

The Arab Transformations

POLICY BRIEFS

NUMBER 5

Against the Tide: Conservatism, Gender Equality and the Possibilities for a Democracy Which Includes Arab Women

Authors

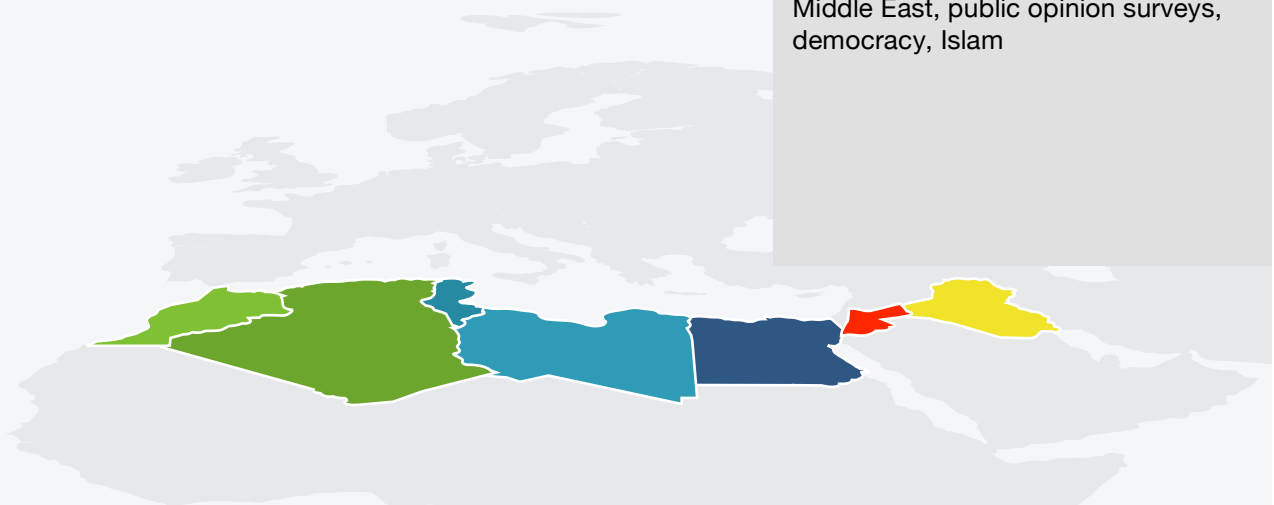
Pamela Abbott and Andrea Teti

Summary:

- The Arab region retains deeply conservative gender attitudes, against the trend of moves to more liberal values generally across the globe.
- Arab citizens say they support gender equality but women are generally treated as second-class citizens, especially by family law.
- Islam is often blamed for gender conservatism, but the systematic repression of political alternatives to Islamism and the often perfunctory way in which women's equality agenda are treated by autocratic regimes are more important.
- Efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women need to be led by Arab women and men and incorporate Islamic feminists as well as secular ones.

Keywords:

Gender equality, Islamic feminism, Middle East, public opinion surveys, democracy, Islam



UNIVERSITY
OF ABERDEEN



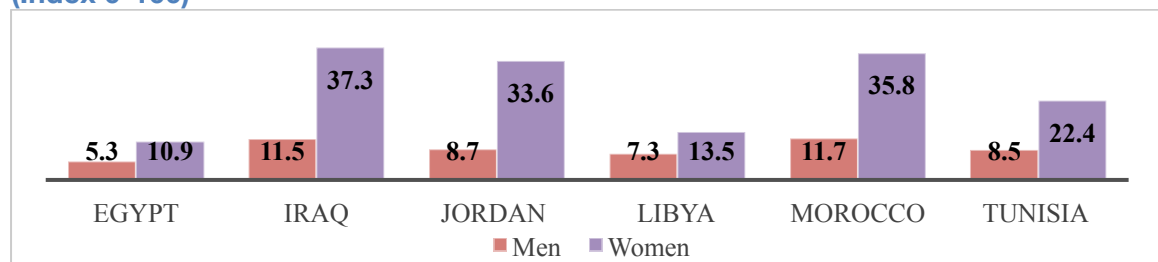
The project received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme under grant agreement no #320214

1. Introduction

Against a gradual rise of support for gender equality and women’s empowerment across the globe, public opinion surveys suggest that Arab citizens are profoundly resistant to promoting gender equality. Islam is often identified as the cause of this resistance. Some even claim that such differences are evidence of a ‘clash of civilizations’ between the West and the Islamic world, often depicting the treatment of women and girls as proof of ‘backwardness’ and ‘barbarism’. Data from public opinion surveys shows that while there are considerable differences between Arab countries, conservative values on gender are clearly entrenched, and may have grown more so after the 2010-2011 Arab Uprisings. While Islam is often blamed, the lack of progress on gender equality is the product of internal and external causes, including the systematic repression of political alternatives to Islamism and the often perfunctory way in which women’s equality agenda are treated by autocratic regimes.

Opinion polls show that while most societies across the globe are becoming more liberal, not only are Arab countries the most gender-conservative, but there is little evidence of these values changing. Our research looking at how political and social attitudes have changed in the wake of the Arab Uprisings in six Arab countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia), and it suggests that both women and men share conservative gender attitudes and that if anything they have become more conservative since 2011. Public opinion surveys carried out in 2014 show that while women are generally less conservative than men, differences are relatively small. However, women are no more likely than men to think that they are treated less equally than other citizens. Perhaps paradoxically, while a clear majority of men and women think that **gender equality** *should* be enshrined in the constitution, there seems to be little support for gender equality and the empowerment of women in practice. Indeed, on the Arab Transformations Gender Index only 17 per cent of respondents scored at least 70 out of 100, with the proportion of women being noticeably higher than men (the male average is 8.9%) but is still only 25.1% overall. In addition, while the proportion of men across the six countries showed little difference, varying from a low of six per cent in Egypt to 12 per cent in Iraq and Morocco, women’s attitudes showed much greater variation, ranging from just over 10 per cent in Egypt and Libya to just over a fifth in Tunisia and just over a third in Jordan, Iraq and Morocco.

Figure 1: Score 70+ on the Arab Transformations Index of Gender Equality (Index 0-100)

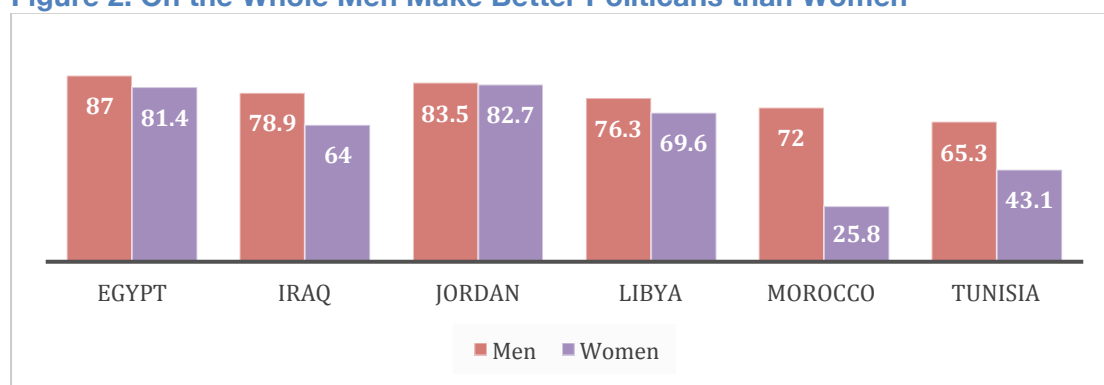


Source: Arab Transformations Survey Data.

There are differences in the ‘gender gap’ for different areas of life. There is relatively strong support for **gender equality in education** and for **married women working outside the home**, but less so for women to be involved in politics. However, while public opinion may be relatively supportive of married women working outside the home, few actually do so, with the economic activity rate for women being one of the lowest in the world. According to World Development Indicators for 2015, the average economic activity rate for women in middle-income countries is 50%. It is much lower in the countries included in the Arab Transformations survey, ranging from a low of 14% in Jordan to a high of 28% in Libya.

Support for women’s participation in politics is also relatively low although somewhat higher among women and among Moroccans and Tunisians, with the view strongly held by men that **‘on the whole men make better politicians than women’** (Figure 2). Less than half the men think it is conceivable that a woman can be Prime Minister or President of a Muslim country, with the notable exception of Tunisia, where the proportion rises to 60%. Women, however, are more likely to see it as possible, varying from just over half in Egypt to around three quarters in Iraq, Morocco and Tunisia. Even in the more conservative Jordan and Libya around 60% of women agree. However, the strong views about female-appropriate behaviour, including restrictions on women’s travel, makes it difficult for them to become politicians or be politically active. Only in Morocco and Tunisia did a majority of women (just over 60%) think that a woman can travel abroad without a male guardian, in Egypt, Jordan and Libya only around a quarter thought it acceptable, and just under half in Iraq. Men generally rejected the idea of women travelling abroad: only 12% of Egyptian men thought it acceptable, with Iraqis (26%), Jordanians (16%) and Libyans (16%) not being much more in support, although the figure was somewhat higher in Morocco and Tunisia at just over 40%.

Figure 2: On the Whole Men Make Better Politicians than Women

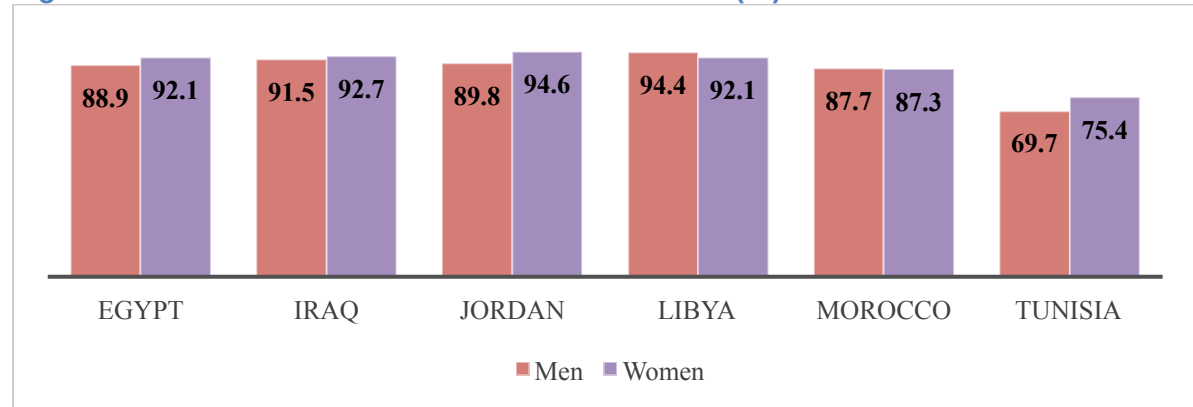


Source: Arab Transformations Survey Data.

However, it is when it comes to family law there is strong support for gender discrimination as codified in Islamic law - which, notwithstanding different interpretations, constitutes women as second-class citizens in rights in marriage and divorce, rights over children and inheritance. Men and women across the six countries want the constitution to enshrine religious law (*shari'a*) as the main source

of law, with nearly half wanting all law based on it, and less than 10 per cent wanting no law based on it (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Shari'a Should be the Main Source of Law (%)



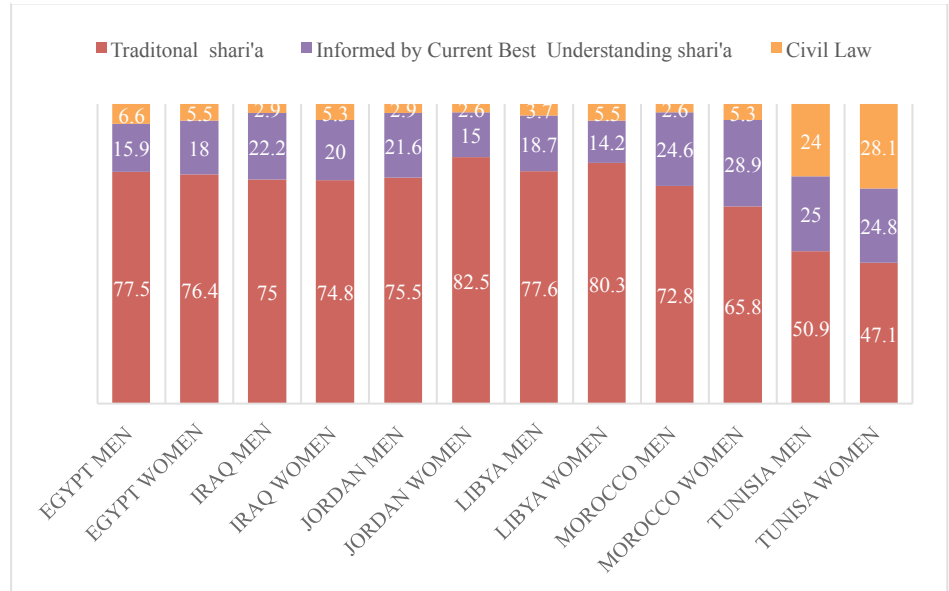
Source: Arab Barometer III.

People's preferences for the role of religious principles and institutions in **family law**, is often seen as being the cornerstone of a system of male privilege and control over women. Indeed, whilst most Arab countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, with the notable exceptions of Morocco and Tunisia most Arab governments have entered reservations to clauses relating to family law. Although public opinion surveys are rough instruments when it comes to understanding what exactly people mean by religious law, more than three quarters of citizens want family law to be based on 'traditional' interpretations, with the notable exception of Tunisia where it is around a quarter, but even here well under 10 per cent want it to be based only on civil law. In this case, differences between men and women are slight and women in Jordan and Libya are if anything more conservative than men.

The active role played by women in the Arab Uprisings was seen by many both inside and outside the region as an example of the possibility – and *feasibility* – of a different kind of gender politics. Some hoped it might mark a potential tipping point that would usher in greater gender equality and the empowerment of women. However, as the Uprisings were increasingly met with resistance from regime remnants and from conservative forces generally, the public sphere was de-democratized and women have simultaneously been increasingly excluded from it. In some cases this step back has been spearheaded or gone unopposed by Islamist movements, a fact that some commentators have attributed to the supposed increase in the influence of religious groups across the region, the so-called 'Islamist winter'. However, in other cases this patriarchal restoration is driven by self-proclaimed 'secular' forces which actively opposed the Uprisings. Either way, the patriarchal contract whereby men and women have separate and 'complementary' roles has in fact seldom been successfully challenged, leaving women's subordination to men as strong as ever. The one exception is the 2014 Tunisian Constitution, where, after a bitter battle, gender complementarity was explicitly rejected and men and women are seen as equal citizens.

So why do a clear majority of women, as well as men, support a situation in which women are presented as second-class citizens? In the West, the resilience of such attitudes is often attributed to a supposedly patriarchal ‘essence’ of Islam. Indeed, influential Islamist actors across the region – including governments – often make the same claim. But

Figure 4: Legal Basis for Family Law (%); Source: AB III



it is a mistake to think that the *cause* of these attitudes – or of their popularity – is somehow built into the nature of Islam. In fact, historians have shown that such conservatism has not been a constant across the Arab world, and that progress had begun in the 19th and 20th centuries but was reversed in

the late 20th century, ‘re-traditionalising’ gender attitudes. Also, the idea that Islam itself blocks women’s empowerment runs into trouble in the face of progress which *is* in fact being made in other Muslim-majority countries. The idea that ‘Islam is the cause’ is little more than a convenient fiction for conservative groups.

One factor identified by women’s rights advocates in the region is women’s strong support for the patriarchal bargain whereby men provide for and protect women and children and women are the nurturers. Many women have invested in this model of family life and see gender equality as a threat to men’s obligation to provide for their wives and family, threatening women’s and children’s economic security.

The biggest obstacle that women’s rights advocacy faces in the region, however, is that in most cases women are caught in a bind: on the one hand, male-dominated conservative Islamist leaderships are perfectly happy to acquiesce in a discriminatory status quo; on the other hand, gender equality was and still is promoted by autocratic regimes for reasons that frequently have little to do with a commitment to these ideals, but are instead a form of rhetorical appeasement of often equally perfunctory Western demands. In addition, the gradual retreat of Arab states from provision of essential social services created the conditions for a *de facto* cooperation between state and religious institutions, in which regimes acquiesced to growing Islamist influence in return for the provision of services such as welfare, education, and healthcare.

Egypt provides a case in point. Throughout the 1970s, secular and ‘pro-Western’ President Anwar Sadat used the Muslim Brotherhood to weaken the Egyptian left and compensate for his programme of austerity and privatizations. He was

eventually assassinated by precisely the Islamist radicalism he sought to stoke, and the left never recovered, leaving the Brotherhood and the Salafists to fill the vacuum created by Mubarak's departure in the 2011 revolution. By contrast, when the 2010-11 Revolution significantly weakened the Tunisian regime, progress was possible because more equally balanced moderate progressive forces – both secular and Islamist – could attempt to establish a consensus more difficult for former regime elements to reverse.

Independent progressive forces struggle valiantly between the Scylla of Islamist conservatism and the Charybdis of local autocracies, but they face enormous odds. Patriarchal attitudes persist not because Islam is 'incompatible' with gender equality, but because supposedly 'secular' regimes have undermined influential progressive forces in most Arab countries since the 1970s – often using Islamist groups to do so. Public opinion data show that conservative gender attitudes are entrenched, but they also show that people remain profoundly dissatisfied with their ruling elites for precisely the same reasons which led them to protest in 2010-2011. During the Uprisings protesters demanded not just the removal of corrupt leaders but an end of a system of increasing economic injustice and political marginalisation held together by repression: gender equality is an essential part of achieving the better alternative.

Thus democratisation, in the sense of policies being openly discussed and opposed and governments being selected through the ballot box, will not bring about a greater insertion of women into politics in the MENA countries. Most men appear to be happy with a system which effectively excludes women from public life and comfortable with the prevailing patriarchal view of their capabilities, and while fewer women accept the patriarchal norms there is still nowhere near a majority in opposition to them even among the women. Women need to be empowered in their daily lives before it makes much sense to offer them political empowerment.

The attempts by Western governments, including the UK and the European Union, to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as part of a policy to support democratisation and human rights more generally have failed. There is little appetite among Arabs for the EU, for example, to provide support for gender equality programmes to the Arab countries. Although EU policy towards the region makes financial aid and agreeing free trade agreements conditional on progress on human rights, conditionality is rarely implemented. Western governments need to move away from promoting a Western secular version of feminism and work with all women in the region who are working to improve the lives of ordinary women, including Islamic feminists. They can best do this by focusing on providing economic and technical support to improve women's lives, including access to employment where women have one of the lowest employment rates in the world with little evidence that it is increasing even among young women. Security in the home and on the streets, tackling workplace sexual harassment, paid maternity and paternity leave and the provision of childcare centres all increase the ability of women to participate in the public sphere. It is also important to work with men and boys to develop an understanding that they too can benefit from gender equality, which does not have to be seen as a challenge to masculinity.



ArabTrans

The Arab Transformations Project is an international research project operating within the European Commission's FP7 framework. The project looks comparatively at attitudes and behaviours in the context of the social, political and economic transformations taking place across Middle East and North Africa since February 2011. The countries covered are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. Ethical approval for the Project was given through the Ethical Review Procedures of the University of Aberdeen. Further details of the project can be found on the project web site at www.arabtrans.eu.

Acknowledgements

The Arab Transformations Project is coordinated by the University of Aberdeen (UK) and includes further 11 partners: Dublin City University (DCU), Dublin, Ireland; Análisis Sociológicos Económicos y Políticos (ASEP), Madrid, Spain; Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), Milan, Italy; Universität Graz (UNI GRAZ), Graz, Austria; Societatea Pentru Metodologia Sondajelor Concluzia-Prim (Concluzia), Chisinau, Moldova; Centre de Recherche en Économie Appliquée pour le Développement (CREAD), Algiers, Algeria; Egyptian Centre for Public Opinion Research (BASEERA); Cairo, Egypt; Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies (IIACSS), Amman, Jordan; University of Jordan (JU), Amman, Jordan; MEDA Solutions (MEDAS), Casablanca, Morocco; Association Forum Des Sciences Sociales Appliquées (ASSF); Tunis, Tunisia.

Copyright

The author(s) have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as authors of this work. The author(s) alone remain responsible for the content of this report. It cannot be taken to necessarily represent the views of the EU, the Court of the University of Aberdeen or any of the project partners.

© Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. The report may be copied and used in whole or part and adapted for non-commercial use subject to the original publication being acknowledged.

Recommended form of citation

Roger Sapsford, Pamela Abbott and Andrea Teti (2017). *Against the Tide: Conservatism, Gender Equality and the Possibilities for a Democracy Which Includes Arab Women*. Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen.

