

2013

Women and Economic Development in the Middle East and North Africa

Lindsay Markle

Purdue University, lmarkle@purdue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/sppp>

 Part of the [Economic Policy Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), and the [Social Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Markle, Lindsay (2013) "Women and Economic Development in the Middle East and North Africa," *Student Papers in Public Policy*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/sppp/vol1/iss1/3>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.



GLOBAL POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE INTERNSHIP POLICY BRIEF
WOMEN AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
Lindsay Markle
Fall 2012

Women in the Middle East and North Africa face daily challenges due to gender norms in society. These norms are rooted in culture, religion, and family structure and affect the way women are able to participate in their economy and public sphere. In an age of globalization and an increasingly open economy, governments in the Middle East and North Africa would benefit financially from incorporating more women into their workforce. Currently, many educated women in developed countries in the Middle East and North Africa, also known as the MENA region, do not enter the workforce, even after obtaining tertiary degrees. While the individual country's infrastructures in the region differ, women face significantly higher discrimination in MENA countries compared to any other global region. While women have recently increased efforts to improve gender equality through protests, domestic efforts in oppressive countries need the support of international organizations, such as the United Nations, to uproot the traditional gender norms of the region. In addition, movements such as the Arab Spring have indicated a desire for reform and increased representation in government. Gender equality itself is not only a humanitarian issue; countries would increase economic output and an improved position in the global economy. Through education reform, change in gender laws, and improved access to loans, women would be able to change the gender limitations that exist in the MENA region.

Before analyzing gender inequality in the MENA countries, it is important to note the impact of the economic structure on gender equality. Many oil-rich countries thrive on male-dominated jobs that feed the oil industry from the oil boom that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. Historically, men sent remittances to their families, and this reinforced men as providers for the family (Moghadam 2005). The strong central and patriarchal governments are reinforced by the oil profits; there is little incentive for economic change. Other countries with heavily oil-oriented economies are Libya, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia (Moghadam 2005). While these countries have large percentages of university-educated women, most between 70–80 percent, with degrees in “softer” sciences, there is little use for their degrees in the profitable oil industry. Women are often designated to help the family business without pay or resort to traditional markets, domestic service, or crafts (Moghadam 2005). Because women are traditionally discouraged from entering the oil market, they are encouraged to enter fields of social science and avoid higher-paying, male-dominated jobs in oil and business.

Even in countries not as oil-dependent in the MENA region, women still face barriers in joining the workforce due to men's views of women's role in society. Traditional views of Islam reinforce the perception that men are the sole provider of the household and women should not seek employment. In Morocco, even when women are able to gain employment, they often receive 40 percent less compensation than men of equal degrees. In addition, they only constitute 28 percent of the workforce (Laskaridis 2011). Gender inequality in pay results in structural differences across the entire MENA region.

Country	Average Pay per Year for Men	Average Pay per Year for Women
Egypt	\$5,577	\$1,663
Turkey	\$12,368	\$4,385
Syrian Arab Republic	\$5,8684	\$1,907

Source: Gender Development Index 2008

Women face discrimination when applying for jobs and are discouraged from challenging the traditional structure in society in many of the MENA countries. If more women were integrated into the workforce in MENA countries, the number of workers would increase and economic output would be improved, particularly for the less wealthy nations in the MENA region that are not as dependent on the oil industry.

Although education is often seen as a positive step for women looking to enter the workforce, many educated women in the MENA region are unemployed. The gap in income continues to exist despite the large number of educated women. For example, 72 percent of unemployed Jordan women had a tertiary degree in the early 2000s. However, when they entered the workforce, they only earned two-thirds of what men earned at the same level of schooling (Moghadam 2005). The gender gap in the workforce is a result of both the economic structure and cultural norms. Men in the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt believe women cannot take responsibility for the consequences of their decisions and men are responsible for guiding the family. Women even agreed that they would make good wives and mothers but not good leaders or rulers because they are “erratic and emotional” (El-Naggar 2012). Women are expected to fill the low-income positions of the informal market and are often discriminated against when applying for positions of greater authority. Due to the high levels of segregation in society, many believe integration is the first step to improving women’s equality.

The feminization of family care in the Middle East prevents women from entering the workforce. Traditionally, women’s role is to remain at home and care for the family. Although many women are educated in the oil-rich countries, their families support their daughters’ education as a way to meet a husband rather than to find a job (Moghadam 2005). In countries such as Iran, the social policy stems from Islamic law, which states that women are obligated to perform the care roles of society, looking after family members unable to provide for themselves (Minguez 2012). While many would argue that Islam is the cause of the gender inequality in the Middle East, the Koran does not state that women must remain at home and look after the children (“Global Connections: The Middle East” 2002). Social policies set by the state impact how women are viewed in society and result in structural gender differences. Islam is used as a way of maintaining traditional culture and promoting the submissive role of women in society. Societies that utilize Sharia law, such as Iran, are often very isolated; both men and women are more unaware of gender norms of other societies. When women are expected to be the main caregivers of society, they are unable to branch away from their families and pursue a long-term career path.

Women in MENA countries are often dependent on their husbands to do things independently, and this limits their ability to participate in the workforce. Lack of autonomy over their own decisions results in submission and a culturally inferior status. For example, in Saudi Arabia, a woman must request her husband’s permission for public activities; women are considered legally on a status comparable to minors. Women are not able to travel, study, or work without permissions from male guardians (“World Report 2012: Saudi Arabia” 2012). Women have been

arrested after protesting for their right to drive. They have been charged with “tarnishing the king’s reputation abroad” and “stirring up public opinion,” according to Saudi reports (“World Report 2012: Saudi Arabia” 2012). Women also must be accompanied by men when going out in public. In addition, women have not been able to register to vote, even through the unsuccessful efforts of the Baladi movement in 2011 (“World Report 2012: Saudi Arabia” 2012). If women are not able to voice their opinions or to participate in the public sphere without a man’s guidance, change will be very slow. Currently, protest movements result in arrests and continued suppression of women’s social and economic rights.

Traditional political powers often prevent women’s rights. In Egypt under a military regime, gender equality is not supported through the law. Over one hundred women have reported being sexually assaulted, and there is no way for them to file charges. Revolutions such as the “Blue Bra Movement” have been domestic efforts to promote gender equality after a woman was beaten and stripped in public, exposing a blue bra (Kirkpatrick 2012). However, conservative parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood support conservative views of women’s role in society. The contrast between women’s rights groups and conservative political power limit progress for women’s equality. If women cannot break past these cultural barriers, they cannot obtain employment and independence. Economic dependence is also a result of a lack of financial opportunities for women.

Cultural isolation of radical governments also affects the public’s ability to improve women’s participation in the workforce. Through isolation, radical Muslim groups gain power by convincing the public that outside norms and values are against their religious beliefs. Organizations such as Al-Qaeda gain power through isolation and helping their people believe that their way is “Allah’s way” and “the only way.” Intense dedication to a particular organization, particularly in less developed countries, causes problems for women hoping to gain equal rights in society. Radical Islam forces women to stay in their homes and continue to be dependent on men. One example of women’s rights movements in the face of radical Islamist regimes is Malala Yousafzai. Shot by the Taliban for supporting the education of girls in Pakistan, Yousafzai faced serious repercussions for challenging the traditional regime. The Taliban sent orders to end female education in support of radical Islamist views (Walsh 2012). The fear created by radical Islamist groups such as these furthers the repression of women. These regimes use isolation as a tool to support radical views, and countries are unable to open societies up to international norms and participate in economic benefits of globalization.

The Arab Spring in the MENA countries reflects a shift in the Middle Eastern public’s desire for a change in the government structure, education, economy, and women’s participation in the workforce. People are more interested in democracy, capitalism, and open societies. However, optimistic social movements can only create a lasting impact on society if they are able to maintain the movement of their ideas into a political structure. For example, in Egypt the Arab Spring forced the resignation of Hosni Mubarak, but his government was soon followed by the Muslim Brotherhood, a traditional political group that does not support the progressive ideals of the Arab Spring. Rather, the Muslim Brotherhood may be considered a reactionary group to the movement and may reinforce traditional views of women’s submissiveness in society. Radical Islamic views could be dissipated if societies were more open through the Internet and social media. Social media fueled the Arab Spring, and there is hope of this for the future. Education reform was also a major goal of the Arab Spring and realizing the full of their potential. Economic opportunities could prosper if given the change; women could prosper if given the chance.

#1 POLICY ALTERNATIVE: EDUCATION REFORM

Education is a key for shaping society to promote gender equality. If children accept the idea at a young age that women and men are equal, they would be more likely to change their society in the future. Currently, the education system is highly segregated, reinforcing the perception that women and girls cannot interact in a man's world. Women and men are separated in universities, and this gender separation furthers the divide within society (Khondker 2011). Education reform to improve integration would alter preconceived notions of a woman's role in society. For example, in Iran oftentimes men and women are admitted into the same university but enrolled in separate programs. Men are enrolled in courses relating to management and oil development, and women are enrolled in programs such as psychology and social sciences (Shahrokni 2012). Integration is not a common phenomenon in these regions, and changes in education would allow access for women in more jobs and improve economic output. In the oil-rich countries of the Middle East, education reform would have quicker economic payoffs because so many women are already educated. Gender integration in schools would face opposition, but it is a great place to start to promote long-term change in society.

In order for policy regarding gender equality in education to be successful, policy must be initiated on a local level and reinforced on a global level. Organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and USAID have made efforts toward gender equality, but progress is slow. Seminars and conferences hosted by international organizations have been held in the Middle East, but actions with more economic consequences, such as monetary incentives to governments, would be a stronger incentive for change. However, internationally funded gender integration programs must be approached with caution and structured so that money does not end up in the hands of politicians, but rather in the coffers of the education programs. In addition, policies for integration must not be superimposed by other governments; rather, these policies must have support from within the MENA countries to be truly effective. Movements such as the Arab Spring indicate a desire for increased women's rights, and with the help of international economic incentives, countries would be more likely to create education reform programs.

#2 POLICY ALTERNATIVE: LEGAL GENDER EQUALITY

In many Islamic societies, women are forced to be separate from men and dependent on men to escort them in public spaces. For example, in Saudi Arabia, women are not allowed to drive or vote. Gender equality would be greatly enhanced through equal rights movements that reduced these actions. Women cannot participate in the economy if they face these barriers. Gender discrimination will continue to exist if women are continued to be regarded as second-class citizens. Sharia law is a major obstacle in this achievement, and Islamic perception of women must be changed in order to be effective.

In order to change Sharia law, a dramatic shift in the perception of the role of women in society could occur. However, once again, a change in this policy would require extensive support from outside influences. In addition, an increase in the number of women in government is commonly thought to be a force of change for equal gender norms. Change within the country would be very difficult, as seen by the women's rights movements in Egypt and Iran mentioned above. However, with long-term policy, women would be able to successfully and gradually maintain a position of higher authority.

#3 POLICY ALTERNATIVE: IMPROVED ACCESS TO LOANS AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Encouraging women to own their own business has been a popular option lately in both areas of economic development and women's rights. Microfinance has been a powerful global movement to empower women through a grassroots approach with the help of international organizations. Organizations such as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) choose to finance women because they are more likely to use their money toward the health, education, and well-being of their families, while men are more likely to spend it on themselves. In addition, women have better credit ratings than men and are often less likely to default on their loans ("Investing in Microfinance" 2012). Investing in a woman is a way to enrich the woman's personal life, her family, and her community.

International microfinance movements are growing, but success would be higher if women were financed from their own governments as well. Women often have trouble taking out loans from a bank, and domestic reform would enable women to have more control over their money. Rather than being dependent on international organizations for aid, women could invest in domestic banks and change cultural perceptions in the Middle East through their own societal institutions. In addition, domestic banks would benefit from more users and domestic economies would improve as a result of these policies. Women's projects, such as making crafts, selling pottery, or owning a bike shop, would enrich the community and allow women to take a stand for their own financial independence.

CONSEQUENCES OF POLICY ALTERNATIVES

When proposing new policies, it is important to remember that all policies have negative consequences. In order for policies to be effective, their negative repercussions must be anticipated and met with thoughtful responses by the local government. Hence, our first policy brief begins with the suggestion of education reform. Traditional culture in the area brings opposition to change and gender equality, and backlash should be anticipated. Specifically, many men in traditional cultures would fight education reform because it shakes their basis of control. Encouraging women to gain an education equal to men and utilize it in the workforce threatens a man's role in the family and society. Changes to the education system have historically been slow, and much support from the local communities would be necessary in order for the policy to be successful.

The next policy option would be to improve legal gender equality. While this may be attainable, it very well may not be enforced. Policies coming from the top down with little support from the public, particularly those in favor of women's current submissive role in society, will be opposed and may lead to violence. If laws are not enforced and believed by the common person, they are destined for failure. There must be a confirmed strength of numbers behind policies, so there must be caution when enforcing them from a global perspective. Policies that receive support from international communities, such as the UN, often face significant difficulties during implementation on the local scale. For this reason, gender equality is not only a national and international policy issue, but an issue of day-to-day interaction and public perception of women's role in society.

Finally, the last policy option of improving finance opportunities for women can also have negative consequences. If the women have improved access to financial institutions but are unsure of how to utilize their new capital, efforts to improve women's economic participation will be unsuccessful. If women lack managing knowledge and fail to develop business plans, men would have even more of a reason to discourage them from financial independence and

encourage a traditional role in the household. Also, as mentioned above, some more traditional men believe that women are too emotional and irrational to make their own decisions, and a failed business plan would support their view. Monetary policies alone cannot change the status of women in Middle Eastern economies. Women must have the proper knowledge and experience to run a business, and training programs would be required for many women with little business experience.

CONCLUSION

A combination of all three of these policies would be effective for gender equality and improved economic output in the MENA countries. By combining education reform, a change in gender laws, and improved access to loans, women would have greater equality in society. However, cultural perceptions change slowly over time, and implementing these reforms would require an extensive timeline. Education reform is a great place to begin because children are oftentimes the most open-minded to change. By exposing young children to a new phase of gender equality, they will be more likely to carry out those values into their adult lives. After substantial improvement in gender equality in the education institution, laws regarding women's independence would change and women would be able to perform tasks such as driving a car or boarding an airplane. While the severity of gender inequality varies from country to country, women will not be able to substantially improve the economic output until they are able to overcome the daily tasks that limit them from such participation. Finally, giving women improved access to loans and financial resources is the most difficult step to obtain as many in traditional societies believe women should be submissive to their husbands and allow men to manage finances. However, through programs such as microfinancing, women eventually will be able to borrow money from their own domestic banks.

With every policy suggestion, there are also limitations. Policies such as gender integration have been thoroughly fought throughout decades of gender equality efforts. Change is slow, and many nations are unwilling to compromise the gender values they source to Islam. Men in power in Islamic societies will react very negatively to a shift in power. As women challenge their role in society, men will be stripped of their identity as the breadwinner of the family, and this will be fought with much resistance. As long as women are seen as submissive to men and as long as women continue to accept this norm, little change will be made. Superimposing Western values is not an effective solution to solving the gender equality issues, and organizations such as USAID, the UN, and the World Bank must utilize caution not to dictate gender norms, but to work with the locals to explain the social and economic payoffs of gender equality.

A combination of all three policies and working with gender equality proponents in the MENA region to change the perception of Islamic law is necessary for financial success. While negative reactions are to be anticipated from those currently in power through Islamic law, economic payoffs and an improved quality of life may serve as incentives. Women in the Arab Spring seeking to be heard will support these movements along with international help. With time, gender equality will greatly improve economic output and make these nations more competitive on a global scale.

WORKS CITED

- El-Naggar, Mona. 2012. "Family Life According to the Brotherhood." *The New York Times*, September 4. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/05iht-letter05.html?pagewanted=all>.
- "Global Connections: The Middle East." 2002. *PBS WGBH Educational Foundation*. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/women/index.html>.
- Gender Development Index. 2008. *Human Development Report 2007/2008*. http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_20072008_GDI.pdf.
- "Investing in Microfinance." 2012. *International Fund for Agriculture Development, United Nations*. <http://www.ifad.org/events/yom/women.htm>.
- Khondker, Habibul Haque. 2011. "Many Roads to Modernization in the Middle East." *Springer Science & Business Media B.V. United Arab Emirates: Symposium: Dictatorship and Scholarship*.
- Kirkpatrick, David K. 2012. "Egypt's Women Find Power Still Hinges on Men." *The New York Times*, January 9. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/world/middleeast/egyptian-women-confront-restrictions-of-patriarchy.html?_r=0.
- Laskaridis, Lisa E. 2011. "Moroccan Women in the Workplace." *Morocco World News*, September 7. <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2011/09/8883/moroccan-women-in-the-workplace/>.
- Minguez, Almudena Moreno. 2012. "Gender, Family and Care Provision in Developing Countries: Toward Gender Equality." *Progress in Development Studies* 12 (4): 275–300.
- Moghadam, Valentine M. 2005. "Women's Economic Participation in the Middle East: What Difference Has the Neoliberal Policy Turn Made?" *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1 (1): 110–46.
- Shahrokni, Nazanin, and Parastou Dokouhaki. 2012. "A Separation at Iranian Universities." *Middle East Research and Information Project*, October 18. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero101812>.
- Walsh, Declan. 2012. "Taliban Gun Down Girl Who Spoke Up for Rights." *The New York Times*, October 9. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/world/asia/teen-school-activist-malala-yousafzai-survives-hit-by-pakistani-taliban.html?pagewanted=all>.
- "World Report 2012: Saudi Arabia." 2012. *Human Rights Watch*. <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-saudi-arabia>.