

Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa

Policy Issue

Women are changing the face of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) politics, yet their success may require bottom-up pressure for change. States' responses to women in the public sphere foster changes in the status of women's rights across the region. However, real change may also require bottom-up pressure for advancement.

The Context

The Governance and Local Development Institute's "Women's Rights in the MENA" roundtable examined shifting attitudes towards women's roles in the public sphere, women's political participation, and gender activism. The panel included **Dr. Dalal Alfares**, assistant professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Kuwait University; **Dr. Nermin Allam**, assistant professor of politics at Rutgers University-Newark; **Dr. Yasmine Berriane**, permanent researcher at the French National Center for Scientific Research and; **Dr. Shirin Saeidi**, assistant professor of political science and the director of the King Fahd Center for Middle East Studies, at the University of Arkansas. **Dr. Marwa Shalaby**, assistant professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, moderated the event. Participants highlighted both how state policies have led to advancements and the remaining gaps, focusing specifically on Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, and Morocco. However, true change likely requires bottom-up pressures to spur effective state policies.

Advancements in Women's Rights

Women have made notable progress in advancing legal protections. A group of Kuwaiti women started the [Abolish 153 Campaign](#), which seeks to end domestic violence in the country. Women have also made important legal gains in Morocco, where public officials have become involved in debates surrounding women's rights. For example, the King dedicated one-third of his 2022 throne speech to amending family law. Civil society actors have used this opportunity to call for amendments surrounding guardianship rights, underage marriages, and inheritance laws. In 2018, women gained the right to become religious notaries (adoul) and a bill was proposed in 2022 to enable women to testify like men; however, the bill is still under debate. Berriane further drew attention to the [role of coalitions](#) in pushing for legal change.



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[Women played a leading role](#) during the 2011 Egyptian uprisings, and the country made notable improvements in formal institutional reforms. For example, a quarter of all Parliamentary seats are filled by women – a historic number. Additionally, seven women ministers were appointed in 2021, and women are also now allowed to serve as judges. These improvements in substantive representation may shore up the legitimacy of Egypt’s state institutions. [In a recent study](#), GLD researchers find that, contrary to expectations, women’s presence and gender balance on deliberation committees, as well as outcomes promoting domestic violence protections, enhance the legitimacy of the decision-making process.

Resistance to Gender Equality

Yet there has also been some backlash to these advancements. For example, Kuwait University recently faced significant resistance against [establishing a women’s studies unit](#) while the government funded seminars against feminism. Moreover, although Kuwaiti women have gained power as business and government leaders, non-Kuwaiti women fare less well. As Alfares noted, 58% of women in Kuwait are not citizens, and they inhabit a space of “legal invisibility.” As a result, they are unable to access the same healthcare, reproductive and gender-affirming care, and other important resources.

Despite improvements in women’s substantive representation in Egypt, women’s voices continue to be marginalized. Allam explains that the government is attempting “to have feminism without the feminists.” The progress in formal representation is not backed by a feminist agenda. Instead, the Egyptian regime is targeting independent feminists and supporting women’s initiatives that are “pet projects” of the regime. Many scholars worry that this is a form of “state feminism” that leaves out feminists. These outcomes draw attention to

the differences between cosmetic changes to the policy process versus real, substantive improvements in women’s lives and livelihoods.

Bottom-up Pressure for Change

Recent events in Iran suggest that bottom-up movements may help to spur further change. The murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in Iran after being arrested by the “morality police” for improperly wearing her hijab sparked massive protests in the country and across the globe. Iranian women have always been at the [forefront of pushing for progressive change](#), but the visibility of the recent protests is historic. The public is witnessing a sea change as more women go out without a hijab. Saeidi explained that women are not just visible but pushing an agenda against violence internationally. The world has a lot to learn from Iran, and it has inspired protests across the region.

The protests have instigated behavioral change that offers hope worldwide as women are at the forefront of coalition-building and activism, making notable improvements in substantive representation across the region. Yet the failure of gender reforms to substantively improve the livelihoods of non-citizens in Kuwait or advance feminist policies in Egypt highlight how advancements in pro-gender policies are beset by domestic political concerns that shape winners and losers in the process. Grassroots movements may be required to foster further change.



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About GLD

The Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) is a research institute based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The institute is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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Contact

Department of Political Science,
University of Gothenburg
Box 711, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden
Visiting address: Sprängkullsgatan 19,
Gothenburg
contact@gld.gu.se

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