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**CONFERENCE REPORT:  
THE EVOLVING ROLES OF WOMEN  
IN THE ARAB WORLD**





JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
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**The Evolving Roles of Women in Arab World**

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## Abstract

Although women were at the forefront of the Arab uprisings, the outcome of their efforts remains uncertain. In order to better evaluate the status of women in the Arab world following the Arab Awakening, the Women and Human Rights in the Middle East Program of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, supported by the Kelly Day Endowment on the Status of Women and Human Rights in the Middle East, hosted a conference on April 24, 2014, titled "The Evolving Roles of Women in the Arab World." Acknowledging the fact that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are undergoing a major transformation not only on the political level but also on the societal and ideological levels, the goal of the conference was to shed light on women's rights in transitional MENA in the political, economic, and private realms.

The conference featured leading regional and international scholars on women in the Arab world with expertise in political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, religious law, and history. The studies presented at the conference were conducted in 12 different countries of the Middle East and North Africa and covered topics ranging from domestic violence to citizenship. Each of the participants produced papers showcasing new research and provided policy recommendations for promoting women's rights in the region.

*“It is far too early, of course, for any of us to say exactly how these events will ultimately unfold, but one thing is very certain—the Middle East, more than ever, will be in need of individuals committed to the cause of human development in all of its forms.”*

*James A. Baker, III, June 9, 2011.*

## I. Introduction

“The most recent events of the Arab Awakening cast a spotlight on human rights and political freedoms in the region, and in particular those of women,” stated Marwa Shalaby, Ph.D., postdoctoral fellow and director of the Baker Institute Women and Human Rights in the Middle East Program in opening address at the conference. The theme of the conference, “The Evolving Roles of Women in the Arab World,” was meant not only to address the shift in women’s participation in society as a result of the uprisings, but also to reveal the continued evolution of societal dynamics long after protestors left the streets. Undoubtedly, at the heart of the Arab Awakening was a clear, unified demand for equal citizenship and basic human rights, including women’s rights and freedoms. “Following decades of social and political marginalization, women were determined to create a legitimate public sphere to voice their grievances and to play an active role in the political arena in their countries,” Shalaby said.

The Arab Awakening provided the rare opportunity for citizens to shape and restructure the political and social fabric of their country. Women across the region raised their voices in the streets and on social media in unprecedented numbers to be agents of change and to fight for their own freedoms. “Over the course of the transition, women also demonstrated deep commitment to the democratic processes and to the realization of the revolutionary ideals in their countries,” Shalaby said. “But the effort, sacrifice, and courage of these women have not yet guaranteed substantive improvement of their status or significant protection of their rights.”

Shalaby drew attention to the fact that significant challenges remain for women in countries shaken by conflict, as well as in nations attempting to rebuild. She argued that women’s engagement at all levels of society is a prerequisite for stability and growth in the region in the coming years, and must be a priority for policymakers within and outside of the MENA. A stable, democratic, and prosperous Middle East and North Africa is not even conceivable unless

women attain their basic rights as well as political and civil freedoms. Despite this uncertainty, she was optimistic about the political involvement of women during and after the Arab Awakening, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia.

Shalaby stressed that the primary intent of the conference was to foster discussion of women's issues in the MENA region. "The discussions today, led by leading scholars and policymakers in the field, will investigate a wide variety of topics affecting the lives of women across the region such as citizenship, domestic violence, family law, employment, feminism, and politics," she said. "Today's papers represent contributions from Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, and Yemen. We hope to present not only valuable theoretical frameworks with which to study women in the region, but also to provide current, on-the-ground research about women's experiences."

## **II. Islamic Law and Gender Equality**

The conference opened with a panel focusing on issues of egalitarianism and the impact of Islamic law on women's status across the MENA region. As stated by Jordanian lawyer and human rights activist Asma Khadar in her seminal work, "Family law is the key to the gate of freedom and human rights for women." Family laws in the Middle East govern not only women's lives in the public sphere, but in the private sphere as well. The panelists engaged in a discussion on Islamic family law from political science, theological, and historical perspectives.

The first panelist, Gail Buttorff, Ph.D., of the Department of Political Science at the University of Kansas, presented her paper co-authored with Rahma Abdulkadir, Ph.D., of New York University Abu Dhabi, titled "Barriers to Gender Equality: A Comparative Analysis of Morocco and Egypt." The authors argue that despite the fact that family laws have been reformed over the past several decades toward a more egalitarian framework for women, parity has not yet been reached. Buttorff and Abdulkadir's study asks why Muslim-majority countries, and in particular Arab Muslim-majority countries, were slow to enact gender equality measures. "Islamic culture

in particular may not be a major impediment to achieving women's rights, but something about Arab states is," said Buttorff, referring to Donno and Russet's 2004 study<sup>1</sup>.

In order to isolate the effects of the "Arab" variable on attitudes about gender equality, Buttorff focused on empirically testing patriarchal kin-based values, a theoretical framework presented in the works of Mounira Charrad,<sup>2</sup> Ph.D., using survey data analysis. Buttorff argues in her paper that the theory of patriarchal kin-based values may influence individuals' attitudes toward gender equality and hamper the introduction—and implementation—of more equitable family laws, and therefore the transition into a more egalitarian gender environment.

The project analyzed more than 9,000 observations from the World Values Survey over two waves of data collection from both Egypt and Morocco. The main statements that Buttorff employed to test gender equality attitudes included the preference of male political leaders over female political leaders, the greater importance of men's university education over women's, and whether men have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce. Respondents in both countries were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with these specific statements. During the time span between the two waves of data collection for the World Values Survey, Egypt shifted toward a more inequitable attitude regarding women, while Morocco displayed a decrease in the number of people with non-egalitarian attitudes.

Those respondents that were housewives, self-employed, or unemployed were less likely to have gender egalitarian values, which would suggest that women's inclusion in the workforce improves the attitudes toward women's rights overall. Those who stated that being a housewife was a fulfilling role were more likely to agree that men had more right to a university education and jobs. Interestingly, the religiosity of the individual did not have an effect on attitudes toward gender equality, a finding that was discussed in-depth in the question-and-answer session at the conference. "It's not saying that religion is not important in the reforms or in people's lives, but that it's not a barrier to gender equality or attitudes towards gender equality," Buttorff concluded.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniela Donno and Bruce Russett, "Islam, Authoritarianism, and Female Empowerment: What are the Linkages?" *World Politics* 56, no. 4 (July 2004): 582-607, [https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/world\\_politics/v056/56.4donno.pdf](https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/world_politics/v056/56.4donno.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Mounira Charrad, "Family Reforms in the Arab World: Tunisia and Morocco," (report for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development Expert Group Meeting, New York, May 15, 2012), <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm12/PAPER-CHARRAD.pdf>.

In the second presentation, Amira Sonbol, Ph.D., professor of history at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service Qatar, discussed her paper “Contextualizing Legal Change: Addressing Normative Paradigms and the Constraints on Equal Rights for Women in the Arab World.” According to Sonbol, dominant paradigms perceive women as secluded and confined to private spheres in the past, though the lived realities of women, as evidenced by court proceedings, show women as significantly more engaged and present in the public realm. Historical precedents, particularly those set closer to the time of the Prophet (570-632 AD), are often highly valued and seen as traditions that should be upheld. These misunderstandings of historical values and realities can impede legal and social progress with regard to family dynamics and rights for women.

Sonbol chose to take a closer historical look at women’s economic activity, a topic that attracted much attention throughout the conference. Based on her historical analysis of legal proceedings, women were economically active and played critical roles in their communities. In the literature, Sonbol finds examples of women working as weavers, midwives, and peddlers who sold clothes, cosmetics, and other household goods. Court proceedings show records of women initiating labor disputes and other litigation on behalf of their businesses. Furthermore, women of all socioeconomic classes are recorded to have invested their money into religious endowments to support and bolster their communities.

Modern Islamic jurisprudence does not ideologically match its medieval predecessor, but rather diverges significantly in the way it deals with the subject of women and women’s duties. In medieval jurisprudence, women were discussed as individuals. In contrast, modern jurisprudence has inextricably linked women to the rest of their family, thereby making her personal actions reflect upon the family as a larger whole. This refocus on family can be seen in the present day from the most liberal to the most conservative scholars and jurists. The modern state created a social framework through legal codification that established men as the legal protectors of the family and making them responsible for disciplining their dependents. The protections that it suggests women require is based on biological differences, i.e., that women are the weaker sex and therefore should be cared for and maintained by their stronger and more able male

counterparts. Interestingly, medieval jurisprudence does not emphasize this biological distinction.

The normative understanding dichotomizes modern from pre-modern by categorizing modern as an innovation and pre-modern as Islamic. Therefore, it is difficult to alter laws given the corollary that altering or improving women's rights is seen as a direct challenge to Islam, even when the lived realities of women in that time were more egalitarian. Sonbol argues that this discourse must be dismantled in order to be historically accurate and pave the way for more egalitarian legislation concerning women's rights.

Ayesha Chaudhry, Ph.D., of the University of British Columbia followed with a paper investigating domestic violence regulations in the United Arab Emirates. The convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the U.N. General Assembly, has been ratified by 20 Muslim-majority countries, but with different reservations. These reservations are often based on the premise that the convention's provisions are incompatible with Sharia' or Islamic law. Chaudhry aimed to highlight in her research whether these reservations to the CEDAW were in line with Sharia' law when it came to domestic violence, not only in UAE, but also in other parts of the region.

The United Arab Emirates has not yet fully criminalized domestic violence despite the fact that rates of domestic violence have tripled over the past three years in one of the UAE's largest cities—Abu Dhabi. Although the UAE ratified the CEDAW, it did so with reservations to article 16 stating, "The United Arab Emirates will abide by the provisions of this article insofar as they are not in conflict with the principles of the Sharia'." The reservation went on to explain that husbands are obligated to pay a dowry and support women after a divorce and that he has the right to divorce, whereas a woman's right to divorce is conditional upon a judicial decision—a decision that Chaudhry characterizes as "asymmetrical rights to divorce" that treat women unfairly.

According to Chaudhry, verse 4:34 of the Qur'an directly addresses the status of women in relation to men.. Verse 4:34 can be particularly controversial because it is often interpreted to encourage a man to beat his wife if she does not agree with him. Chaudhry stresses that these

accepted interpretations are highly problematic due to the polyvalent nature of the Arabic language. Chaudhry argues that these religious arguments against the rights of women must be systematically challenged on religious grounds.

“It appears that religious reasoning is a central obstacle to eliminating decriminalization against women and criminalizing domestic violence in the UAE,” Chaudhry said. By suggesting a more egalitarian understanding of verse 4:34 on the basis of historical context and linguistic reinterpretation, Chaudhry aims to offer a means to embrace Islamic values and edicts while still protecting women’s rights across the region. These new changes, in order to be accepted by the religious community, must create a sense of continuity with Islamic, legal, and theological tradition.

### **III. Agency and Women’s Empowerment**

The second panel of the day addressed women’s empowerment and action on the political, economic, and societal levels. Traditional views of women, particularly originating from the West, categorize Muslim women as inactive and oppressed within their societies. The reality, however, as investigated by the three panelists, paints an entirely different picture of activism and engagement.

The first speaker on the panel was Bozena Welborne, Ph.D., assistant professor of government at Smith College, whose presentation addressed the structure and consequences of women’s political participation in the Middle East. Today, there is an opportunity for women to participate in the political process in all of the Arab states, be it through elections, appointments, or voter participation. “There’s been a huge shift in terms of women being represented across the various assemblies in the Middle East and North Africa,” Welborne said. Between 2000 and 2011 the average representation of women in these political bodies rose from 3 percent to 14 percent.

Welborne’s study focused on Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco. These countries were selected because of the many similarities between their monarchies, and especially because of their relatively high ranking on women’s empowerment and equality measures, she said. For all three countries, women were represented in the lower, upper, and municipal levels of the government,

and in some cases, their percentage of representation far exceeded that of women in the United States.

For Welborne, what distinguished Morocco from the other two countries was the autonomy of its women's rights groups. The women's groups in Jordan and Bahrain, in contrast, are what Welborne defined as GONGOs, or government organized non-governmental organizations, meaning that the government has a heavy hand both in financing the organization, and in determining its initiatives. In some cases, a nation's push for women's rights is a top-down response to international pressure, not a popular movement from the people themselves. Welborne emphasized the critical importance of women's grassroots organizations in guaranteeing representation and rights.

The next speaker, Alessandra Gonzalez, Ph.D., post-doctoral research associate for the James Madison Program at Princeton University, provided conference attendees with a clearer picture of the value of women's grassroots organizations in one Gulf monarch—Kuwait—and what women desire from the political process. Gonzalez's fieldwork, conducted in Kuwait in 2007 and 2008, included survey data from Kuwaiti elites and college students, and represented an interesting time in Kuwait's history because of the development of women's political voice during that time. Although women gained the right to vote and run for office in 2005, they did not successfully win a seat in parliament until 2009.

"Like many Americans, I was curious to know if there was some idiosyncrasy for why women in a majority Muslim country were given their right to vote so late in modern history," Gonzalez explained. "Often, this lag in rights is attributed to Islam, or its misinterpretation by modern politicians and lawmakers." However, Gonzalez argued that Islamic feminism, or the fight for women's rights within the framework of Islam, does exist in Kuwait, and that it is distinct from the American or Western brand of feminism in that it values some elements of traditional gender roles established by Islam.

In addition to the discovery that feminism in Kuwait differed from feminism in the West, four major trends emerged in Gonzalez's research. According to her research, many women were

voting for Islamic political parties, even though some of these parties did not support the full protection of women's rights. Overall, religiosity in both the private and public spheres has become quite popular in the region. Gonzalez noted that veiled women are becoming increasingly present and successful in the public sphere, and that young people fuse elements of modernity and tradition in their lives.

According to Gonzalez, perhaps the most important finding is that many men support women's political and social activism. Although there had been some resistance to a woman's right to vote and run for office when a new election law passed in 2005, "after women were given the right to vote, you found even the most conservative, Salafist Islamist justifying why his political agenda would benefit women," she said. Indeed, women's political engagement is seen as an asset for many Islamic or Islamist groups, as the majority of women support candidates who show a strong commitment to traditional family values. Although a woman's right to vote was instituted from the top-down, Gonzalez's survey work and interviews indicate that the decision has led to positive, changing attitudes on the ground toward women's political representation.

Transitioning from the topic of political and social rights and aspirations, the final panelist, Lindsay Benstead, Ph.D., assistant professor of political science at Portland State University, presented her research on the impact of women's participation in the labor force on women's rights in the region. Globally, the rate of women in the labor force is the lowest in the MENA region at only 26 percent, compared to an average of 54 percent in other regions. Benstead aimed to determine the social barriers to women's entrance and equal treatment in the labor force. Using Arab Barometer data and her own fieldwork, Benstead investigated the attitudes and characteristics that led to a more egalitarian approach toward women in the workplace. "Could some of these factors be things that we can control as policymakers," wondered Benstead. "Are there things that we can do in order to try and reduce some of the barriers to women's labor force participation?"

Previous research has offered three possible frameworks to explain the lack of egalitarian attitudes in the region. The first is a cultural framework, which reflects some of the ideas that both Gonzalez and Buttorff presented—i.e., that there is something inherent in Islam or Arab culture that limits egalitarianism. The tremendous variation of women's labor force participation

and legal codes in the region “makes it very hard to argue in a persuasive way that culture can explain certainly all, if not much, of the variation,” Benstead said. The second framework is modernization theory, which states that those who are more modern will demand egalitarianism and democracy. The final model is the women’s employment model, or the idea that exposure to women’s employment changes attitudes about issues of equality in the workplace.

According to her analysis, cultural and religious factors were important predictors for egalitarian attitudes such as whether a person was more secular or supported Sharia’ law, or belonged to a certain religious sect. However, the level of a person’s religiosity, as measured by frequency of prayer, had no impact on egalitarian values. Women overall were more egalitarian compared to their male counterparts. There was also strong support for modernization theory, as it was evident that those with a higher income and education, and that follow the news media held more egalitarian values.

As for the women’s employment model, those male respondents whose wives were employed did have more egalitarian values than those whose wives were unemployed. Additionally, women who were employed were more likely to support women’s employment and equal pay for equal work. In closing, Benstead argued that employment, both theoretically and empirically, plays a part in promoting women’s political participation and in shaping attitudes about gender equality, and that supporting employment will strengthen civil society.

#### **IV. Societal Change Post-Arab Spring**

The final panel of the conference presented a multidisciplinary investigation of societal change and political engagement after the Arab Awakening. The first panelist, Dina Kiwan, Ph.D., associate professor of sociology at the American University in Beirut, presented her work on Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian women in Lebanon. Citizenship for the Palestinian refugee community has been an issue of critical importance for decades, and has most recently revealed itself as a challenge for the four million Syrian refugees in the region. Remarkably, 78 percent of this refugee community is composed of women and children. Kiwan urged us to consider the

political presence and action of these women and whether or not this action constitutes citizenship.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency are two international organizations that have worked to assist the refugee communities in Lebanon. As a result of shortsighted and restrictive immigration laws, many Syrian-Palestinian refugees are living in Lebanon illegally, and therefore finding support or protection can be even more difficult. “With regard to women refugees, what one sees in the UN documentation is a narrative about rescue and compassion,” Kiwan said. “There is an emphasis on victimhood and vulnerability.” While these attitudes are necessary and appropriate, a discourse of victimization decontextualizes and depoliticizes the refugee community. Kiwan urges the scholarly community to redefine the discourse on refugee populations. Rather than focusing solely on vulnerability, there needs to be a more holistic approach that reflects the resilience, adaptability, and self-reliance of these populations, and women in particular, she said.

Wanda Krause, Ph.D., former assistant professor of Gulf studies at Qatar University, presented next on the topic of feminine politics. With the region undergoing significant changes, Krause argued that the success of the coming phase in each nation depends on its ability to provide for the well-being and security of their citizens. Meeting the basic needs of the people must go beyond state politics and involve civil society, the private sphere, and economics. “We must include the economic when poverty is the reality that women are facing,” Krause said. “Women find greater mobility through their economic mobility, and through education and access into the economic sphere.”

Krause defines feminine politics as the desire to provide for others—to be compassionate and cooperative. Feminine politics is characterized by a response to the demand for basic needs such as clean water, housing, and electricity—even if such a response requires the circumvention of government policies. Rather than receiving power from the government, feminine politics is characterized by empowerment from within. In contrast, feminist groups are more objective-oriented and work to dismantle laws within the state structure that oppress women.

Based on her extensive fieldwork in Qatar, Krause discovered that although state-based feminism was important, women's groups were much more successful when they focused their attention on the provision of basic needs. For example, an organization formerly called the Qatari Women's Association found it to be more beneficial to their mission to become a branch of the Qatar Red Crescent, an organization similar to the Red Cross. The women's association, after removing the word "Women" from its name, was able to increase its efficiency and had more popular support. This would suggest that formalized feminism, at least in name, is not a successful strategy in Qatar, but by rebranding as a group that provides basic services, women were able to better themselves and the community.

The final panelist, Valentine Moghadam, Ph.D., director of the International Affairs Program and professor of sociology at Northeastern University, provided a comprehensive theoretical framework of Arab Awakening transitions. "For the first time in modern Arab history we saw significant massive participation by women. As we all know, women have taken part in all manner of collective action in the MENA, but never on this scale," Moghadam said. Although the Arab Awakening greatly disrupted the status quo in several nations of the Arab world and encouraged women's participation in the public sphere, the results of the democratizing efforts were mixed, particularly for women.

When authoritarian and dictatorial governments in the Middle East collapsed as a result of the Arab Awakening, many had high hopes for the prospects of a new political order and the basic rights and freedoms it would provide for all citizens, Moghadam said. However, "democratic transitions have risks, too, including risks to women's well being and rights." The success and ease of some of the transitions may have more to do with the regimes that preceded the uprisings than the people's desire for democracy. In Tunisia, for example, President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was an authoritarian leader, but he attempted to present himself as a modernizer and champion of women's rights to both the domestic and international communities. Despite his authoritarianism, his desire to appear egalitarian shaped the institutions under his command and smoothed the transition to the democracy that would follow.

It is still unclear what a women-friendly democracy in the MENA might look like, but Moghadam provided several elements that are required to ensure women's equality and

representation in the region. In her opinion, a positive democratic structure for women would consist of a welfare state that provides quality health care and education for all its citizens as well as resources for women's organizations. These organizations could then enhance women's participation in political bodies and trade unions, the latter of which are particularly strong in Tunisia. Finally, a women-friendly democratic state would also strive to protect women from domestic abuse and sexual harassment and legislate the family law reforms necessary to protect women's marital rights.

In Moghadam's opinion, Tunisia was the model for fighting for and instituting women's rights during the democratic transition. Although in some Gulf countries the leaders have advanced women's rights from the top-down, the nations of the Maghreb, like Tunisia, have fought for their own rights from the bottom-up. "Those countries that have seen sustained advances in women's participation and rights are the ones that are most likely to have successful democratic transitions," she concluded.

## V. Conclusion

Participants at the conference "The Evolving Roles of Women in the Arab World" agreed that the significance of the Arab Awakening in transforming the societal as well as the political structures across the region must not be downplayed. As maintained by Valentine Moghadam in her concluding remarks, "the Arab Awakening should have by now shattered every remaining stereotype about this unchanging, timeless region, gender inequality, religion as being uniform, and so on." The people of the region have greatly increased their political, social, and economic expectations as well as their willingness to fight to protect their rights.

The Arab Awakening has also resulted in a wealth of scholarship on the region while taking into account—for the first time—its complexities. Over the past two decades, research on the region has mainly focused on culture and religion as the main factors impeding the advancement of women's status in the region while paying little attention to the societal and political context. Currently, we are witnessing a major shift in the study of the region's women, with research employing more diverse and rigorous approaches—as evidenced by the variety of methodologies and questions presented at the conference. This research will contribute to a greater

understanding of the multi-dimensionality of the issues currently facing women across the region—and most importantly, will provide policymakers and decision-makers with concrete policy recommendations and context-specific prescriptions for advancing women’s rights and status in the region.

The conference participants widely agreed on the importance of grassroots women’s groups in the region post-Arab Awakening. Although it is important for governments to support and champion women’s rights, informal groups and civil society organizations should play a leading role in advancing women’s issues in their respective countries. One of the major mistakes of the past was the lack of collaboration and coordination between these groups that was further complicated by the struggle between these informal groups and the state-affiliated agencies. These groups should join efforts to play an active role to improve the status of women, and push for legislation that addresses the innumerable injustices currently facing women in the region. While the UN and other international organizations continue to support a women’s rights agenda in the MENA region, in order for these aims to be genuinely implemented, women must fight for themselves on the ground.

Finally, the improvement of Arab women’s status in the public and political sphere is inextricably connected to their economic empowerment. “The challenges are still quite tremendous after the Arab Awakening in the region, and they’re mainly economic,” said Moghadam—a statement that was echoed and empirically proven in Benstead’s presentation. As demonstrated in Benstead’s study, opinions on women’s equality and egalitarian values are positively related to the presence of women in the workforce. When women enter the workforce, they are able to redefine the typical role that society has assigned them, and prove that they are capable of contributing and shaping their environments in positive ways.

In conclusion, the process of women’s empowerment in the MENA region requires an all-encompassing approach that addresses the economic, political, and legal inequalities currently facing Arab women. The entire region is in transition at the moment, not only on the political and leadership levels, but most importantly, on the societal level. Women across the region should seize this opportunity to push for policies and legislation to improve their status in

society—or they will have to wait for another major event that shakes the region's dominant political and belief structures before these structural inequalities are addressed.