women's rights in the middle east

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abstract. This paper seeks to fill a gap in the current literature by examining women’s rights in the Arab world, ways of eradicating legal discrimination against women and assisting women in claiming their existing rights, and gender asymmetry and the status of women in the Muslim world. Ottaway explains that women become an effective voice in legislatures when they are present in sufficient numbers to constitute a substantial bloc. In Caiazzo’s view, societies that condone and promote violence against women tend to be violent in other ways as well. Moghadam emphasizes that the prescribed role of women in Islamic theology and law is a major determinant of women’s status.

Keywords: women, right, Middle East, Arab, Muslim, world

1. Introduction

Ottaway writes that that the rights of Arab women are not sufficiently protected in the Arab world, that social norms preclude women from fully enjoying even their limited legal rights, that this holds back the entire society, and that the United States should be concerned about the problem and contribute to its solution. Allam notes that there are many obstacles that affect Arab women’s status in society, and examines the prevalence of negative images in the Arab media’s depictions of women. Blaydes and El Tarouty examine the actions and motivations of everyday women as political actors. Würth calls for an improvement in the social status of women and the eradication of legal discrimination, discussing the status of
women in marriage and family law in select Arab countries. Caiazzo states that the Taliban’s radical fundamentalist form of *sharia*, Islamic rule, banned women’s education and activism. Moghadam reports that to understand the roles and status of women or changes in the structure of the family it is necessary to examine economic development and political change.

2. Advancing Women’s Rights in the Arab World

Ottaway points out that different groups of women need different reforms, including some in which U.S. agencies should not meddle. Democracy entails equality for all citizens, thus promoting women’s rights means promoting democracy. The struggle for women’s rights and the core struggle to achieve democracy are separate processes in the Arab world today. Including women in the political process appears to have an impact on public policy. Much of the progress made in improving the legal status of women has been made by male-dominated legislatures. Ottaway explains that women become an effective voice in legislatures when they are present in sufficient numbers to constitute a substantial bloc. The countries where women enjoy the highest political presence are also the ones where women’s rights receive the greatest recognition and respect. The growth of Islamist movements in many countries is creating new obstacles for women. On Allam’s reading, the women’s section in the daily newspapers are not mentioned in the weekly annex supplement, media messages are directed towards sophisticated modernized women living in cities, most media messages focus on the traditional role of women (such as that of housewife), and many newspapers are not focusing on women’s increasing participation in economic, social, and political fields. Many women passively follow customs and traditions that devalue females relative to their male counterparts. The Arab media should balance its coverage of women by portraying them as productive members of the work force.

Ross suggests that women in the Middle East are underrepresented in the workforce and in government because of oil: oil production affects gender relations by reducing the presence of women in the labor force. The failure of women to join the nonagricultural labor force leads to higher fertility rates, less education for girls, and less female influence within the family. Different types of economic growth have different consequences for gender relations. Ross says
that export-oriented manufacturing can draw women into the labor force, and boost their political influence. A boom in oil production will squeeze women out of the labor force. The percentage of parliamentary seats held by women is influenced by gender quotas. Oil production reduces female political influence by reducing the number of women who work outside the home. The extraction of oil and gas tends to reduce the role of women in the work force. Oil wealth does not necessarily harm the status of women.³

3. Eradicating Legal Discrimination against Women and Assisting Women in Claiming their Existing Rights

Blaydes and El Tarouty remark that the Egyptian state has created secular organizations dedicated to the advancement of women. Since the 1950s, opportunities for women’s economic and political participation have increased. Women’s Islamist groups are a force whose importance has increased in recent years with the retreat of the Egyptian state. Blaydes and El Tarouty discuss the ways that women are both mobilized as voters and as political recruiters to support candidates associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, and identify the symbolic role played by female voters whose participation can serve as an encouraging signal to other Brotherhood supporters. The women associated with the mosque movement are fertile for recruitment by Islamist political organizations. The presence of women at or near polling stations can help to deter types of election violence. Women who sell their vote to vote brokers enjoy a form of economic empowerment. Practical concerns related to everyday economic survival motivate the actions of many Egyptian women. Clientelistically-based voter recruitment tends to empower women economically.⁴

Würth insists that some Arab civil and commercial laws do not permit women to conduct independent businesses without the approval of their husbands. The legal protection of women and children and the protection of the family as an institution have been dependent on the modern Arab state. Women depend on legal intervention in several aspects of marriage and divorce. Women from different social backgrounds possibly have different demands on the law. Würth thinks that many women in the Arab world prefer to be repudiated by their husbands than go to court themselves. The socially preferred form of divorce in many countries is the out-of-court repudiation by the husband (it guarantees women all the rights arising
from marriage). Women’s groups in many countries are currently campaigning for expanding women’s possibilities for divorce. Poverty among older women is a growing problem in Arab countries. In Calazza’s view, societies that condone and promote violence against women tend to be violent in other ways as well. Economic instability breeds conditions that lead to violence against women and undermine their capacity to build peaceful societies. Calazza states that violence against women heightens economic instability. Understanding why and when women fight for peace is crucial to guaranteeing higher levels of peace and security throughout the world. Violence against women and other forms of violence are inextricably linked. Where violence against women is particularly endemic or ignored, women are often less able to care for their families. “Non-violent” forms of repressing women’s rights contribute to a country’s economic and political instability. When women have more rights and equality, national standards of living also rise. Calazza notes that some women participate in or encourage terrorism (when there are few perceived outlets for gender equality). Direct and indirect violence against women exists in virtually every country. Turning a blind eye to violence against women should be recognized as a sign that violence is an acceptable part of a society that undermines a country’s stability. Women’s concerns need to be incorporated into development policies.

4. Gender Asymmetry and the Status of Women in the Muslim World

Moghadam emphasizes that the prescribed role of women in Islamic theology and law is a major determinant of women’s status. High fertility, low literacy, and low labor force participation are linked to the low status of women. The position of women in the Middle East cannot be attributed to the presumed intrinsic properties of Islam. Gender asymmetry and the status of women in the Muslim world cannot be solely attributed to Islam. Women’s legal and social positions are quite varied. Today upper-class women have more mobility than lower-class women. Moghadam claims that the status of women in Muslim societies is neither uniform nor unchanging nor unique. Women’s social positions have implications for their consciousness and activism. There exists intra-regional differentiation in gender norms, as measured by differences in women’s legal status.
en’s participation in government as key decisionmakers and as members of parliament varies across the region. Women’s roles and status are structurally determined by state ideology, level and type of economic development, and class location. Moghadam maintains that stability and change in the status of women are shaped by the following structural determinants: the sex/gender system, class, and economic development and state policies that operate within the capitalist world system. Women’s relative lack of economic power is the most important determinant of gender inequalities, including those of marriage, parenthood, and sexuality. Many governments do not take an active interest in improving women’s status and opportunities. Class shapes women’s roles in the sphere of production. A large percentage of urban employed women in the Middle East are found in the services sector or in professional positions. State economic and legal policies shape women’s access to employment and economic resources. Moghadam underscores the government’s role in directing development and its impact on women, and examines shifting state policies in an era of globalization, and their effects on women’s employment and economic status. Modernizing revolutionary states have enacted changes in family law, providing education and employment, and encouraging women’s participation in public life. Moghadam examines the effect of radical reforms and revolutions in the Middle East on the legal status and social positions of women, including variations in family law. Political conflict or war can bring about social change, including change in the economic and political status of women. The implications for women are significant, inasmuch as Islamist movements are preoccupied with questions of cultural identity and authenticity. Moghadam explores the causes, nature, and direction of change in the Middle East, North Africa, and Afghanistan, particularly as these have affected women’s status and social positions. Moghadam draws attention to the potentially revolutionary role of middle-class Middle Eastern women: they demand social and political change, participate in movements, and take sides in ideological battles.  

5. Conclusions

Ottaway contends that overgeneralizations about the conditions of women in the Arab world, their rights, and their empowerment are dangerous. Allam explains that positive examples of Arab women
exist and activities to empower women are underway throughout the Arab world. Blaydes and El Tarouty observe that underprivileged women are a common target for vote-buying schemes. The highly targeted strategies of local political brokers buy the votes of economically underprivileged women. Würth discusses Islamic law, its main sources, and the status of women in Islamic law, notes that it is difficult for women to assert their rights because they have limited access to the judicial system. On Caiacza’s reading, under a system of legalized hatred for women, women are subject to increasing “private” forms of violence. Moghadam shows the changing and variable status of women in the Middle East, emphasizing the factors that best explain the differences in women’s status across the region and over time.

REFERENCES


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