



Committee: Human Rights

Question of: Gender Equality in the Middle East

Students Officer: Nadia Roeske & Olivia Barrios

Introduction:

Women throughout the Middle East are at greater social, political and economic disadvantages than women in any other region around the world. Many Arab States have signed onto the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) however most of these Muslim nations have also implemented Family Laws (personal status codes) in their state laws. These laws have resulted in certain hesitations in signing onto CEDAW, as they dictate the status of women to be dependent and minor in the situation of marriage, divorce, and child custody. This female second-class citizenship is widespread in different degrees across the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), and many nations exhibit serious under-representation of women in governance and general workplaces.

The disparity in gender norms has resulted in different states mistreating women to considerably varied levels, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia enforcing the wearing of a veil as a compulsory practice, and numerous severe offences in gender-based violence. A multitude of serious crimes against females are being forgiven or acquitted due to their 'lesser' status; the state of Morocco's penal code used to contain Article 475, which permitted rapists avoiding prosecution if they wed their victims, with or without her consent. Fortunately, this was overturned after a rape victim, forced to marry her attacker, committed suicide in 2014. However, females across the region have been empowered by the global feminist movement, and although certain states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt have rebutted this movement with outright hostility, numerous states including Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco actively promote women's rights and are pushing for legal reforms, a marked progression in the push for gender equality in the Middle East.

The Issue:

The 'Islam' Argument:

There is a wide range of causes for the disparity between men and women across the Middle Eastern region, with one of the longest standing arguments for the oppression of women being the Islamic representation of women and their overwhelmingly domestic role in society. However, the Islamic explanation of what women should and should not be/do dramatically varies between individuals and, on a grosser scale, between groups with different political ideologies and interpretations of the Qur'an. The most drastic inconsistencies lie in the rise of Islamism and fundamentalist Muslims, and Islamic Feminists, as explained below.



Islamic Fundamentalism:

Since the 1980s, the resurgence in support of gender inequality throughout MENA, whereby the female is an inferior individual to the male, has majorly stemmed from a belief in Islamic Fundamentalism: a movement which rejects modern influences on religion and labels them as abrasive/detrimental to the foundations of Islam and what it stands for. This rebuking of modernism and ‘Western’ liberalism has resulted in many supporters of fundamentalism to grow violent, namely groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. The Islamic State in South Sudan have committed countless sexual offences against women, and women’s freedoms are being marginalised and are rapidly diminishing in the face of such groups. Progress in reaching equality between men and women is ever hindered by the growth of religious fundamentalism, as believers try to reassert more traditional gender roles on women across MENA; such as the Islamic State recruiting process of youths from across the world seeking out men as prospective fighters and women as wives and dutiful followers. The 2012 World Development Report explicitly highlights noteworthy advances in health and educational fields (with respect to gender equality), but notably recognizes a significant lagging in political and economic progress; women are being confronted by a “significant restriction on mobility and individual agency” as religious groups continue to push for the presence of an Islamic protector and escort, a *Mahram*, who dictates what the woman may or may not do, and accompanies her to any location she wishes to go (which he permits her visiting), thus reiterating her inferior and dependent status.

Islamic Feminism

Essentially a form of feminism rooted in Islam, this school of thought argues that discriminating against women in the name of Islam is entirely unfounded and unsupported in the Qur’an/*hadiths* and throughout Islamic teachings. Islamic feminism has a fair few opponents, many who disagree that Islam and Feminism can even be bracketed together, however the male *and* female supporters of this movement are at the forefront of the surge in support for gender equality in the Middle East in all disciplines and jobs. An example of such individuals comes in the pioneering group of activists, writers, politicians and other Muslims who convened in 2015 to publish a ‘Declaration of Reform’ in support of women’s rights; “We support equal rights for women, including equal rights to inheritance, witness, work, mobility, personal law, education, and employment. Men *and* women have equal rights in mosques, on boards, in leadership and all spheres of society.” Although difficult to distinguish between this particular movement and general global pressure from other states, Islamic feminists definitely considered Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia’s lifting the female driving ban (in an effort to bring Saudi’s 2030 Vision of greater female involvement in the workforce to life,) a great win in the name of gender equality across the region. These individuals continue to strive for liberation from oppressive and unjustified misogynistic approaches to women/their roles in Middle Eastern societies.

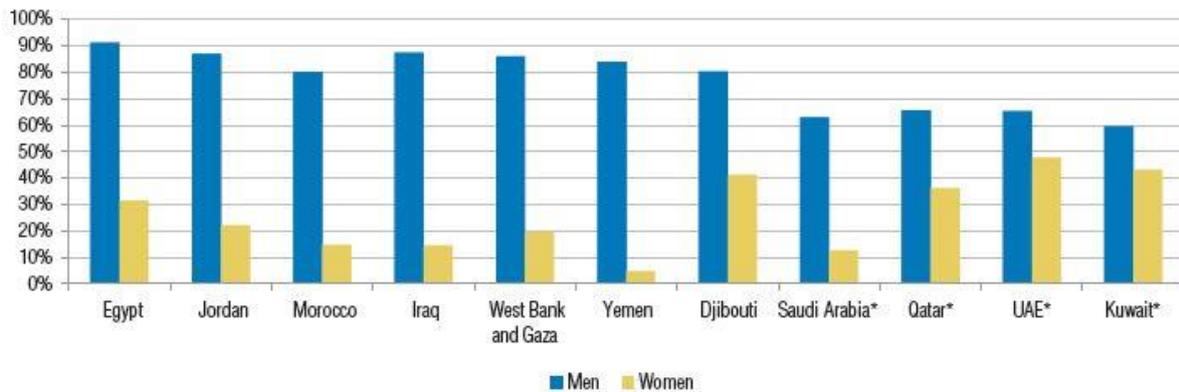
Specific Areas of Contention:

The Labour Force

There is an alarmingly large gender gap in the Middle Eastern Labour Force, with a comparatively low 25.2% of women across MENA actively seeking out employment, versus an average

of 50% of women in other developing regions. The director of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), Dr Lina Abirafteh, is dismayed by the lack of women in the workforce, stating “you cannot have half of the region’s population under-utilized, discriminated against and treated like second-class citizens then expect to make progress.” According to studies by the World Bank, if MENA continues to weakly progress with a meek 0.17% *per annum* of women entering the Labour Force, it will take 150 years for the Middle East to catch up with the wider world. To exacerbate the situation, the gender gap in the workforce is growing substantially, having gone from 5% in 1985 to 10% in 2010. It is clear from the educational choices of women in the region, that the skills they acquire are more suitable to the public sector, leaving the private sector to be dominated by men. The projection of women as individuals that belong at home, caring for children and completing mundane domestic tasks, makes potential female employees less attractive to hire, as they are deemed weaker workers than males. It is this opinion, which is upheld across the Middle East, that gives way to further discrimination against women and encourages a further gender gap in all fields of employment.

FIGURE 2 Female and Male Labor Force Participation across MENA



Source: Household Surveys.

* Official estimates for national non-immigrant population.

Sharia Personal Law/Muslim Family Law

One of the deepest areas of contention lies in the *sharia* practise of Muslim Personal Law (MPL), which involves controversial extracts and passages of the Qur’an being interpreted to suggest that men are obliged, religiously, to take care of women and preside over them as ‘protectors.’ Many countries across the Middle East use this Islamic argument to prevent women from working or travelling by prohibiting their ability to be in public without a *Mahram*, or simply denying them the opportunity to find a job. The issue of MPL spreads as far as India, where the practice of triple talaq (where the man repeats the word *talaq* (divorce) three times, thereby divorcing her) has been contested by many Muslim women. Across MENA, many governments have turned around and said that the man is entitled to such a decision as he is more “emotionally stable” than his wife. Many Islamic Feminists, such as the Canadian Council of Muslim Women, have been working towards establishing female-incorporated versions of MPL; these both uphold Islamic principles and allow women equal opportunities to men without any forms of discriminatory behaviour against them thus, critically breaking the taboo of females being of a lesser gender to their male counterparts.

Education:

Where only 2 in 5 university graduates (of which a majority are men) are guaranteed a job, and high-skilled employment stands at a weak 21%, employment and work in the Middle Eastern region is difficult to find irrespective of gender/degree of qualification. However, women are being purposefully excluded from the workforce by being poorly educated or not educated at all: girls constitute the majority of minors who are out-of-school as children in the Middle East, such as the overwhelmingly female 2.2 million uneducated children in South Sudan. It is projected that countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt could boost their GDPs by 12% and 34% respectively if women were adequately educated/incorporated in their workforces, and countries like Qatar, that exhibit a male dominion of over 80% in the workforce, leave little room for those few women who *have* received a higher education to gain employment. Although going up, as of 1999, girls were only spending an average of 4.5 years in education, before leaving school to become housewives to, usually, significantly older men. Although many educated women wish to be employed, it was observed by the World Bank that a majority of women, once taking up their ‘duty’ as a housewife, gave up their wishes of employment in the name of fulfilling their responsibilities in the home, and felt too confined to do otherwise; even for those women who do get university education, the cultural, traditional and Islamic laws/values upheld in MENA prohibit them from working after being wed.

Outcomes of Gender Inequality:

The World Economic Forum’s Human Capital Index has uncovered that the entirety of the MENA region only utilizes around 62% of its human capital potential due to a lack of females in the workforce. The average percentage of national budgets in MENA dedicated to women’s rights is moderately disappointing, with very few resources being aptly allocated to the necessary establishment of shelters/health clinics/ education facilities, etc. The World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap report of 2016 predicts that it will take an estimated 365 years before the Middle East brings the gender gap in line with the rest of the world’s pace of change, not even to bridge the gender gap. There is excessive research to explain the benefits of closing this gap, namely in the workforce, and the economic benefits of having women at work, but the issue persists and too little is being done to solve the issue of gender inequality in the Middle East.

Key Events

Event/Date	Explanation
August 16 th 2017- Article 522 of the Lebanese penal code is abolished	Article 522 allowed for halting the prosecution or suspending the conviction of a person who had committed rape, kidnapping, or statutory rape if he married the victim. Similar legislations have also been abolished in Tunisia and Jordan. Countries that still have similar legislations are Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya and Syria.
1979-The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	Many middle eastern countries are members on the committee of the CEDAW. Although they

(CEDAW)	may have signed this convention, many states have reservations about the convention due to their own legislations.
21 st June 1946-UN Commission on the Status of Women founded	The commission has been able to monitor gender inequality all over the world. Recently they have identified that some Arab States are still not as inclusive of women as they could be.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The Universal declaration of Human Rights set the tone that gender should have no effect of the rights of a person. However, due to the UDHR addressing human rights on a whole, it fails to tackle gender inequality. It is because of this that other conventions and commissions are necessary to attempt to further gender equality.

NGOs, such as Amnesty International, have campaigned to try and improve the status of Women's rights in the Middle East. When trying to reach a solution delegates should consider work done by such NGOs as well as the United Nations.

Possible Solutions

- Members of law enforcement need to be trained to uphold and enact women's rights laws, ranging from judges to police officers
- Make the work force more accessible to young mothers;
 - Extend flexibility of working hours
 - Introduce childcare in the workplace / increase possible day-care options
 - Promote female entrepreneurship and starting of their own companies/businesses
- Delegates may wish to make amendments to already existing documentation, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Another way delegates may wish to tackle the problem is by forming new committees or bodies to improve gender inequality in a way that existing committees may not.
- Reinforcing the importance of Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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