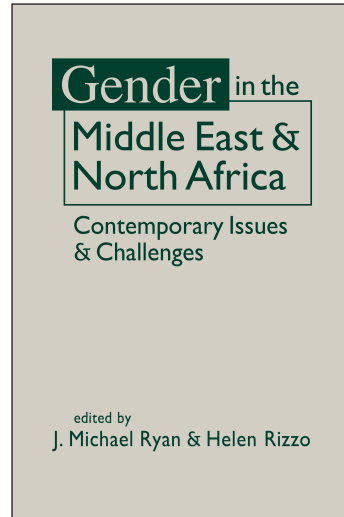


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Gender in the
Middle East and
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Contemporary Issues
and Challenges

edited by
J. Michael Ryan
and Helen Rizzo

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1

Gender in the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa

Helen Rizzo and J. Michael Ryan

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been of increasing interest for many in the fields of sociology, anthropology, political science, and international relations, as well as others in academia and the general public. The near-constant military incursions, challenges to democratization, threat of regional extremist groups (al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS]), rise of regional cities to a level of global prominence (Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha), increased funding for international projects coming from the region (most notably from Qatar), and the increasing presence and “concern” over Muslims in the rest of the world are just a few of the reasons for this.

One area of growing interest has been the field of gender studies. Much of the work in this field, particularly the early work, focused primarily on women. Charrad (2011) found that research on women in the MENA region has grown dramatically since the late 1960s and especially since 2000. The focus on women was justified by two main objectives:

first, to dismantle the stereotype of the silent, passive, subordinate, victimized, and powerless Muslim woman and, second, to challenge the exceptionalism of Islam as a monolithic entity shaping women’s condition in the same way in all places. The urgency of the tasks involved in this endeavor has been heightened by the fact that gender has come to demarcate battle lines in geopolitical struggles since September 11, 2001, and to occupy a central place in the discourse of international relations in regard to the Middle East. (Charrad 2011, 418)

Despite the fact that there are a number of gender-related journals and other academic works addressing this topic and that gender has now become an important subfield in Middle East studies, there is still a lot of work to be done. As globalization, oil dependency, international tourism, political turmoil, and military conflict continue to make the MENA region increasingly interconnected with the rest of the world, changes in how gender is understood in the region are happening at accelerated rates. This makes continuing critical inquiries into this subject of increasing importance.

However, using gender as a framing analysis can be a bit misleading as no single demographic should be considered without an intersectional perspective. One must consider not only gender but also race, class, sexuality, religion, geography, family status, age, able-bodiedness, and a variety of other factors in tandem to find any meaningful answers. Thus, while chapters in this volume foreground gender, none does so at the expense of considering other important demographics as well.

Our goal, therefore, is to bring together a collection of scholarship into a single volume that tackles a variety of issues at the heart of understanding gender in the Middle East and North Africa and that does so on a regional level rather than on the level of individual countries. This is not to say that some issues do not lend themselves to a focus on a particular country, or set of countries, but that the goal of the volume is to provide a regional analysis of the topics presented to the greatest extent possible.

What Is Gender?

Although the answer might seem obvious to many who ask it, we want to take the time to address exactly what we mean by *gender*. Gender is a social system whereby certain social, cultural, political, economic, legal, and other rights, responsibilities, roles, and identities are created, conferred, and enforced. It is a key organizing principle in many societies and, quite arguably, to a greater extent in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa than perhaps in any other region of the world. It is the means by which one is able (or not) to seek employment, get an education, hold political office, and use public space. It is the means by which many are shaped to see the world and the means by which they come to be seen in the world. It is, in short, one of the fundamental notions of how we live our lives, organize our societies, and exist in the world today.

It is important to emphasize several things about the way we are using gender. First, gender is not code for sex. Whereas sex has a more

biological basis—one has a penis or clitoris, XX or XY chromosomes, ovaries or testicles, or something somewhere in between or beyond any of the above—gender has a more social aspect: how we dress, the public and private roles we play, and how we are empowered or policed by a series of ever-changing social regulations. It is true that gender is often tied to sex, but it is not true that they are the same thing. Thus, although this volume will also deal with important elements tied to sex, the focus will be more squarely on the social dimensions of gender.

It is also important to note that we are not using *gender* as code for *only women*. As we noted, earlier there were important reasons for why women were often the focus in early gender studies scholarship. However, new scholarship highlighted in this volume includes the analysis of men, transgender, or other gender options. As noted above, gender is a social system and one that relies on understanding not just women but also men, other gender options, and the interrelationships between them all.

Studying Gender in the MENA Region

The contemporary MENA region is an area ripe for the study of gender. For the purposes of this volume, we define the Middle East and North Africa as including the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Israel, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen. All of the contributions in this volume deal with some subset of these countries depending on the relevance of the countries to their topics. Women's issues in the area have long served as a lightning rod for international discussions including those related to sexual harassment, women driving, burqas and headscarves, female circumcision, and the effects of migration. Many of these issues have served as paradigms of larger philosophical issues related to cultural imperialism versus cultural relativity. The region has also played host to a number of important international conferences and declarations on the rights of women globally, including the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 and the controversial conference on women's rights held in Saudi Arabia in 2012 where not a single woman was present.

In addition to women's issues, men's issues have also increasingly become the focus of discussions related to gender in the region. Historically, men have typically been portrayed as the "bad guys" and perpetrators of sexual violence and female oppression. That focus is beginning to

change, however, as more attention is being paid to the effects of economic inequality on men's roles in society, the effects of violence on men, and the importance of empowering men as agents of change in the battle for gender equality. Rather than simply being seen as unidimensional oppressors, men, and their issues, in the region are now beginning to see attention paid to the complexity of their own lived realities.

The MENA region is also one where "alternative" genders, and those who violate their prescribed gender roles, are heavily frowned upon. Ironically, many Westerners visiting the region often remark on the "unusual" ways that gender plays out in the region—rare mixing of the sexes in social settings, men holding hands as a sign of friendship, and a set of complex rules, often tied to religion, that appear to dictate gender in ways that seem foreign to many not familiar with the customs and traditions of the region. Thus, what qualifies as "alternative" in terms of gender roles is an issue that must be taken as culturally relative but one that still has powerful, almost always negative, effects on those who violate them.

The region is also an area ripe with the possibilities of intersectional analysis of gender—the impact of religion is particularly strong; race is often unacknowledged but highly influential; economic differences, especially as related to attitudes and opportunities, are poignant; issues of (temporary) female empowerment in light of men's migrating away and the global care chain related to women's migrating to the region are pronounced; and the role of women in politics all serve as fruitful areas for understanding how gender intertwines with other demographics.

The Role of the Arab Spring

In the years since the Arab Spring began in late 2010, women's status and movements toward gender equality have faced many challenges despite women's active participation alongside men in protests for economic and social justice and freedom that erupted across the region (Price et al. 2017). The Wilson Center Middle East Program (2016) published the reflections of a panel of country experts on the effects of the Arab Spring for women in the MENA region, but as Fahmia Al-Fotih of Yemen put it, they generally viewed the region as having been thrown into a "miasma of pandemonium and civil unrest." In the worst cases, women have been subjected to injustices common to women in times of war, including displacement, abuses, rape, and poverty, particularly in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. While these three countries are representative of one of the main outcomes of the Arab Spring—"state

failure and civil war”—Hinnebusch (2015, 206) argues that there were two other main outcomes as well: “restoration of a hybrid regime” and “democratic transition,” with Egypt being “iconic” of the former and Tunisia of the latter.

More specifically, as Egypt returns to some stability, women have seen themselves left out of the state-building process. One of the major setbacks women have faced in Egypt since 2011 has been their isolation from the formal political decisionmaking process (Price et al. 2017). In the first parliament after the fall of Mubarak, and following the cancellation of the women’s quota law, women’s representation was a mere 1.5 percent (Hatem 2013), and out of an eighty-five-member constituent assembly tasked with drafting Egypt’s 2012 constitution, only 7 percent were women (Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights 2013). In the one-year period under President Mohamed Morsi (a member of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Political Party), 2012–2013, the Islamist-dominated parliament threatened women’s status with discussions of changing the following laws: lowering the legal age for marriage, repealing the 2000 reforms to the personal status law that made it easier for women to end their marriages, lowering the maternal custody age to seven for boys and ten for girls, and easing restrictions on female genital mutilation. Officials in Morsi’s government also downplayed gender-based violence; their response to mob sexual assaults and rapes at protests was to blame the victims by saying that they took the risk of being violently attacked by participating in dangerous protests (Kato 2017).

However, longtime women’s rights activists and organizations have had successes in fighting back in Egypt, particularly their strong response to parliamentary threats to reverse decades of progress in women’s rights. These efforts influenced the new constitution of 2014, which was drafted by the Committee of Fifty after Morsi was removed from power in July 2013. The Committee of Fifty was more representative than the previous constitution-drafting committee. While the Committee of Fifty only had five women (10 percent of the members), those women were highly vocal and influential leaders in Egyptian society. As a result, the current constitution is the most progressive constitution in Egyptian history with respect to women’s rights (Kato 2017). Moreover, as Bayat (2015) has noted, because of women’s participation in the 2011 uprising, “women’s extraordinary public presence threatened patriarchal sensibilities, and their public harassment produced one of the most genuine movements in the nation’s recent history.” Partly because of this grassroots pressure against harassment and partly in response to a video widely circulated on social media

exposing how a “blonde girl” was openly assaulted by a mob at Cairo University in June 2014 (Thornhill 2014), interim president Adly Mansour issued a decree to criminalize sexual harassment for the first time (Kingsley 2014). But more recently, there has been a severe crackdown on civil society, making mobilization and expressing dissent extremely difficult across the board.

One country that deserves some cautious optimism in terms of women’s status and democratization is Tunisia. Since the start of Tunisia’s Arab Spring uprising in 2010, Tunisia passed a gender parity law in 2011 that requires party lists for national elections to contain an equal number of men and women. As a result, women hold more than 30 percent of the seats in parliament, the highest in Tunisian history, and one of the highest in the region (Mhajne 2018). In 2017, Tunisia passed the Law on Eliminating Violence Against Women, which criminalizes not only physical violence but also economic, sexual, political, and psychological violence. It provides support for survivors to access legal and psychological assistance; contains policies to prevent child labor, public space harassment, and pay discrimination; and criminalizes domestic violence. Also as part of this law, Tunisia became the first in the region to repeal laws that would exonerate the rapist if he married his victim (Mhajne 2018; UN Women 2017). Finally, in late 2017, the Tunisian president repealed a 1973 law prohibiting Tunisian Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men (Mhajne 2018).

In attempts to explain why Tunisia has made greater strides toward democratization and gender equality than other Arab Spring countries, scholars have examined the history of institutionalization of more equal gender relations into the family laws and the long-standing dialogue between opposition groups. According to Mounira Maya Charrad (2014, 4), the Tunisian Code of Personal Status of 1956 was “part and parcel of a larger state building program that aimed at developing a modern centralized state and at marginalizing patriarchal kin-based communities in local areas.” It was a major reform to the family law and is seen by scholars as still one of the most progressive family laws in the Arab world as it abolished polygamy and gave women equal access to divorce as men, with both having to go to court to end a marriage. It launched the era of state feminism in Tunisia until the 1980s when neoliberalism and structural adjustment policies saw the withdrawal of the state from some economic and social welfare activities. This opening saw the emergence of independent women’s organizations and an independent feminist discourse in the 1980s and 1990s alongside state feminism. One of the key issues they focused on was the inability of Tunisian women to pass their citizenship on to their children if they

were married to foreigners. Their great success of this period was the 1993 reform to the Code of Personal Status allowing women to pass on their citizenship to children born abroad regardless of the nationality of the father (Charrad 2014).

Alongside the movements to greater gender equality, steps toward greater democratization began before the 2010–2011 uprising. A key development in the 1980s was that the main Islamist party changed its goal from establishing an Islamic state in Tunisia to supporting the creation of a civil state where public policy and laws would not be based on religion. The party also became more supportive of human rights and gender equality. During this same time period, secular opposition groups became receptive to working with Islamists because of the recognition that they were all being repressed by the regime and that political inclusion would be necessary for a future democratic Tunisia. In 2003 the main opposition groups met in France and agreed that a future democratic government would be based on the sovereignty of the people and that the state would guarantee freedom of belief and expression to all citizens as well as the full equality of men and women. Thus when the 2010–2011 uprising occurred, the opposition parties and long-standing civil society organizations had already established a consensus on what a democratic state would look like post Ben Ali and on the need to continue cross-ideological cooperation, which did not emerge in the Egyptian and Yemeni cases. As a result, when the 2013 Islamist transitional government faced political crisis and popular discontent,¹ it was possible for the various groups to reach an agreement on the way forward that maintained the democratic transition process in Tunisia (Durac 2015).

Just as the Arab Spring had diverse, gendered outcomes in the MENA region, the following chapters tackle the similarities and differences in the contemporary issues and challenges that countries in the region face and how they are addressing these (or not) in terms of gender relations, gendered institutions and structures, and gender inequalities.

The Chapters

In the next chapter, Shereen El Feki and Gary Barker contribute to the relatively recent yet growing literature on men and masculinities in the MENA region. Previously, men were often “invisible” as the dominant group and the unmarked “norm” to which women were compared in gender studies. Studying men as gendered subjects, in other words “men as men,” began more recently, in the 1990s. Case studies from around the world began to see men as marked and masculinities as problematic,

no longer assumed as the taken-for-granted norm. Because of the lack of research on men and masculinities in the MENA region until the early 2000s, there has been and continues to be considerable speculation and negative stereotyping about men in and from this region. As a result of the “othering” of Middle Eastern men, their complex lives have been reduced in the West to being violent extremists and/or sexual predators. It is within this context that El Feki and Barker present their results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey, Middle East and North Africa (IMAGES MENA). This household survey and corresponding qualitative research comprise the largest study of its kind to assess how men in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine see their lives at work and at home—as husbands, fathers, and sons—and the social changes they are currently experiencing. IMAGES MENA complements a growing body of ethnographic research on men and masculinities across the Middle East and North Africa. Together they reveal the complexity of men’s lives, both supporting and refuting stereotypes of patriarchy in public and private life.

In Amina Zarrugh’s chapter, “Gender and Religion,” she examines how the everyday life experiences of women and men in the Middle East and North Africa are shaped by relationships between gender and religion, particularly as they are affected by states and local communities. Experiences throughout one’s life, such as career opportunities, marriage, and citizenship rights, are influenced by a complex intersection of gender and religion that varies across history, political systems, and states. Thus her chapter focuses on the state and local communities because they play important roles in managing, legislating, and enforcing gender norms as well as in shaping understandings of religion’s role in the community. The structure of her chapter begins with a discussion of the demography and diversity in the MENA region and how they affect conceptions of gender and religion. Then she reviews the scholarship on gender and religion in the MENA region and concludes with a discussion of local social movements that address the relationship between gender and religion in the region.

In her chapter, “Marriage and Divorce,” Nadia Sonneveld discusses the important changes that have occurred in marriage and divorce patterns over the past forty years. These include delayed first marriages for both men and women, legal and accessible unilateral no-fault divorce being more available to women, and old and new forms of informal marriage that exist next to formal ones. She argues that while the changes in marriage and divorce patterns in the Middle East and North Africa are not surprising given global trends, what is significant is the different ways they are understood by actors on legal, religious, and

social levels. Her main argument explains why in the Middle East and North Africa the gain from marriage is still high, despite the profound changes in societal, legal, and religious understandings of marriage.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a prevalent problem that crosscuts borders, culture, religion, gender, sexuality, class, and age and is not unique to or absent from the MENA region, though its prevalence rate varies by context. The taboo, shame, and victim-blaming behavior associated with SGBV serves to silence people and prohibits a better understanding of how ubiquitous the problem is and how it is variously expressed across contexts. In her chapter on sexual and gender-based violence, Angie Abdelmonem explores the salient features and issues around SGBV in the MENA region, with attention to how violence affects both women and men, as well as those who identify as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender). The chapter also includes a poignant examination of the patriarchal basis of SGBV, exploring how this has been linked to codes of honor and shame emerging from tribal society but persisting even within urban systems. The issue of culture and cultural relativism as it relates to SGBV is also foregrounded as are examples from various MENA countries to exemplify the scope of violence across these heterogeneous cultural spaces.

Female circumcision, sometimes also called female genital cutting or female genital mutilation, has become one of the most contentious issues in global politicking. More than simply a political issue, it has become a moral crusade, a lightning rod for discussions of ethnocentrism and imperial policy pushing, and a debate whose outcome affects the lives of millions of the world's most vulnerable peoples. J. Michael Ryan tackles this sensitive issue in his chapter, "Female Circumcision." The chapter includes a discussion of the different types of female circumcision and their prevalence, consequences, and potential complications; the debates surrounding the terminology used to refer to this sensitive cultural practice; and the ties, or not, to religious ideologies. Ryan also includes a discussion of various strategies that have been employed to attempt to eradicate female circumcision and the debate surrounding these attempts as either cultural imperialism or excessive moral relativism.

We then have Michaëlle Browers's chapter, "Gender and Politics," in which she argues that many of the struggles for women's equality and greater access to political institutions and power in the region took the form of "state feminism." This was exemplified by the fact that "'revolutions from above' pursued by republican regimes in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Iraq and Syria often contained social welfare provisions that 'offered explicit commitment to public equality for

women' and undertook 'state feminism as a legal, economic and ideological strategy to introduce changes in Egyptian society and its gender relations'" (Hatem 1992, 231). While the state was instrumental in granting women greater access to politics, citizenship rights, education, and the workplace, there were still limitations to this form of feminism. In several countries, state feminism "empowers some women and neglects others," rendering various subgroups (rural, lower class, religious, and/or "traditional" women) "dominated or excluded" (Yacoubi 2016, 260; Hatem 1992). Moreover, gains that were imposed from above were often reversed in times of conflict (e.g., Iraq) or when the state retreated from its commitments to social and economic equality when economic and political liberalization policies began in the 1980s. Women today still face discrimination from the society at large, political parties, and institutions when attempting to gain full access to formal politics such as running for elected political office. However, her chapter ends on a more optimistic note by looking at two forms of youth feminist activism that are trying to break down patriarchal and authoritarian bargains: anti-sexual harassment activism in Egypt and street theater in Tunisia.

Stefanie E. Nanes examines in her chapter, "Gender and Citizenship," the challenges of extending full citizenship rights under non-democratic conditions. At a basic level she argues that "Citizenship delineates membership in a territorially bounded political community. Citizenship defines a relationship between individuals, their political community, and the state. Finally, and most importantly . . . citizenship endows these members with *equal* rights and obligations." More specifically, her focus in this chapter is on women's dispossession of these citizenship rights across the MENA region. Further, she argues that even though implementing citizenship rights under authoritarian conditions is difficult, that does not make these rights any less applicable. The evidence of this comes from the region itself, where the demands of participants of the Green Movement protests in Iran in 2009 and the Arab Spring uprisings that emerged in 2010–2011 as well as the ongoing women's movements in many of these countries fall perfectly in line with demands for full citizenship and gender equality.

In her chapter, "Gender and Development," Islah Jad argues that there is a blurred policy on gender and development in the region. Since the end of what was called "state feminism" in the seventies and the prevailing of structural adjustment policies, the Arab world has been following haphazard policies driven mostly by donor funding and government opportunism in seeking this funding without interest in empowering people or women. Jad also argues that conflict and authoritarian-

ism in the Arab region have put serious limitations on the ability of national mechanisms in the region to effect change in the field of gender and development. The use by national mechanisms of the discourse of “women’s rights” as human rights puts many of these state mechanisms in a precarious situation. It is perceived that advocating for women’s rights through these means, while other political and civic rights are violated, undermines the integrity of these national mechanisms and places doubt on their ability to effect genuine change. The fact that most of these national mechanisms are controlled by a member of the ruling elite leaves little opportunity for them to play a critical or influential role vis-à-vis other governmental policies and practices.

Alexandra Parrs argues in her chapter, “Gender and Migration,” that population movements are factors that affect the meaning of national belonging; ethnic and racial identifications; and political, social, and economic processes. Global mobility is also increasingly becoming a gendered process and, as such, affects gender relations, the gendered division of labor, and gendered institutions like the family. These outcomes are particularly salient in the MENA region where, traditionally, migrants were male laborers who temporarily left their families behind in search of better economic opportunities. Parrs provides a review of different aspects of migration within, from, and to the region, and examines the impact of financial and social remittances as well as the challenges to patriarchal structures brought about by migration within, from, and to that region. She also looks at the state of asylum seeking and refugeeness, specifically for women. By drawing on empirical studies, Parrs highlights recent trends in the area of gender and migration, such as the impact migration has on socialization, education, family formation, and women’s empowerment in general, but also presents more theoretical debates about new practices and meanings created by migratory movements.

In the chapter “Gender and Social Movements,” Anne M. Price and Chelsey Marty tackle the contradiction that even though women in the MENA region have a long and established history of activism, whether mobilizing specifically around women’s issues or by moving into the public sphere to participate in social movements alongside men, their participation was previously overlooked in the academic literature, at least partially due to a Western academic view of women in the region as universally oppressed. Moreover, prior to the Arab Spring uprisings, many scholars believed that social movements as they were defined in the West did not exist in the region. The MENA region was considered by many to be too authoritarian and repressive for movements to form. To refute these claims, their chapter focuses on the following questions: What are the targets of contemporary women’s movements in the region?

How have the Arab Spring uprisings affected women's activism and their ability to successfully mobilize to achieve their goals? For what reasons have women's movements in the MENA region been historically overlooked? Thus, their chapter examines the ways women mobilize in the region, the issues of contention for women, and the ways women are responding to these issues.

Since at least 2009, as protesters in Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Turkey poured into the streets to express dissatisfaction with their governments, the international community has been able to peer into their world via bloggers and citizen journalists whose video clips taken by their mobile phones and transported into Web 2.0 sites that are interactive and collaborative, such as blogs, social media, and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), have become a source of news. Elham Gheytanchi and Valentine M. Moghadam explore this fascinating issue in their chapter, "The New Media Activism." They examine women's media activism in the region's social upheavals, with a focus on four country cases: Iran's Green Movement protests and its feminist movement; the 2011 political revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and women's campaigns since then; and the gradualist movement in Morocco for women's rights and democratization. This timely chapter shows that women's cyberactivism, their citizen journalism, and their self-organization both contribute to and reflect the social and political changes that have occurred in the region.

Note

1. One of the controversies came from the first draft of the 2012 constitution that had the phrasing, "women as complementary to men in family life," which was later removed because of pressure from activists who saw it as a threat to women's rights and gender equality. The ratified 2014 constitution explicitly guarantees gender equality and equal rights for women and men.