

Introducing

Steve Monroe

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Steve Monroe is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Yale-NUS College. He is a development scholar with a regional emphasis on the Arab world. Monroe's work primarily focuses on two developmental challenges: the political obstacles to economic integration and gender equality. In this interview, Steve talks about his forthcoming book *Mirages of Reform: The Politics of Elite Protectionism in the Arab World*, his thoughts on gender parity in the Arab world today, and shares a memorable fieldwork moment from Jordan.



Your forthcoming book, *Mirages of Reform: The Politics of Elite Protectionism in the Arab World*, explores economic integration in the region. Could you share some key findings or insights from your research?

Mirages of Reform investigates why – despite decades of international pressure – economic integration in the Arab world has been uneven and often ineffective. It argues that when the region's regimes have strong support from the US or the EU and strong social connections to industrialists, they engage in extensive, but deceptive, trade policy reform. Behind an edifice of neoliberal trade policies, illicit forms of protectionism, like tax evasion and noncompetitive procurement, shield the socially connected from international competition. In short, it demonstrates that local and international politics can interact to subvert economic integration in the Arab world and beyond. The book focuses on Jordan as a case study but draws on examples of neopatrimonial protectionism and trade policy reform from around the region.

Gender equality is another focus of your research. In your opinion, what are the most significant barriers to achieving gender parity in the Arab world today?

Unfortunately, according to the latest [Arab Barometer](#) report on gender attitudes in the Arab world, there's been growing support for patriarchal norms over the past few years. Many blame women's low labor force participation for gender inequalities in the region today. Indeed, Arab Barometer finds that men with working spouses and female relatives tend to have more gender egalitarian views.

Understanding the relationship between women's work and gender equality is tricky. It's hard to tell whether women's work promotes support for gender equality, or whether support for gender equality enables women's work. Countries like Japan and Korea have high rates of female labor force participation but low levels of gender equality, as measured by female political representation, gender egalitarian legislation, or public opinion.

[My work with Carolyn Barnett and Amaney Jamal](#) explored how earning income might influence gender relations in Jordan. We found that women with higher incomes than their partners behaved more efficaciously. However, earning incomes will not be enough to flatten patriarchal hierarchies.

There is exciting new research that examines men's attitudes towards gender equality in the region. Men in the region consistently overestimate others' patriarchal preferences, suggesting men's patriarchal attitudes and behavior are very sensitive to group dynamics. In the Gulf, for example, Calvert Jones has a fascinating study where she found priming men to think about working with women increased support for egalitarianism.

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Do you have any memorable experiences from your fieldwork or research journey that have influenced your perspective or understanding of the issues you study?

One of my most profound fieldwork experiences happened after a long interview with a bureaucrat from Jordan's Ministry of Industry and Trade. We were sitting in the living room of his Amman apartment, and as we were wrapping up, we started to talk about life. The bureaucrat described the challenges of making ends meet and supporting his family on his civil servant salary. He then talked about his kids and, with a sense of resignation, said his daughter might have to work in an office alongside men.

I didn't make much of that comment at the time – I was rushing to get home to type up my interview notes on Jordanian trade policy – but it stuck with me. I didn't understand the bureaucrat's reluctance to see his daughter work. I wondered what his daughter thought about work, and working with men. And, as a grad student interested in trade politics in the region, I wondered how these attitudes about gender and work would affect and be affected by globalization.

A few months later, I asked my Jordanian host mom, who I was staying with at the time, about her thoughts on her daughters working in mixed-gender spaces. She told me she didn't care and was, in fact, proud that her daughters worked. That conversation was an important reminder not to overgeneralize. Jordanians, like everybody else, have a range of views about gender. But it also made me want to know why some Jordanians, and people more broadly, are more supportive of gender equality than others. Answering this question is as important in Jordan as in the United States. These fieldwork moments got me interested in gender politics in the region, an agenda that complements my work on economic integration.

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