

Forum: Arab League

Issue: Developing Methods to Ensure the Abatement of Gender Inequality in the Middle East

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Introduction

Gender equality, according to the United Nations is “not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. An issue which is constantly and passionately argued, debated and worked upon by governmental and non-governmental organizations alike, has remained significant in multiple regions and a prevalent issue in the Middle East region, present in both Arab and non-Arab states. Despite educational access for middle eastern women having been very high and, on the rise, cultural, political and societal values have led to middle eastern women being deprived from political positions, consisting of only 7% of parliamentary seats in the Arab world and 25% of the workforce in the MENA region.

This problem has been prevalent throughout middle eastern history, and despite having been worked upon and advocated for by men and women in the community alike, is still a very pressing issue. Gender inequality in the Middle East can be traced back to religious interpretations made by the leading jurists throughout history in the region, whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish, which have provided society with conservative interpretations of each respective religion, limited a woman’s role in politics, society, and even the family. This can be seen in laws surrounding inheritance, court appearances, a woman’s rights in both a marriage and a divorce, along with polygamy. This, when paired with the United States’ support for the ruling powers and the clergy who had instilled these laws in the first place, allows for these powers to institutionalize unjust laws on the middle eastern population.

Stereotypical approaches to culture in the middle east have also contributed to the lack of international attention to gender inequality. This refers to the generalization of a woman’s identity in middle eastern society, ranging from their clothing choices, which the international community, believes involves being fully covered, to their role in politics, which is believed to be non-existent, and the disregard for the diversity within the middle east.

With women in Northern Africa representing less than 20% of the non-agricultural sector, the United Nations has embarked on a journey to aid in the rectifying of the gender inequality which has become so incorporated in modern-day society, within and outside the middle east. This involves measures such as strides to diversify the economy through increasing inclusion for all genders along with the implementation of plans to improve the general wellbeing and future of women.

Definition of Key Terms

Gender Parity

A means of determining the equality between both genders, on a numerical scale. In this topic in specific it could be the number of men holding parliamentary positions to women holding parliamentary positions.

State religion

A religion which the state represents and may range from the incorporation of this religion into the state or the financing of the religion by the state.

MENA region (Middle East & North Africa)

Refers to the geographical area consisting of both the Middle East & North Africa. An important distinction is to be made and kept in mind between the Middle East and Arab Countries.

Arab League

Refers to a 22-member association of countries which have Arabic as an official language and aims to promote aid within the group.

Education index

A means of determining the average educational attainment of a country, involving calculating the average years of schooling for both adults and children.

De jure discrimination

Discrimination in the form of law. An example of this is women not being allowed to travel if there is no written consent from her husband.

De facto discrimination

Discrimination in the form of practice. An example of this would be a difference in the benefits which accompany the same job which both a man and a woman hold.

Gender pay gap

The precise difference between the salary which women and men receive for performing the same job.

Gender-based violence (GBV)

Sexual violence, honor killings, domestic violence and trafficking are all forms of GBV, which is the term for harmful practices towards someone based on their gender

Masculinities/Femininities

Categorizing certain actions as “feminine” or “masculine,” which may vary in regards to religion, social class, culture, geography.

Key Issues

Child marriage

As the MENA region is home to approximately 39 million child brides, with 9 million of them married before the age of 15 and 30 million married between the ages of 15-18, it is evident that the MENA region faces a large issue, which is due to a multitude of factors, from the laws legalizing child marriage, to the lack of governmental care for women at risk. It is also important to recognize the fact that despite these nations being united under a common banner, whether through the Arabic language or religion, there is an evident gap between the presence of child marriage throughout the different countries. This is especially seen in the gap between the 34% of women currently aged 20 to 24 having married prior to the age of 18 in Sudan when compared to 2% in Tunisia. This also represents the cultural diversity within the region and also brings up the question of the influence of residence, wealth quintile and education on the probability of a woman having been married or in union prior to the age of 18. In fact, 13% of child brides lived in urban households while 27% came from rural areas and on average had received less education and were generally less wealthy.

Governmental positions

Women have become more and more involved in the government worldwide, and the middle east has been following in the rest of the international community's footsteps. This can be seen in countries such as Bahrain, where women comprise of one-third of the nation's foreign ministry personnel, and in Lebanon, where two politicians became both the first female defense minister and the first female interior minister in any Arab country. However, 7%, representing the average seats taken up by women in Arab parliaments, is a staggering statistic and this ratio needs to be worked upon, as women not only provide the state with the same level of work, but keep in mind the importance of inclusivity and diversity within the workforce and incorporate such inclusion in their work and their political views.

Role in workforce

With women in Northern Africa representing less than 20% of the non-agricultural sector, the workforce in the middle east seems to be less diverse than its western and eastern counterparts. This may be due to a combination of religious influence on society's perception of a woman's role in society and a lack of intervention to rectify and work upon the transformation of the nation's views on women in the workforce. With the labor force participation rate of females in the MENA

region having been approximately 20% in 2019, this is less than half of the world's average participation rate of females in the labor force, highlighting a lack of inclusion and balance between both genders.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

UNESCO, being a division of the United Nations, focus on the “Building peace in the minds of men and women”, respects both genders equally and strictly shuns all forms of discrimination based on gender. UNESCO actively promotes the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals which also include the eradication of gender equality challenges.

The United States of America (USA)

The United States of America, being a very progressive nation, has for a long time advocated for and worked towards gender equality on both a national and international level, however, as aforementioned, its support behind the ruling groups which had instilled such laws or not intervened in the mistreatment of a woman has allowed for this to persist and become even more incorporated in modern society.

The Arab League

The Arab League's views on gender inequality are very similar to the international community's views. For example, the Arab League, the UN Women and the UNFPA have worked together in order to prevent gender-based violence (GBV). In addition, the Arab League adopted the Cairo Declaration for Arab Women and the Strategic Plan of Action for the Development of Women in the Arab Region 2030 in March 2017 and also has expressed its interest in achieving equality for both genders. The Arab League also created the Arab Women Organization to work on the support of women in the region and eliminating gender barriers for females.

Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran, established in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution and with that, the abolishing of the monarchy, ushered in a new era of religious conservatism which became intertwined with the republic's governing system, placing most of the power with a supreme leader, making it a Shia Islam state, and with that, implementing many laws which included women having to wear a headscarf, allowing men to marry a second wife without permission from the first. However, Iran prides itself in the education of its population, and with a literacy rate of 97.9% and almost all Iranian girls going to primary school, it has achieved a substantial amount of education for its population. However, only 6% of the seats in the parliament are held by women which raises questions surrounding the involvement of women in the political scene.

Tunisia

Tunisia stands out as a beacon of equality between men and women in the MENA region, where women enjoy an equal share of inheritance despite normal Islamic laws, which is different from its neighbors. Women can also pass down their citizenship and hold a significant portion of the parliament seats.

Development of Issue

Date	Event	Outcome
1934	Women gain the right to vote in Turkey	The beginning of a journey to establish women's influence in state decisions.
1979	Conservatism begins to impose itself largely in the middle east, seen especially with the 1979 Revolution in Iran and	Further conservatism instilled with conflicts, which allows for values to be reinstilled into middle eastern society.

	harnessing extremist Islamist groups in Afghanistan to fight communism.	
December 2010	Arab Spring	A wave of protests flows through the middle east which leads to many reforms including providing women with more equality in nations in the MENA region.
2011	UAE Citizenship law amended	Provides children of Emirati women and foreign fathers with the right to request citizenship when turning 18
March 2017	Arab League Summit Jordan	The Cairo Declaration for Arab Women and the Strategic Plan of Action for the Development of Women in the Arab Region 2030 which calls for the protection and support for victims of gender-based violence (GBV) and its prevention in the future.
August 2017	Article 522 of the penal code repealed	The parliament repealed a law where if a man marries a woman whom he had committed rape, kidnapping or statutory

		rape would allow for halting of prosecution and suspension of conviction.
June 2018	Women being allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia	King Salman legalized and implemented laws which allowed women to drive for the first time.
October 2019	Arab Charter of Women's Rights drafted by the Arab Parliament of the Arab League	A 25 article charter which aims to provide all children of Arab women and foreign fathers with citizenship
January 2020	First female defense minister in the Arab World	The new Lebanese cabinet ushered in a new era for female ministers, with 6 of the ministers being women, including the minister of labor and the minister of justice.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Qatar – Qatar Foundation

The Qatar Foundation, ever since its founding by Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser in 1995 focused on the education of both boys and girls and has established 9 universities, Carnegie Mellon University's campus in Qatar having 63% woman enrollment while its campus in Pittsburg has 49%. This represents the Qatar Foundation's ambition and hard work to provide opportunities for both genders equally.

Saudi Arabia – Vision 2030

His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, Crown Prince, Vice President of the Council of Ministers & Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs of Saudi Arabia, announced the Vision 2030 which essentially entailed targets such as the economic diversification of the

Kingdom and capitalizing on its strategic geographical location. This also included moves to move away from its conservative roots and achieve gender equality by taking measures such as legalizing driving for women and even prior to this vision, extending suffrage to women alongside men.

Sustainable Development Goals – Goal Number 5

One of the Sustainable Development Goals, being Goal Number 5, being the “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” strives for the achievement of gender equality by 2030 and aspires to implement laws such as discriminatory laws which aim to alter the fact that 49 states don’t have appropriate laws condemning domestic violence for women.

UN Women

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) works towards achieving gender equality by focusing on the participation of women in law and governance, to provide women with income security and work, to provide women with protection for violence along with their involvement in world peace and humanitarian action. To achieve this, UN Women works with states around the world including the MENA region to achieve gender equality.

Women for Women International

Women for Women International is an international women’s rights organization which aims for providing women with a better quality of life, access to health, and place them at positions where they can have a say in their community and in the decision-making process. It also seeks to raise awareness about women’s rights to let them know about their powers under the law and what can be done to provide them with equal benefits with men. In fact, it has helped 478,000 women to rebuild their lives after war.

Possible Solutions

Foreign Intervention

Seeing that the U.S backs and provides financial aid to many governments in the middle east region, it allows these governments to receive support with the same decisions, which whether purposefully or not, provides governments with the idea that since their decisions are accepted by

the U.S. or other belligerents, their decisions are suitable and the right ones for society, however, this encourages decisions and laws which place women at a disadvantage as opposed to men.

A possible solution for this would be the imposing of sanctions on governments or avoiding the support of such governments until certain measures are taken to protect the interest of women and to protect them in the nation. Foreign intervention could implement governmental associations to protect women and to promote education of women, their employment and their involvement in the government and to work alongside the local government in creating laws to protect women from gender-based violence (GBA) and reducing the prevalence of child marriage by beginning to criminalize it.

UN Monitoring statistics

The UN should work towards the close monitoring of statistics in the middle east in regard to gender inequality and its causes in order to more closely target the issue. Despite the fact that the UN actively works towards gender inequality, especially within the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), there should be another division which works in coordination with the League of Arab States in order to ensure that measures to ensure the abatement of gender inequality in the middle east are suitable for the region and in line with authorities. Furthermore, every region requires different approaches and a subdivision which could be named United Nations Women's Association in the MENA region (UNWA MENA) would allow for close studying of religious, political and societal factors which should be kept in mind.

Encouraging women to enter politics

The government or non-governmental organizations could work towards appealing to women to present services which specialize in campaigning for women to make campaigns to earn seats in the parliament and the government and to increase their influence in decision making on a national scale. These campaigns could appeal to the importance of a woman's presence in politics as they strive for inclusion and diversity in establishments. These campaigns would also have psychological divisions to ensure that any potential politicians, whether men or women, receive the emotional support throughout their campaign to ensure they don't decide to stop their campaign.

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