

# ISSUE BRIEF **07.17.15**

## **Working Those Connections: Exploring Arab Women's Differential Access to Opportunity in the Middle East and North Africa**

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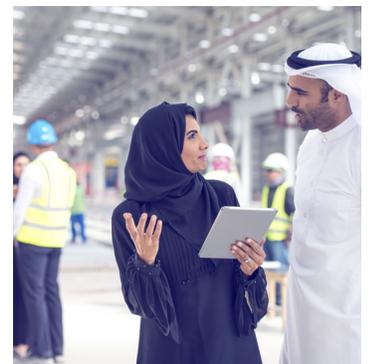
### **INTRODUCTION**

Marwa Shalaby, Ph.D., has highlighted the importance of providing women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with economic opportunities as a way to enhance their political influence.<sup>1</sup> Despite enviable increases in educational attainment, women have not really seen their achievements translate into meaningful economic participation and access, with MENA countries reporting some of the lowest female labor participation rates in the world at 25.2 percent.

Shalaby cites the importance of the World Development Report's definition of gender equality as a useful benchmark for assessing progress in terms of facilitating women's agency: "the accumulation of endowments (education, health, physical assets); the use of those endowments to take up economic opportunities and generate incomes; and the application of those endowments to take actions, or agency, affecting individual and household well-being."<sup>2</sup> While she identified that women have indeed made progress in accumulating some of these "necessary endowments," there is one form of social capital integral to their ability to exercise full political, economic, and social agency in the MENA that women may fare less well in accumulating: *wasta*.

*Wasta* has variously been defined as a "special influence by members of the same group or tribe"<sup>3</sup> or "mediation and intercession"<sup>4</sup> on the part of a specific individual or community. In Arabic, the term, according to Barnett et al.,<sup>5</sup> captures "an implicit social contract, typically within a tribal group, which obliges those within the group to provide assistance (favorable treatment) to others within that group." Today, *wasta* is the most commonly used of this "intercessory" type<sup>6</sup> and is often compared to the notion of *quanxi* in China.<sup>7</sup>

Possessing *wasta* allows individuals in positions of power the opportunity to grant assistance when requested, while others use *wasta* to streamline bureaucratic processes and gain access more easily to employment, relevant legal documentation (e.g., driver's and business licenses, identity cards, passports, etc.), and even university admission.<sup>8</sup> In the political realm, *wasta* affords easier access to government contracts and helps navigate arcane and oftentimes arbitrary government institutions and rules. Importantly, *wasta* is not perceived as corruption across MENA societies and is not criminalized in the same way as in Western countries.<sup>9</sup>



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## WASTA USE IN THE MENA

Considering the pervasiveness of *wasta* in Arab life, a fundamental question arises: Do women and men have differential access to *wasta*? Similarly, what kind of differences in possessing and pursuing *wasta* might emerge across genders? Scholarship on whether the usage of *wasta* is gendered is very limited. However, most research connects it to tribal intermediary practices. The generally conservative tribal attitudes toward women may have a lasting impact in how both men and women navigate and interpret modernity through the institution of *wasta*.<sup>10</sup>

In a preliminary examination of these questions, we use the first wave of the Arab Barometer Survey, conducted from 2006 to 2007 across Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestine. The survey posed two questions about *wasta*: (1) During the past five years, have you ever used *wasta* to achieve something personal or family-related, or to resolve a neighborhood problem? and (2) Please list the type of *wasta*.

Figure 1 reveals striking differences across the six countries surveyed in terms of the proportion of men and women who reported using *wasta* in the previous five years. Algeria, Morocco, and Lebanon all demonstrate relatively similar levels of *wasta* usage across the genders, although the overall usage rates vary across the three countries. In Jordan, Palestine, and Yemen, by contrast, men and women exhibit dramatic differences in *wasta* usage. In Yemen, for example, 46 percent of men reported having used *wasta*, compared to only 29.05 percent of women. We initially suspect this may be partially due to the fact that Morocco and Lebanon, if not Algeria, also have more women in the labor force, affording them more opportunity to use *wasta*. In 2007, women made up 28.5 percent of the total labor force in Morocco and 23.5 percent in Lebanon, but only 14.5 percent in Algeria. They made up approximately 17 percent of the labor force in Jordan and Palestine, as well as a staggering 25 percent in Yemen.<sup>11</sup> Yet the reverse could also be true: that *wasta* allows privileged women more access to the labor force to begin with. The story is further complicated when we consider how *wasta* usage differs across men and women in terms of demographic characteristics.

Across all countries, we do not observe large differences in *wasta* usage by marital status. This is somewhat surprising considering that previous research in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries showed women claiming they tended to rely on *wasta* through their spouses and effectively only had indirect access to it as a form of social capital.<sup>12</sup>

In most countries, with the exception of Lebanon, *wasta* usage seems to be higher among older generations. Yemen has a disproportionate amount of over-65 male individuals reported using *wasta* and more people across the age spectrum use *wasta* in general. In Jordan, roughly similar levels of *wasta* usage appear across the age groups of both genders, but among women reliance on *wasta* appears to increase gradually with age. We also see similar patterns in Algeria and Palestine.

FIGURE 1 — USE OF WASTA IN THE MENA BY GENDER

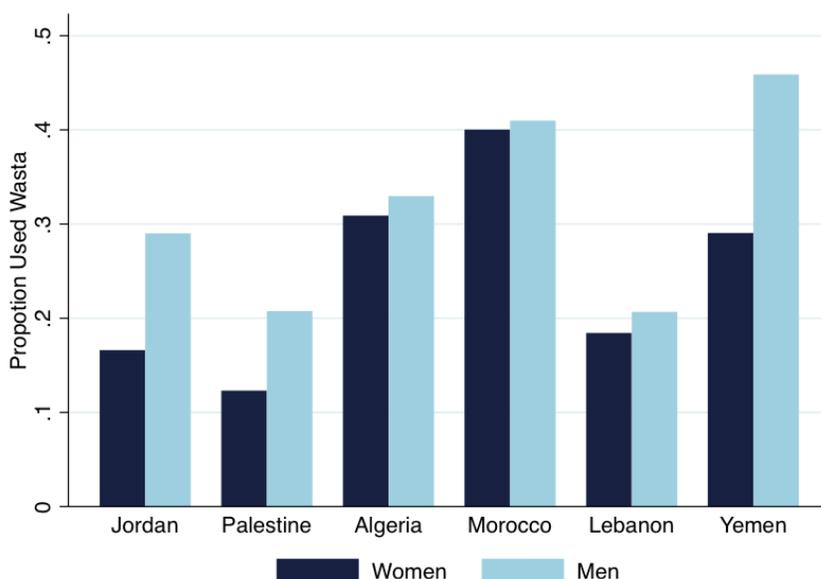
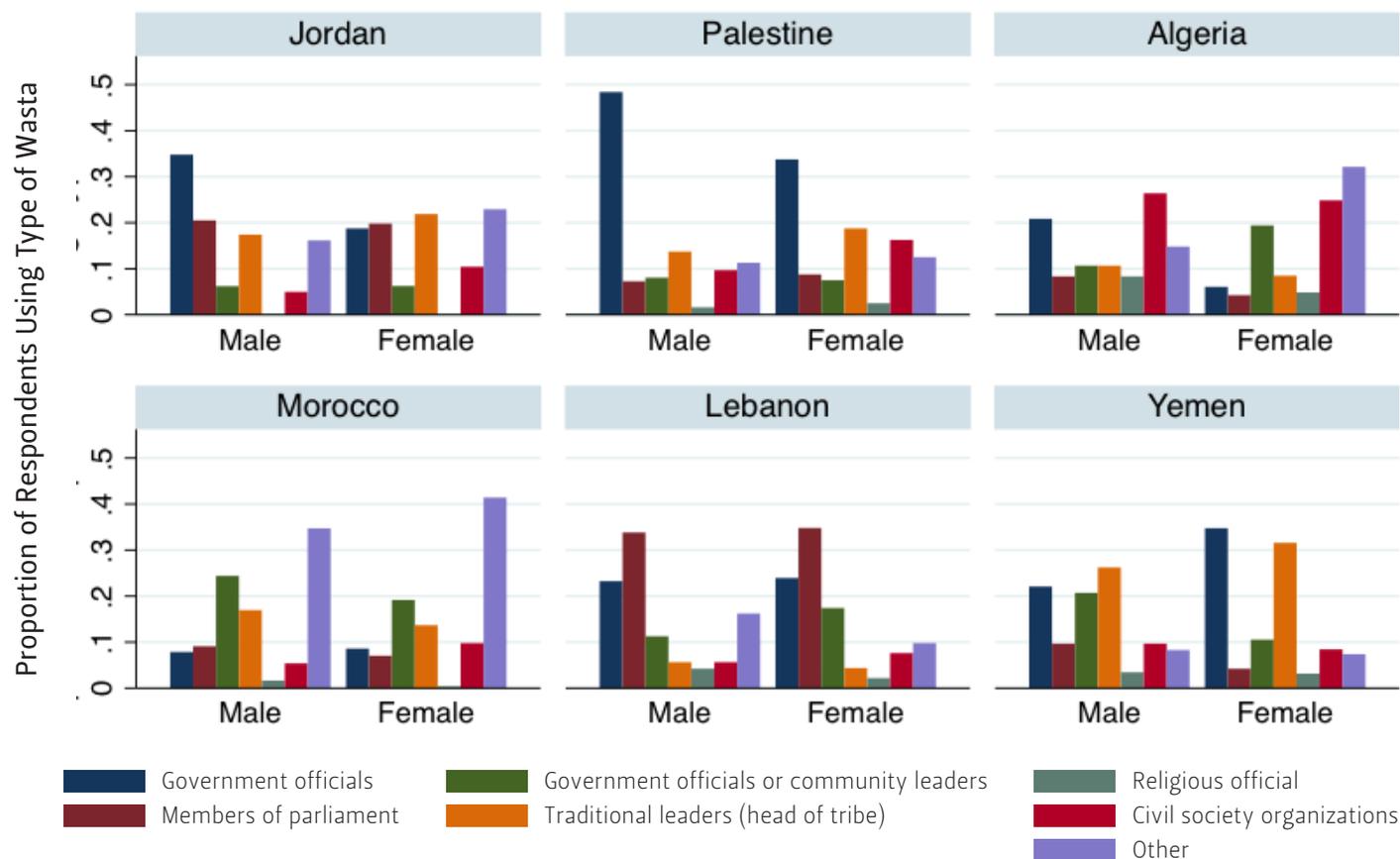


FIGURE 2 — WASTA TYPES USED BY GENDER AND COUNTRY



In terms of education, the most sizable outlier is Yemen, with men with primary school education reporting very high levels of *wasta* use and the usage across education levels varying substantially—more so than in other cases where education level does not seem to make as much of a difference, except perhaps in the case of highly educated men in Palestine. We also observe better-educated women—those with at least a high school diploma—in Yemen disproportionately using *wasta*. A similar trend appears in Jordan, but among women: those with at least some post-secondary education (diploma, B.A., M.A., Ph.D.) tended to use *wasta* more.

Although there do not appear to be clear patterns between gender and the use of *wasta* across key demographic characteristics, we do observe interesting variation both across gender and across countries in the type of *wasta* commonly

used. This can be seen from Figure 2, which presents the type of *wasta* used among those respondents who reported using it in the last five years by gender and by country. In terms of the types of *wasta*, there seems to be a greater pattern of relying on government officials, traditional leaders, and government leaders, as well as sources classified as “other” across both genders. Neither gender turns to religious leaders for *wasta*. Algeria shows a surprising reliance on civil society organization by both men and women, while the Lebanese tend to turn to members of parliament (MPs). Interestingly, in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Morocco, roughly the same number of men and women reported using MPs for *wasta*. The extent of use, however, varied across the countries from a high of 34 percent turning to MPs in Lebanon to less than 10 percent in Palestine and Morocco.

**In Jordan, Palestine, and Yemen, by contrast, men and women exhibit dramatic differences in *wasta* usage.**

We also observe big differences across the genders in their reliance on other types of government officials for *wasta* in Jordan (34.78 percent for men and 18.75 percent for women), Palestine (43.39 percent for men and 33.75 percent for women), Algeria (20.83 percent for men and 6.06 percent for women) and Yemen (22.07 for men and 34.74 for women). In Lebanon and Morocco, we note both men and women display equal usage rates for government officials. More generally, in these two countries we encounter small differences across gender for the type of *wasta* used. Only in Yemen did women report relying on government officials at a much higher rate than did men. The proportion of Yemeni men, however, that reported using MPs (9.66 percent) and governorate officials or community leaders (20.69 percent) was twice as high as that for women (4.21 percent and 10.53 percent, respectively).

In Jordan, Palestine and Yemen, a higher proportion of women used traditional leaders, such as the head of a tribe, as their primary *wasta* intermediary than did men. Mounira Charrad states patrilineal kinship networks tend to privilege men and seniors to women and youth, so it is perhaps surprising we observe women relying on them to a greater extent in these countries.<sup>13</sup> It may be that women also have limited access to official networks in the public sphere and thus only have access to localized and/or informal networks. Per Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, “The private space is culturally associated with powerless people (women and children) and is subordinated to the public space, which is culturally associated with men—who dictate the law, lead business, manage the state, and control the economy, both national and domestic.”<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, in the three countries where women’s participation in the formal labor force and political sphere is lower, women also tend to rely on more informal networks to wield influence. Even in Algeria, where women enjoy higher levels of political representation (32 percent of the National Assembly is female), women use local leaders at twice the rate of men, while men rely on *wasta* channeled through the central government. In all

countries, more women than men reported civil society organization (NGOs) as a type of *wasta* used, which further aligns with the notion that women may have to choose informal, private channels to seize opportunity more so than men.

## LOOKING AHEAD

What does this all mean? It seems to signify that the gendered nature of *wasta* certainly varies across contexts. Surprisingly, men and women do not differ substantially in *wasta* usage across basic demographic characteristics such as age, education, and marital status overall. More of the interesting variation in *wasta* usage and demographics is perhaps found across countries than across genders. Women and men do, however, differ in terms of the reported usage, specifically in Jordan, Palestine, and Yemen, and the types of *wasta* used.

Despite differential access and use, both men and women display similar attitudes on the importance of *wasta* in obtaining government jobs relative to a person’s experience and qualifications. In management literature, scholars have found that *wasta* continues to be important in employment opportunities, career advancement, and in many cases, more important than experience and qualifications. As stated by Tlaiss and Kauser, “The bottom line remains that the use of *wasta* in Middle Eastern organizations is a critical component for the career success of managers.”<sup>15</sup>

A small number of research projects focusing on Jordan and the countries of the GCC have attempted to disentangle some of the gendered legacy of *wasta* in the public domain. Focus group interviews conducted in 2012 with Emirati women attending university revealed they felt that they had limited access to *wasta*.<sup>16</sup> All women agreed that what little *wasta* they possessed, ran through their fathers or future husbands. A study conducted in 2015 with female managers from Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates yielded similar results. Focus group participants argued that *wasta* was the key determinant

in their employment opportunities.<sup>17</sup> As one Qatari female participant in the same study explained, “You need the necessary education, experience and skills but they do not guarantee you a good position, you also need advocates.” On the whole, the research that specifically targeted women reflected that they usually did not see themselves as possessing *wasta* per se, but rather needed men to “broker their access to desired resources.”<sup>18</sup>

*Wasta* is not only important for employment opportunities and career advancement. It is also a key part of serving as an MP in most Arab legislatures. As showcased in the research of Stephanie Nanes the ability to engage in public service provision is the gold standard of politics and political influence in the MENA even for women.<sup>19</sup> This talent was duly rewarded across both genders in Jordan. Falaak Jamani, a Jordanian woman directly elected (not through the gender quota) to the Jordanian Lower House was particularly adept at taking care of her constituents, helping build a new school or hospital, or ensuring someone’s education was paid for or unemployed status readily resolved—effectively, using her *wasta*. She won her first mandate for the district of Karak in 2003 and was later re-elected in a landslide victory in 2007. Integral to her skill was her status as a General in the military’s health division and an ability to place people in jobs across both the military and health sector. Jamani had the support of her tribe and was even invited to a sitting of the all-male tribal *diwan* as a full-fledged member and contributor.

The next line of research should explore whether the outcomes of *wasta* usage are qualitatively different for men and women. Investigating this important topic allows scholars of the MENA purchase on the types of social capital accessible to women and whether these translate into sociopolitical and economic influence over time. It may not be an accident that the two countries in which women report levels of *wasta* usage equal to men (Algeria and Morocco), also happen to be states that have the most women in formal political positions, with 17 percent and 32 percent

of legislators female in the Moroccan and Algerian parliaments today.<sup>20</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Marwa Shalaby, “The Paradox of Female Economic Participation in the Middle East and North Africa,” March 7, 2014, Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.

2. World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2012* (Washington: World Bank, 2012), 4, <http://data.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/wdi-regional-highlights2012-web.pdf>.

3. A. Barnett, B. Yandle, and G. Naufal, “Regulation, trust, and cronyism in Middle Eastern societies: The simple economics of “wasta,” *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 44 (2013): 41–46.

4. R.B. Cunningham, Y.K. Sarayrah, and K. Yasin, “Taming *wasta* to achieve development,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 16 (1994): 29–41.

5. Barnett et al., “Regulation, trust and cronyism.”

6. Al-Ramahi notes, “*Wasta* has been an institutional part of Jordanian society since its creation. Its tribal origins centered on an intermediary role that is associated with prevention of retaliation in inter-personal or inter-group conflict. However, *wasta* has evolved from conflict resolution as a means of survival to intercession to maintain one’s place of honour within contemporary Jordan.” See Al Ramahi, *Arab Law Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2008): 35–62. Also see Cunningham and Sarayrah, “Taming *wasta*,” 29.

7. K. Hutchings and D. Weir, “Understanding networking in China and the Arab World: Lessons for International Managers,” *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 30 no. 4 (2006): 272–290.

8. Barnett et al., “Regulation, Trust and Cronyism,” 41.

9. Barnett et al., “Regulation, Trust and Cronyism,” 6.

10. M. Charrad, “Gender in the Middle East: Islam, State, Agency,” *The Annual Review of Sociology* 37 (2011): 417–37.

11. World Bank Development Indicators, 2007.

***Wasta* is not only important for employment opportunities and career advancement. It is also a key part of serving as representative in most Arab legislatures.**

12. See D. Bailey, "Women and *Wasta*: The Use of Focus Groups for Understanding Social Capital and Middle Eastern Women," *The Qualitative Report* 12 (2012): 1–18; I. Abdalla, "Being and Becoming a Leader: Arabian Gulf Women Managers' Perspectives," *International Journal of Business and Management* 10, no. 1 (2015): 25–39. See also B.D. Metcalfe, "Exploring Cultural Dimensions of Gender and Management in the Middle East," *Thunderbird International Business Review* 48 (1): 93–107.
13. Charrad, "Gender in the Middle East."
14. F. Sadiqi and M. Ennaji, "The feminization of public space: women's activism, the family law, and social change in Morocco," *JMEWS: Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2, no. 2 (2006): 86–114.
15. H. Tlaiss and S. Kauser, "The importance of *wasta* in the career success of Middle Eastern managers," *Journal of European Industrial Training* 35, no. 5 (2011): 467–486.
16. Bailey, "Women and *wasta*."
17. Abdalla, "Being and becoming a leader."
18. Bailey, "Women and *wasta*," 9.
19. S. Nanes, "Regime Stability in the Face of Global Economic Crisis: Cosmetic Reform and a Municipal Quota for Women," Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2010, Washington, D.C.
20. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015. [com.br/site.aspx/Braskem-Perfil-MEX](http://com.br/site.aspx/Braskem-Perfil-MEX).

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## WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST