (non-significant) negative bias towards candidates with more education. These results align with the broadly studied unemployment paradox in MENA countries and amongst women, where low-educated or non-educated workers show shallow unemployment levels. In contrast, unemployment increases with education for higher education graduates (World Economic Forum, 2017).

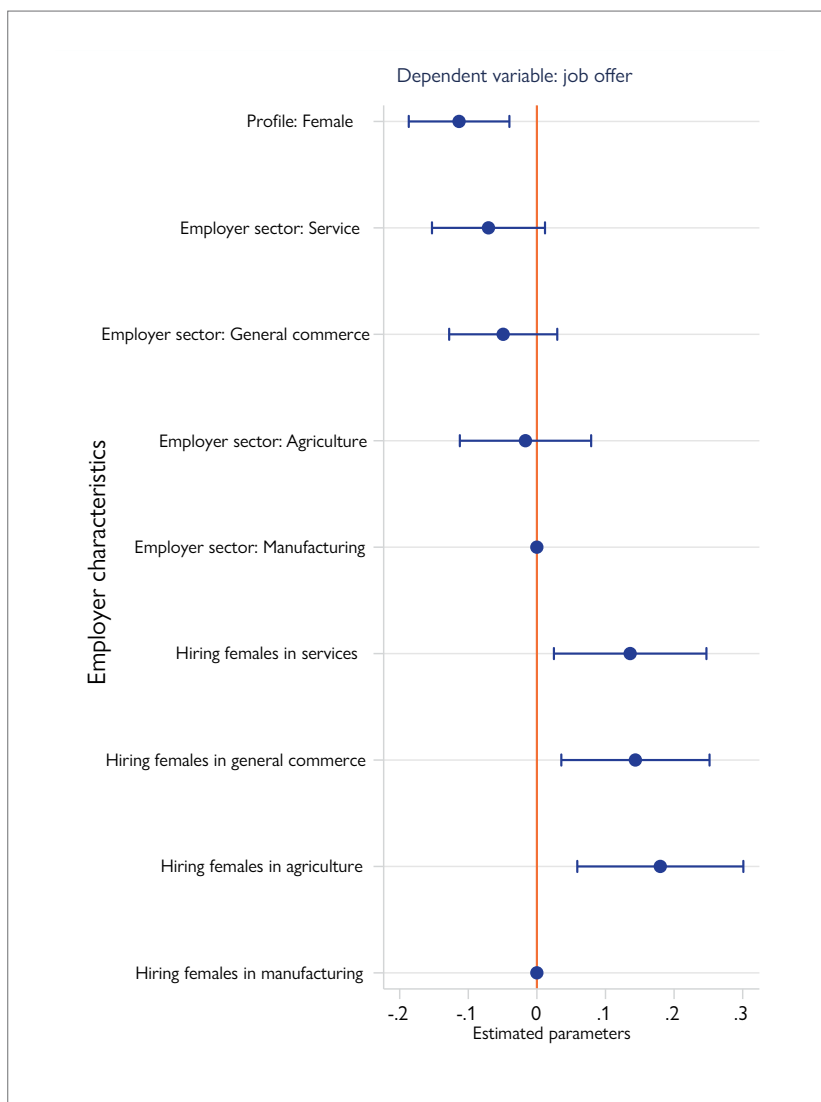
BIAS TOWARD FEMALE JOBSEEKERS BY EMPLOYERS' SECTOR

SME owners in specific sectors showed certain trends towards preferring men or women. In Iraq, IOM found that women tend to work in industries aligned with their traditional gender roles, including the food sector, hairdressing and beauty salons, textile and retail of women's clothing (IOM Iraq, 2021). Figure 12 included interactions between the profile's gender and the employer's industry sector to further the analysis in this report. Figure 12 shows that female resumes are more likely to receive a job offer in services, commerce and agriculture than in manufacturing, pointing to a negative bias towards women in the latter sector. The positive bias towards women in agriculture and the negative preference towards them in manufacturing might have cancelled out and therefore camouflaged an overall negative bias found with this specification, which was non-significant on the baseline results.

¹⁴ In the MENA region, women's labour force participation decreases with their wealth index, even when accounting for male income (Al Azzawi and Vladimir Hlasny, 2019).

¹⁵ Other studies find that the likelihood of hiring decreases for older candidates in vacancies that require computer, physical, social, creative and training skills, which can also be correlated to economic sectors (Van Borm et al., 2021).

Figure 11: Job offers by employers' sector



Note: The figure displays estimated AMCEs on job offers with 95% confidence intervals, adding interactions between the gender of the profile and the industry sector of the interviewed SME owner. The regression controlled for fixed effects for governorates, survey round and employer-fixed characteristics. Additional controls include the average number of interviews to hire an employee and business profit in 2021 and 2022. The category “other” for the sector is in the regression but not displayed in the figure because only 1.2 per cent of employers chose this option. The regression has 1,383 observations, with 678 male and 705 female resumes.

The segregation of female and male workers across sectors or industries has been found to widely exist and derive from both supply and demand factors, including access to capital, career choice, intra-household time allocation and recruitment processes, as a result of which women generally concentrate in low-productivity sectors (Carranza et al., 2023). Segregation also constrains women to sectors with lower pay and lower rankings in stratification structures (Gedikli, 2019). In developing countries, gender segregation by sector is a persistent phenomenon that has strengthened over time and is resilient to increased education and income levels (Borrowman and Klasen, 2019). Long-term studies of sectoral segregation by gender have established that studying aggregate male and female employment can mask these trends (Blau et al., 2013).

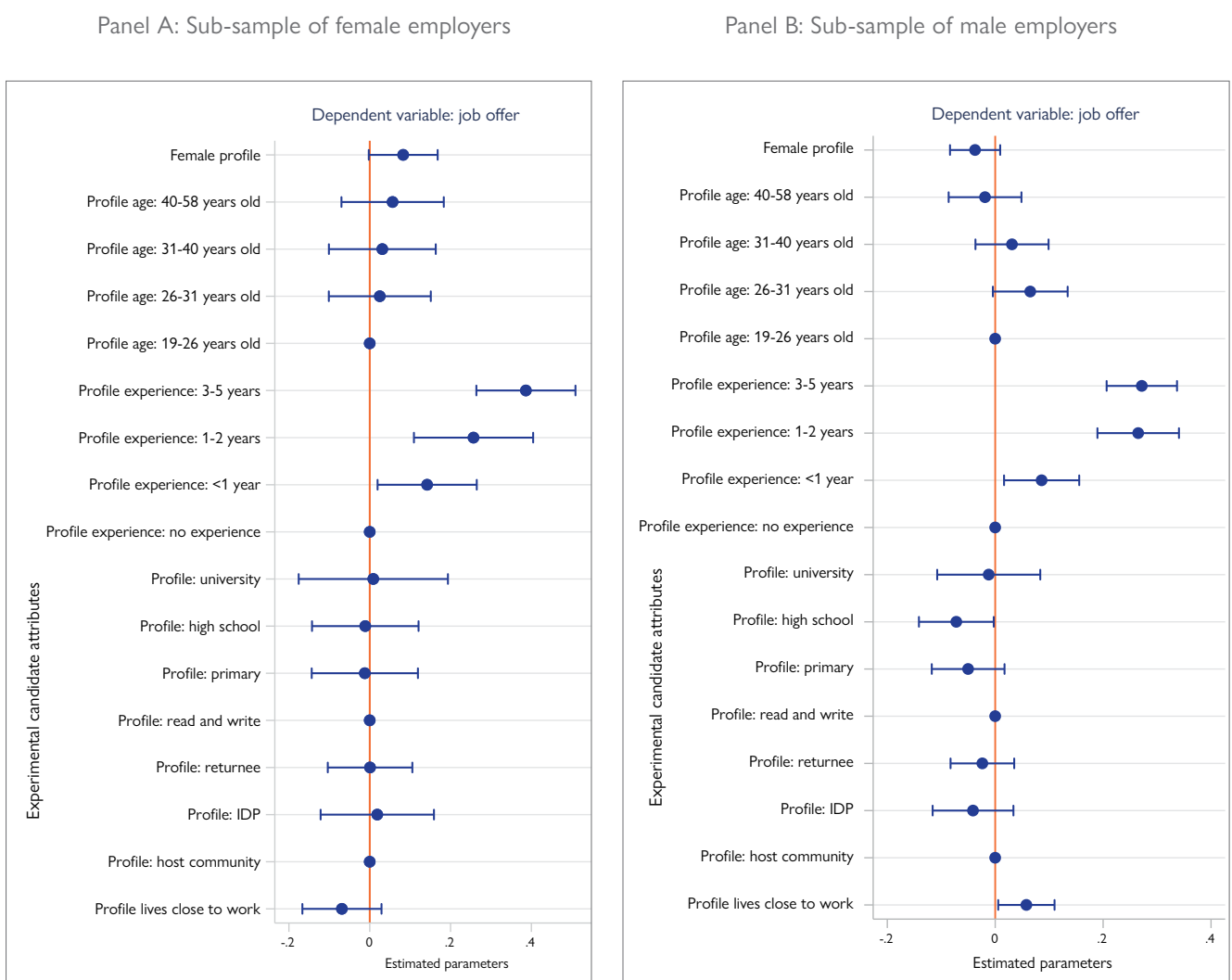
JOB OFFERS AND CORRELATIONS WITH EMPLOYERS' CHARACTERISTICS

Figure 13 estimates the initial regression (that is, where the dependent variable equals one when an employer offers a job and zero otherwise) by the employer's gender. When separating results for female and male interviewees, the findings found that baseline results hid specific heterogeneous effects. Even though the coefficient for gender bias is still insignificant, female employers prefer female candidates, while males are less likely to offer jobs to female jobseekers. Moreover, male employers

drive a marginally significantly lower likelihood of providing a job to people who reached high school, as shown in baseline results (Figure 11). This coefficient is close to zero and non-significant for female employers. Finally, males seem to value candidates who live close to the working site more than women. Different candidate's ages seem to generate a similar likelihood of being offered a job when the employer is female, whilst male employers show a preference (significant at the 10% level) for candidates aged 26 to 31 years.

Additionally, male employers have a non-significant negative effect on profiles aged 40 to 58 years on their likelihood of making job offers. The coefficients for candidate experience are also higher for male employers, who significantly prefer candidates with one to five years of experience over those with less than one year or no experience. Although female employers have the same tendency in their preferences, the coefficients do not have the same level of statistical difference. Finally, profiles from IDPs and returnees do not show a statistically significant difference in the probability of receiving a job offer from male or female employers, keeping the same results as shown in Figure 11.

Figure 13: Job offers by employers' gender



Note: The figure displays estimated AMCEs on job offers with 95% confidence intervals. This specification was run for two all-female and all-male sub-samples. The regression controlled for fixed effects for governorates, employer's sector, survey round and employer-fixed characteristics. Additional controls include the average number of interviews to hire an employee and business profit in 2021 and 2022. The regression for male employers has 1,053 observations and the regression for female employers has 330 observations, with 678 male and 705 female resumes.

The characteristics of employers are correlated with the decision-making of the recruitment of profiles. Compared with SME owners who only read and write, employers with a technical or university degree are more likely to hire by 34 and 18 pp, respectively (see Figure C in the Appendix). A high school degree also increases this likelihood, but only by 16 pp compared to those who can only read and write. These results are statistically significant at the 5 per cent confidence level. The literature on this matter has found that an additional year of education may positively influence an employer's hiring decision when the employer has recently become an entrepreneur (Caliendo et al., 2019). Additionally, the agglomeration of university graduates as employers reduces the usage of fixed-term contracts and prompts high-quality human resource practices, an effect that is stronger for SMEs (Ghignoni, 2022).

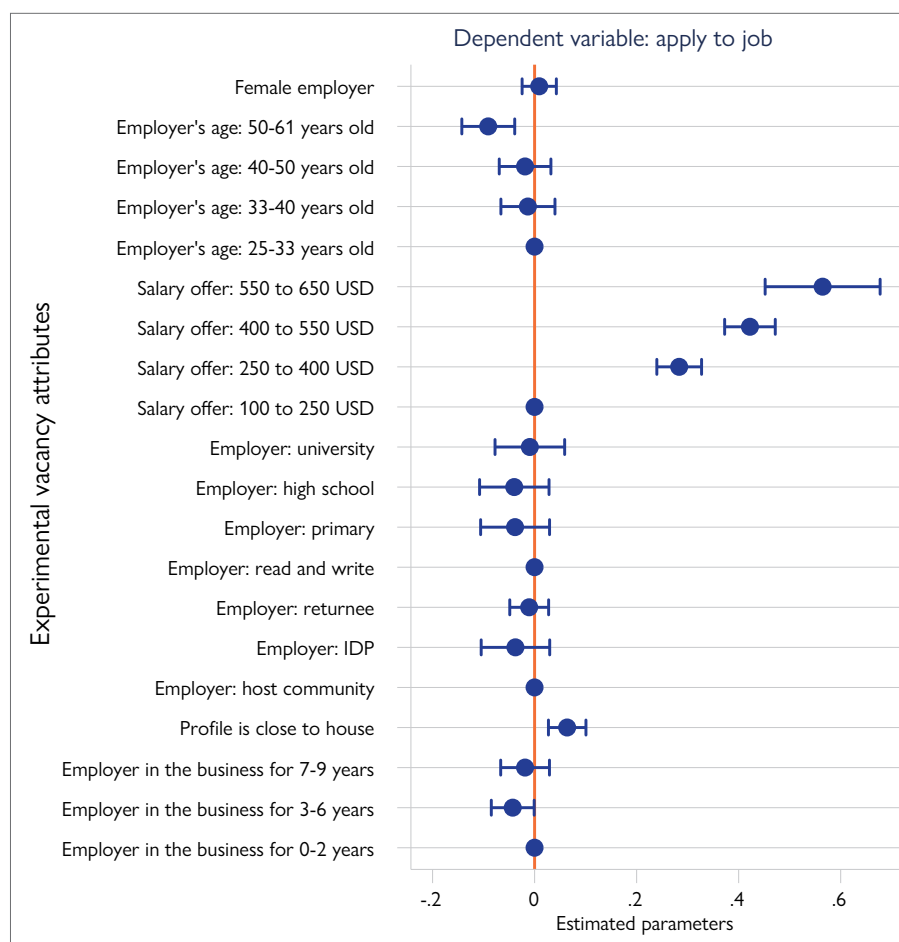
Other variables related to the employment structure in businesses influence the recruitment probability. Having employees working in the industry for less than six months results in a 13 pp difference in the probability of hiring compared to having employees for six months to one year. Finally, employers that have never hired women are less likely to offer a job to the hypothetical candidates (8 pp).

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS: JOBSEEKERS' PREFERENCES

CORRELATIONS BEHIND JOB APPLICATIONS

The sample for jobseekers contains 477 individuals who evaluated 2,850 hypothetical job vacancies. Figure 14 shows the AMCEs where the dependent variable equals one when jobseekers apply for a hypothetical vacancy and zero otherwise. The independent variables are the attributes of hypothetical vacancies, which were randomly varied and can be given a causal interpretation. The central factor jobseekers valued in vacancies was the salary offer. Openings from USD 550 to 650 increased the likelihood of applying by 56 pp, compared to USD 100 to 250 salaries. Those that offered USD 250 to 400 and USD 400 to 550 also had a higher probability of 42 pp and 28 pp, respectively. The age of the SME owner became significant as it reached higher values, with owners from 50 to 61 years old discouraging jobseekers from applying by 9 pp. Distance to the job site also influenced jobseekers, since living close to the described position increased the probability of applying by 6 pp. Finally, the trajectory of the SME owner in the sector was only marginally significant; profiles that had been in the business for 3–6 years had a lower likelihood of being attractive to the jobseekers by 4 pp (significant at the 5% level). Similarly, the analysis found no evidence that the employer's displacement history influenced the decision to apply for the vacancy.¹⁶

Figure 14: Job application from jobseekers depending on vacancies' characteristics



Note: The figure displays estimated AMCEs on job applications with 95% confidence intervals. The regression controlled for fixed effects for governorates and survey round levels. The estimation also included jobseekers' characteristics. The regression has 2,802 observations (that is, hypothetical vacancies).

¹⁶ Female jobseekers do not prefer specific sectors (see Figure D in Appendix). However, there is a negative non-significant coefficient for female candidates applying to jobs in trade sectors. Compared to employer-level results, this would suggest that sectoral segregation comes from the demand side rather than from supply, where women do not self-select out of specific industry sectors but are left out of them by employers (Carranza et al., 2023).

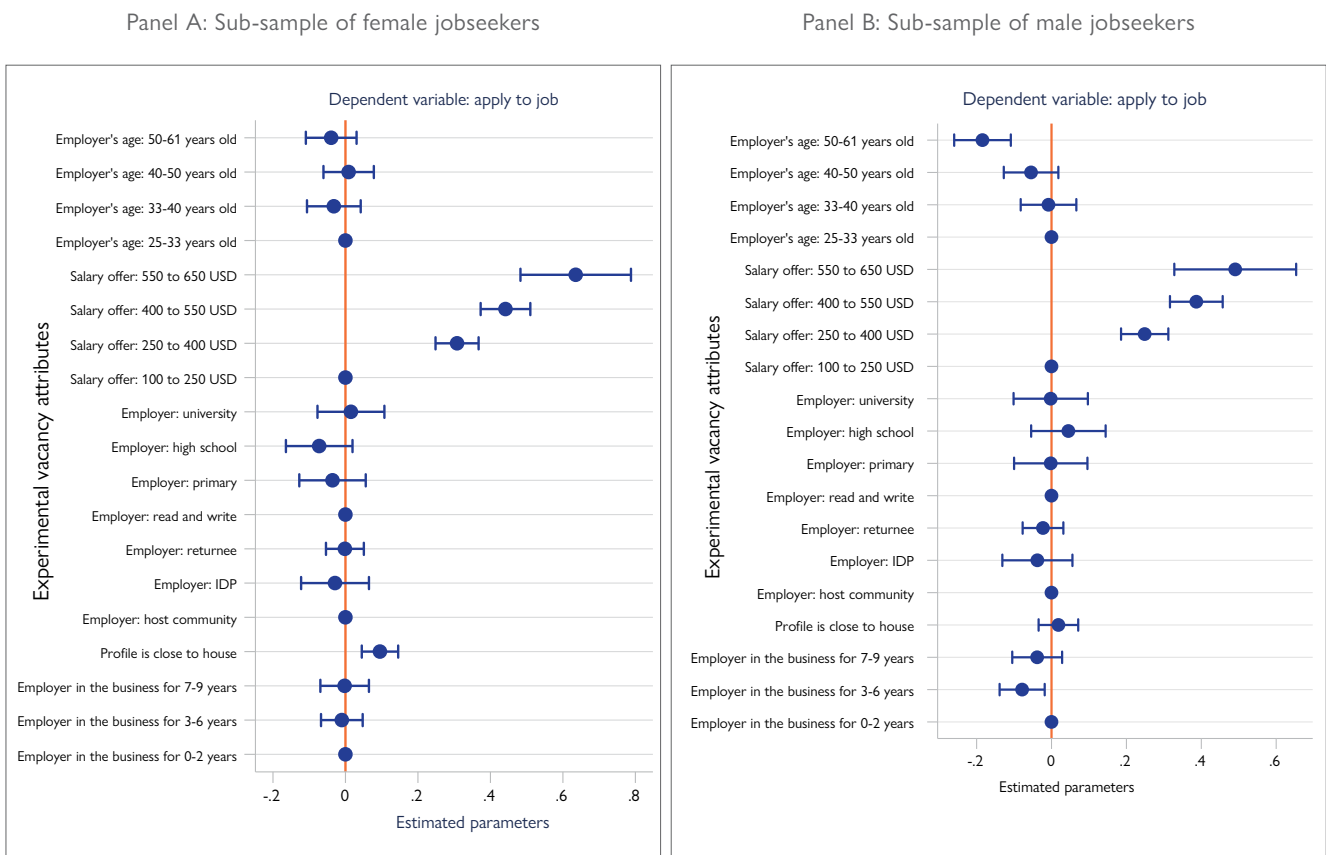
Female jobseekers do not prefer specific sectors when searching (see Figure D in the Appendix). However, there is a negative non-significant coefficient for female candidates applying to jobs in trade sectors. Compared to employer-level results, this would suggest that sectoral segregation comes from the demand side rather than from supply, where women do not self-select out of specific industry sectors but are left out of them by employers (Carranza et al., 2023).

JOB APPLICATIONS AND CORRELATIONS WITH JOBSEEKERS' CHARACTERISTICS

Like job offers, the same model was estimated for female and male jobseekers (results in Figure 15). The results show that female jobseekers do not have a bias towards the age of the employer since all coefficients are not statistically significant, while male jobseekers tend to have a negative preference towards older employers (50–61 years old). Both female and male jobseekers seem to respond in a similar manner to different salary ranges and migration statuses for the employer, showing no bias in this last variable toward IDPs and returnees. There is a slight non-significant difference in the education level of the employer, where female jobseekers answer negatively in their probability of applying to employers that reached high school compared to those with no education. In contrast, male jobseekers have a positive response.

In line with revised literature, studied female jobseekers have a significantly higher likelihood of applying for a job when the job site is close to their house (Dal Bó et al., 2013; Eriksson & Kristensen, 2014; Soeling et al., 2022), while for males, this variable does not seem to have an effect statistically different from zero. This indicates that female jobseekers drive the baseline result shown in Figure 14. Furthermore, females show no preference for firms of different trajectories in terms of time in the business. Male jobseekers have a significant negative bias towards those who have been in the company for three to six years, compared to those who have been functioning for less than two years.

Figure 15: Job applications by jobseekers' gender



Note: The figure displays estimated AMCEs on job applications with 95% confidence intervals. This specification was run for two all-female and all-male sub-samples. The regression controlled for fixed effects for governorates, survey round and jobseeker-fixed characteristics. The regression for male employers has 1,274 observations and the regression for female employers has 1,528 observations.

The characteristics of the profiles or vacancies can be given a causal interpretation, while the characteristics of the interviewed jobseeker are included in the model as merely descriptive (See Figure E in the Appendix). The jobseeker's gender does not correlate with their likelihood of applying for a hypothetical vacancy. Nonetheless, other studies have found that women may self-select out of the labour force due to higher risk aversion that leads them to pursue lower salaries and not apply for some jobs (Croson and Gneezy, 2009; Cortés et al., 2023). Furthermore, younger applicants are more likely to apply than older applicants (33–43 years old), which negatively impacted the probability of applying compared to being 19 to 27 years old (5 pp). Jobseekers of mature age have been found to have less confidence in finding a new job (Watermann et al., 2021). Being married did increase this likelihood by 7 pp, a finding that is in line with previous research pointing to higher motivation from married individuals and less burnout (Meng and Yang, 2023).

Jobseekers' experience and education significantly predict their likelihood of applying for a job. Compared with jobseekers without experience, individuals with three or more years of experience, one to two years of experience or less than one year of experience are more likely to apply (23 pp, 25 pp, and 18 pp, respectively). The literature has found that least qualified individuals often self-select out of applying to vacancies, as the perceived likelihood of finding a job is an essential driver of job searching (Beam, 2021).

Regarding education, jobseekers with higher education and high school showed a lower probability of applying for the hypothetical vacancies by 11 and 6 pp, compared to jobseekers who can only read and write. This finding could respond to the declining reservation wage previously examined by literature. Evidence exists that more years of education lead a jobseeker to sample higher type jobs with more requirements first, which tend to offer the most pay, and, as the search continues, apply for jobs that are the first choice of less educated individuals (Kudlyak et al., 2013). This would make sense to result in a lower probability of applying for higher education candidates at the beginning of the job search.

An interesting outcome from the regression was the negative preference of those who own a home to apply for the vacancies since their likelihood was lower by 5 pp. Asset accumulation has been found to make individuals more selective in their job search and wait for high-paying jobs (Rendon, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Iraqis have faced issues regarding the scarcity of livelihoods and the lack of formal employment (IOM Iraq, 2022). The present work examined the dynamics of applications and job offers within the country through a conjoint experiment with hypothetical vacancies and resumes. When analysing the demand side (that is, jobseekers' probability of applying for a job), there were no signs of a statistically significant difference in female and male jobseekers' preferences toward specific sectors or salary ranges.

The findings also showed the widely accepted outcome in the literature that female jobseekers prefer job openings closer to their homes or jobs with lower commute times. This report also shows that experience is the most crucial attribute employers value when hiring. The historically low employment rates for women in Iraq can make it challenging for female applicants to break into the labour market. Female and male jobseekers value salary range similarly. On average, we found no bias towards IDPs or returnees in jobseekers or employers.

The aggregate non-significant results regarding gender and migrant biases could be a result of the specific sample of employers used in this study, which only included EDF recipients who underwent an extensive screening process by IOM and are not representative of the Iraqi labour market. This is a reassuring finding about the ability of private sector development initiatives such as EDF to create inclusive employment. Another possibility, in line with recent research from Saudi Arabia, is that some men's private views about women's participation in the labour market may be less restrictive than what they are willing to admit in public. These findings do not deny the existence of discrimination in Iraq's labour market, which has been broadly studied by the literature (IOM, 2023c; UNHCR, 2021; Galos and Coppock, 2023). Indeed, 42 per cent of the surveyed employers openly state that they prefer male applicants, and 22 per cent report employers in the same sector prefer host community applicants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations aim to address the observed disparities and barriers to employment. They leverage the study's findings to propose actionable strategies for stakeholders, including policymakers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), employers and educational institutions.

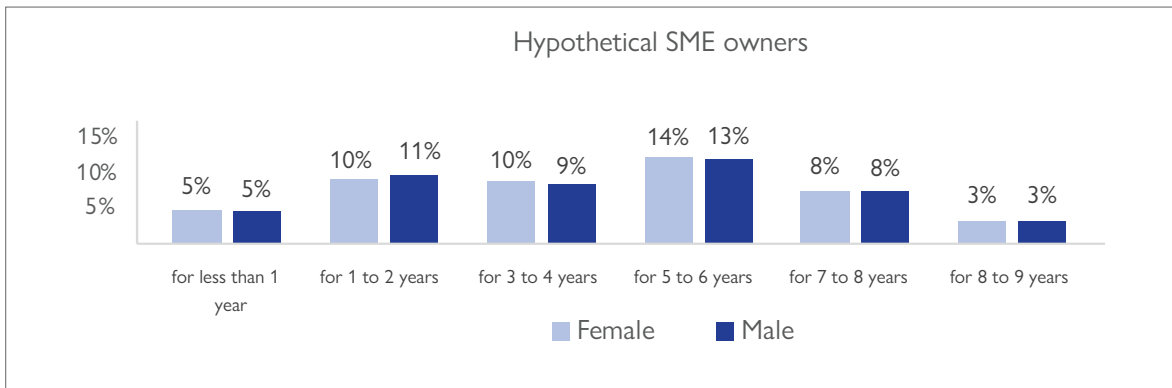
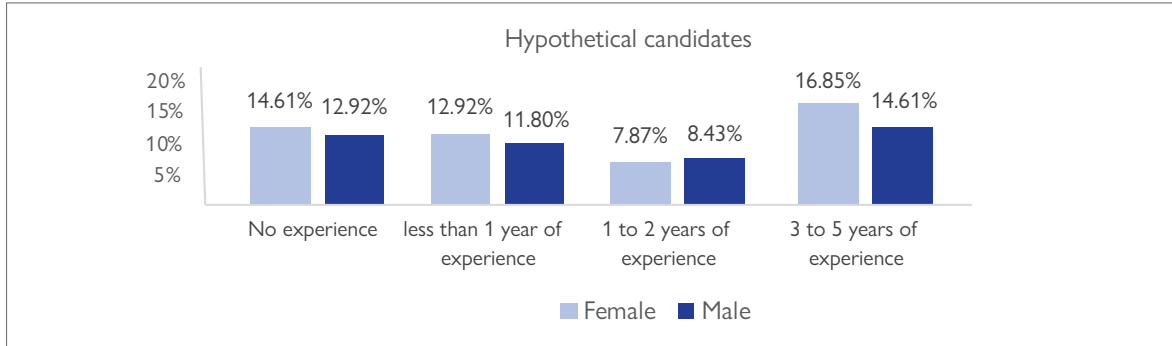
- 1. Job Matching and Placement Services:** Job-matching mechanisms can help navigate the complex hurdles restricting labour market participation by women and migrants. Such platforms should aim to align jobseekers with positions that match their skillsets and experience and consider the socioeconomic contexts that influence employment preferences, such as proximity to home and sector-specific biases. For war-affected areas like Iraq, where the labour market is fragmented and the path to employment is fraught with unique challenges, leveraging technology and data analytics to create dynamic job-matching services could significantly improve employment outcomes. Job-matching and related services, including resume building and career counselling, would serve as critical bridges, connecting employers' diverse needs with the workforce's untapped potential, including the most vulnerable populations. These platforms could prioritize IDPs, returnees and women, providing them with tailored support to enter or re-enter the workforce. The study shows that among EDF beneficiaries, most employers are willing to hire women and IDPs with the required skills.
- 2. Labour Market Information Systems:** Develop comprehensive information systems to provide up-to-date data on job vacancies, skills demand, and employment trends. This system would benefit jobseekers, employers, and policymakers by facilitating better matching between demand and supply.
- 3. Experience-Building Opportunities:** Encourage partnerships between NGOs, the private sector and government agencies to create internships and volunteer opportunities in sectors of high employment potential, particularly for young jobseekers and women. These opportunities should be accessible to IDPs and returnees, emphasizing practical skills and experience acquisition. The study shows that lack of experience is a key barrier to finding employment.
- 4. Support Female Entrepreneurs:** Enhance support for female entrepreneurs through targeted financial products, business training and networking opportunities. Promote sectors where women are traditionally underrepresented, moving beyond roles aligned with traditional gender norms.
- 5. Incentives for Employers:** Introduce incentives for businesses that actively hire and train IDPs, returnees and women. These could include tax breaks, subsidies for training costs and grants for creating inclusive workplace environments.

These recommendations are designed to address the multifaceted challenges faced by jobseekers in Iraq, particularly IDPs, returnees and women. By implementing these strategies, stakeholders can work towards creating a more inclusive, skilled and competitive workforce, contributing to Iraq's economic resilience and growth.

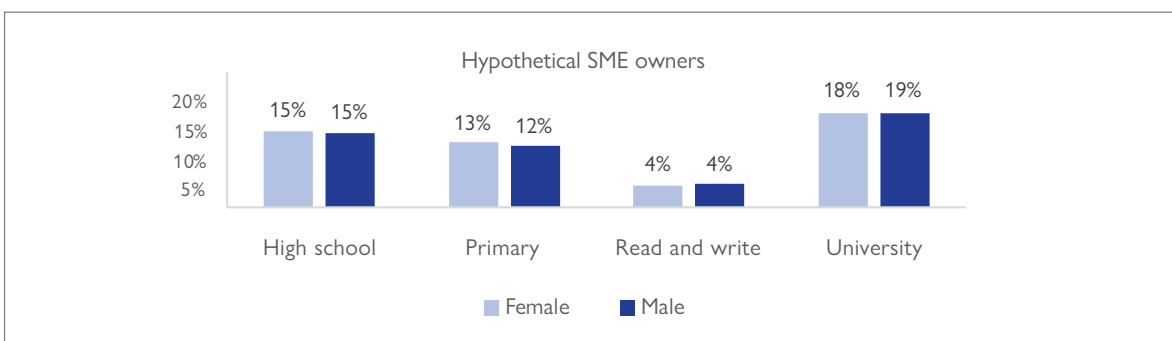
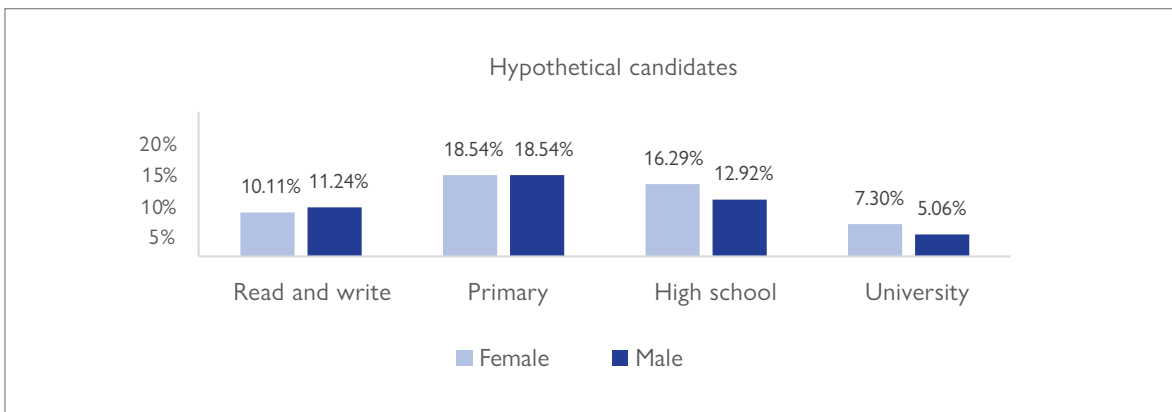
APPENDIX

Figure A: Distribution of experience, education and migration status by gender

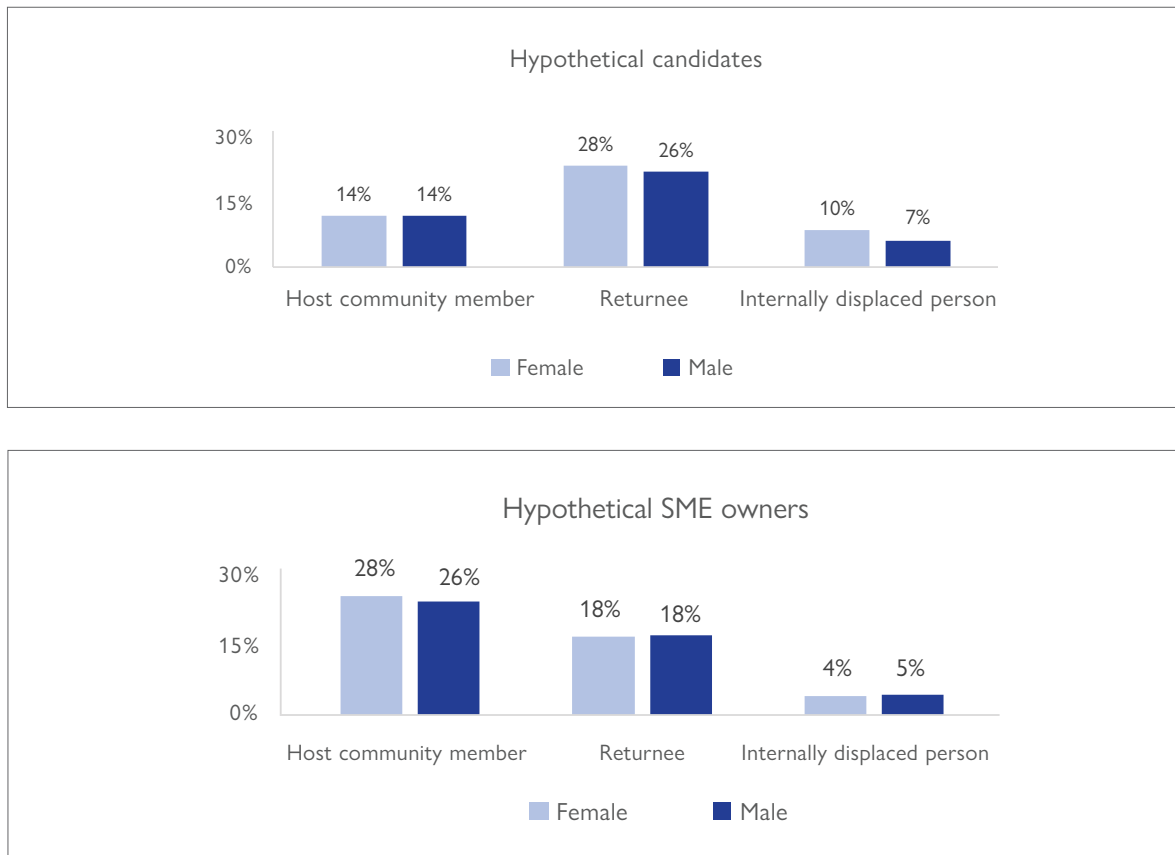
Panel A: Experience



Panel B: Education



Panel C: Migration status



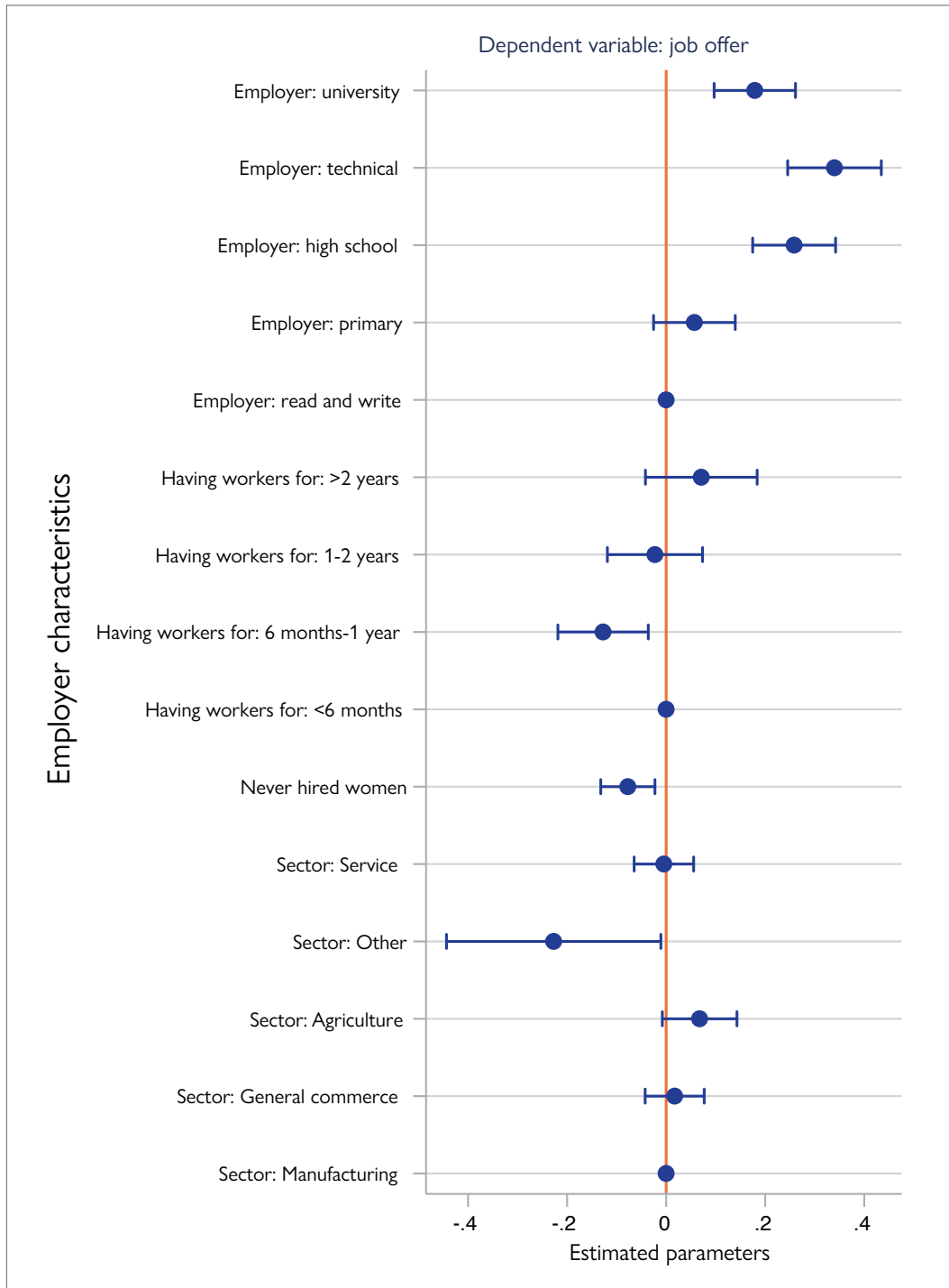
Notes: 729 and 711 hypothetical female and male profiles. 342 and 1098 hypothetical female and male SME owners.

Table A: Difference in means between female and male hypothetical resumes

	Age		Experience		Education		Migration		Distance to the job	
	Mean	Std. Err.	Mean	Std. Err.	Mean	Std. Err.	Mean	Std. Err.	Mean	Std. Err.
Male	33.96	0.797	2.59	0.085	2.065	0.079	2.098	0.073	1.536	0.040
Female	33.86	0.782	2.58	0.084	2.071	0.079	2.091	0.073	1.532	0.040
Difference	0.097	1.12	0.01	0.120	-0.006	0.111	0.007	0.103	0.003	0.057
P-value	0.931		0.931		0.957		0.945		0.952	

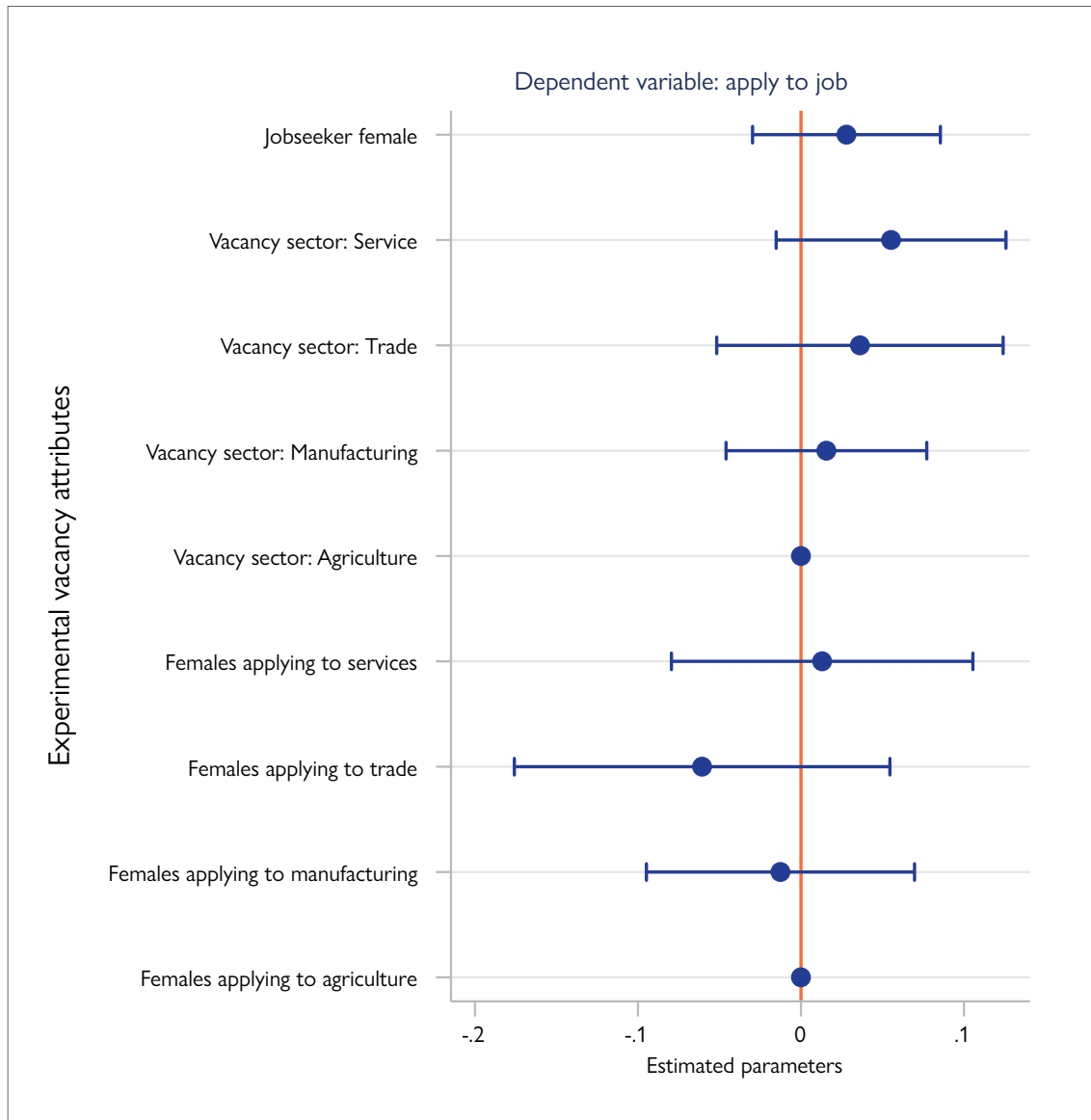
Notes: 729 female resumes and 711 male profiles. A p-value of 0.9 indicates that the observed difference in means could easily occur by chance, suggesting no significant evidence of an actual difference between the groups.

Figure C: Job offer correlations with employer characteristics



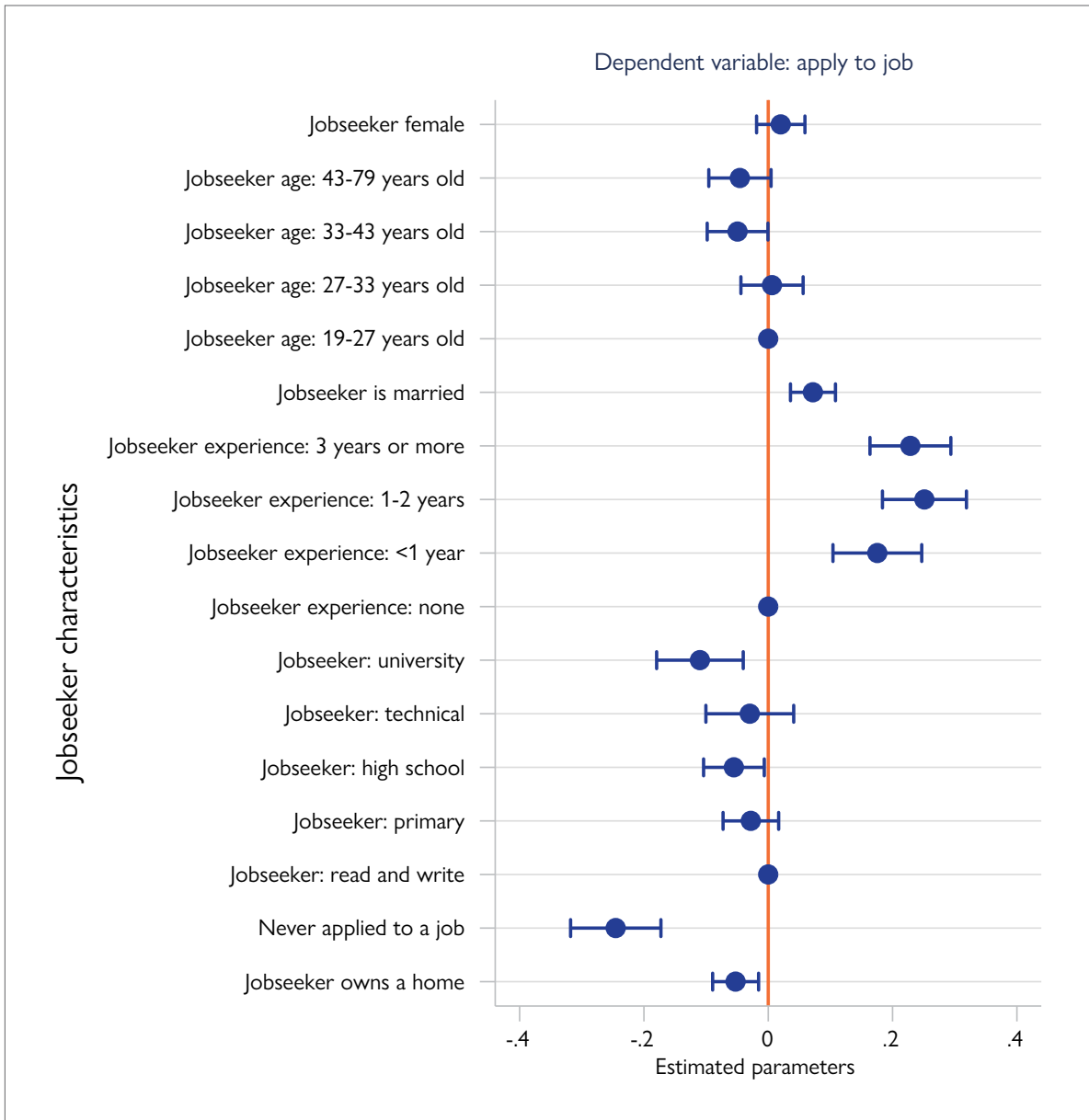
Note: The figure displays estimated AMCEs on job offers with 95% confidence intervals. The regression controlled for fixed effects for governorates, employer’s sector, survey round and employer-fixed characteristics. Additional controls include the average number of interviews to hire an employee and business profit in 2021 and 2022. The regression has 1,383 observations, with 678 male and 705 female resumes.

Figure D: Job applications by sector



Note: The figure displays estimated AMCEs on job applications with 95% confidence intervals, adding interactions between the jobseeker's gender and the industry sector of the hypothetical vacancy. The regression controlled for fixed effects for governorates, survey rounds and jobseeker-fixed characteristics. The regression has 2,802 observations (i.e. hypothetical vacancies), evaluated by 261 female and 216 male jobseekers.

Figure E: Job applications correlation with jobseeker characteristics



Note: The figure displays estimated AMCEs on job applications with 95% confidence intervals. The regression controlled for fixed effects for governorates and survey round levels. The regression has 2,802 observations (i.e. hypothetical vacancies).

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