

JISMUN UNWomen Study Guide

The Role of Religious and Cultural Practices in Gender Equality in the Arab World

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1. Letter from the Secretary-General

2. Letter from the Under Secretary-General

Most Esteemed Delegates,

It is with great honor and anticipation that I welcome you to JISMUN's UN Women committee. I am Ilaf Bayazid, privileged and thrilled to serve as your Under-Secretary General.

Before all else, I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the dedicated Secretariat who have poured tireless effort into bringing this conference to life. I owe special gratitude to two of my dearest MUN colleagues (and genuine friends), Salsabeel Hasan and Salwa Alrifai, whose resilience, dedication, spirit, and intelligence will inspire me for years and years to come.

Furthermore, I am grateful to the secretariat for entrusting me with this specific committee. Before international relations and politics established themselves as the bane of my existence, the "debate" in regards to women's rights was the one thing I was fully committed to and dedicated to.

Back then, the sentence "Keep women's livelihood out of your politics!" (alongside other unapologetic variations) rolled off my tongue with righteous anger, and perhaps naivety. Years of studying the field have taught me that politics spares no one. And when it comes to women, politics is quite merciless. The very existence of women is political: to wake up, to walk, to speak, to demand, to work, to dissent, to simply exist, these are all actions loaded with female resistance and consequence.

Now, when you multiply that existence by the inherent political complexity of an Arab nationality, the solution is... Well, up to this committee.

The agenda chosen is not easy and it is not safe. It is certainly not neutral. But I urge you to view its controversiality not as a burden, but as an opportunity. An opportunity to uncover uncomfortable truths, engage with perspectives you may otherwise loathe, and to move beyond performative advocacy toward serious, intersectional, meaningful discourse.

I can, with a clear conscience, say that not a single day has passed without this committee's agenda weighing on my mind like a thousand tons. I promise to serve this committee with the same commitment and dedication that I have carried for years. I look forward to engaging with everyone of you.

Best,

Ilaf J. Bayazid

Under Secretary-General, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

3. Introduction to the Committee

3.1. About UN Women

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, commonly known as UN Women, is a United Nations committee formed in 2010 through the merger of four entities: the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women (OSAGI) and the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). UN Women became fully functional in 2011, with their main purpose being to advocate and achieve global gender equality and empower women and girls everywhere.

Most of their work revolves around setting international standards for Member States to aim for while offering technical, financial, and legal assistance when necessary. Furthermore, they monitor the progress (or the deterioration) of women's rights as well as the commitment of Member States to previous international agreements, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

3.2. Relevance of the Topic

The female struggle for equal rights is global, but it is not equal. Women in different regions across the world face different, unique challenges shaped by their cultural, religious, economic, and geopolitical realities. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Arab world. Understanding the lived experiences of Arab girls and women requires moving beyond surface-level narratives of oppression or liberation. It demands analyzing structures seen as unquestionable. The intersection of religion and culture, alongside their role in the achievement of gender equality, is the main example. This agenda is therefore essential to examining how cultural and religious frameworks actively shape or challenge gender equality in the Arab region.

Although efforts toward reform have emerged, many women continuously face systemic obstacles to their rights in education, employment, political participation, bodily autonomy, and many other areas.

3.3. Purpose of the Agenda

The main purpose here is to shed light on controversial topics that are not otherwise discussed. Delegates must critically assess the role of both culture and religion as both opponents and proponents of women's liberation based on who manipulates the narrative. This agenda, and the committee, will not shy away from hard truths, from challenging ideas and cultures that are widely accepted, and from utilizing all ethical means necessary to protect women. Delegates must understand the impact of religion and culture on legal and social systems, explore how international mechanisms like UN Women operate in context-specific cases, and bring about innovative ways to protect them.

4. Contextual Foundations

4.1. Arab World vs. Islamic World

The terms “Arab world” and “Islamic world” are often used interchangeably in modern political discourse, despite referring to distinct entities. While Islam has played, and continues to play, a significant role in shaping Arab societies, not all Muslims are Arabs, and not all Arabs are Muslim. The Arab world primarily refers to a group of countries located in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) where Arabic is the lingua franca. At its minimum, it includes the 19 states where Arabs form at least a plurality of the population. On the other hand, at its maximum, it consists of the 22 members of the Arab League, an international organization, which adds to the 19 plurality Arab states the Comoros, Djibouti, and Somalia. Despite its name and ethnic plurality, the Arab world is home to significant populations of other ethnic groups.

The Islamic world, on the other hand, includes a much wider, more ethnically diverse set of countries united by the prevalence of Islam. It dismisses ethnic backgrounds, language, and government types, from Turkey to Pakistan, to Nigeria.

This agenda specifically focuses on the Arab world, acknowledging that Islamic teachings intersect with local customs, colonial histories, and tribal structures in varied ways across these nations.

4.2. Potential of Patriarchy Co-opting Religion

The patriarchy refers to a social system of oppression in which men hold primary power, dominating roles in politics, society, morality, legal rights, property control, family structures, and more. Patriarchal societies often confine women's positions and jobs to private spheres where they cannot be seen or rewarded, such as housework.

The patriarchy has, unfortunately, well established itself all around the world. In many parts of the Arab world, patriarchy is not only a cultural norm but also deeply rooted in legal and institutional frameworks. While Islam, the major religion of the region, was the predominant force of female liberation in the Arab world, it has since been subject to patriarchal actors who

have historically used religious narratives to reinforce male dominance. Verses are cherry-picked and selectively cited, either by islamophobes to portray Islam in a terrible light or by patriarchal muslims who interpret said verses in ways that push their agendas. Traditions are often filtered through conservative, hierarchical interpretations of Islam rather than its egalitarian, just perspective. Patriarchy sinks its claws into Islam for the sole purpose of hiding the criminal exclusion of women from public life, the limitation of their autonomy, and the dictation of their behavior behind the façade of religion.

The risk lies in conflating religion with culture, which is heavily influenced by systems of oppression. Religion is not just practiced peacefully but politicized and manipulated to legitimize gender-based discrimination. In such cases, it becomes difficult, even borderline impossible, to challenge harmful societal norms and standards without being accused of challenging the religion itself. This is not a purely Islamic phenomenon either, this strategy is employed to exploit religions all around the world.

5. Historical Context

5.1. Pre-Islamic Arabia

Before the rise of Islam in the 7th century, pre-Islamic Arabia was marked by tribal societies with distinct practices and beliefs. Despite the absence of a unified political or legal structure, tribal customs often dictated what women could and could not do (similar to what we'd consider today as customary law¹). Women's status varied greatly from tribe to tribe, from those who were relatively empowered to those who experienced more rigid gender roles and discrimination. In some tribes, women could not inherit property, engage in trade, or participate in warfare. In other tribes, women could. Nevertheless, patriarchal values were prevalent, and women were often seen and treated as property. The value of women was often tied to their roles in reproduction, the alliances they could bring through marriage, and honor. In the most extreme cases, practices like infanticide² were not uncommon.

5.2. Post-Islamic Arabia

The emergence and subsequent spread of Islam unarguably had far-reaching effects on the region, particularly in transforming the social and legal status of women. The Qur'an affirmed the dignity and rights of women, granting them new rights such as the right to inherit property, the right to choose their spouse, and the right to divorce. Unlike tribal customs, the spread of Islam

¹ Customary law: in reference to an established pattern of behavior within a particular societal setting which could lead to a legal claim being carried out in defense of "what has always been done and accepted by law"

² Infanticide: the crime of killing a child, usually within a year of birth

introduced a unified legal and moral framework for both men and women to follow. This meant that women, in principle, were equally entitled to the newly gained rights, which now did not vary from tribe to tribe. Nevertheless, over time, interpretations of these rights became more conservative, especially as Islamic empires grew and cultural norms began to dominate religious institutions. The early Islamic period demonstrated that while Islam provided a framework for gender equity and female liberation, the practical application of these principles was often obstructed by ingrained tribal customs, patriarchal cultural practices, and purposeful manipulation.

5.3. Colonial Era

“This woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself.”

— Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*

The colonial rhetoric often portrayed Arab women as victims needing to be “saved” by Western civilization, weaponizing the image of the veiled woman as a symbol of backwardness to justify imperial domination.

During the colonial era, European powers exerted criminal control over many parts of the Arab world. Because colonial powers often justified their interventions as a means of “civilizing” the region, indigenous cultures were labeled as backward, leading to reforms that were presented as “liberating” to women but were aligned with a colonial agenda. This era disrupted indigenous legal and social systems across the Arab world, introducing foreign laws and administrative structures that deepened gender inequality instead of alleviating it.

In many cases, the colonizers selectively empowered patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law to ensure social control and prevent resistance. For instance, British colonial administrators in Egypt and Sudan reinforced male-dominated religious courts while sidelining pre-colonial practices that had allowed women certain rights in marriage and divorce. French colonial rule in Algeria imposed a dual legal system that treated Muslim women as subjects of Islamic personal status laws, even while promoting secular codes for Europeans. This legal divide preserved conservative gender norms under the guise of “respecting native customs,” effectively shielding patriarchal structures from reform.

Rather than challenging local patriarchies, *colonial regimes often collaborated with them*. They co-opted religious elites, undermined reformist voices, especially belonging to women’s movements, and distorted both religion and culture as a means to their ends. As a result, colonialism not only deepened gender inequality but also contributed to the later backlash against feminist discourse, which became associated with Western intrusion.

5.4. Post-Colonial Era

Nationalism, state-building, identity formation, and newly independent Arab governments inheriting fragmented legal systems from colonial rule.

To consolidate authority and unify populations, many states turned to Islam (or specific interpretations of it) as a source of legitimacy, often at the expense of women's rights.

In some countries, state feminism emerged. They offered limited reforms in family law, education, and employment while tightly controlling independent women's movements. In contrast, other regimes institutionalized more conservative interpretations of Islamic law.

Post-colonial governments often reinforced traditional gender roles as a form of social stability. In doing so, they treated women as symbolic bearers of cultural and religious identity: expected to uphold national "honor" through modesty, motherhood, and obedience. Men were mostly exempt from such burdens.

In many cases, rather than dismantling colonial frameworks, post-colonial states repurposed them to maintain power, deserting feminist demands in favor of political convenience. Thus, the tension between religion, culture, and gender equality did not dissolve with independence—it often intensified.

6. Legal and Institutional Equality

6.1. Constitutional Shortcomings

Across the Arab world, legal systems turn gender inequality into codified law, either explicitly or in practice. Even when constitutions guarantee equality, contradictions in legal practice sustain patriarchal norms. This is primarily due to the coexistence (and successive clash) between civil law and religious law, especially in areas that regulate personal status.

While constitutions often declare that citizens (making no distinction based on gender) are "equal before the law," they typically fall short of explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on sex or gender. Even when such prohibitions exist, they are weakened by conditional clauses such as "by the provisions of Sharia" or "without violating the values of society." Both of those clauses are open to interpretation but simultaneously hide behind an aura of indisputability and

unquestionability. What constitutes the “values of society”? What decides which interpretation of Sharia is the constitution “by”?

The concept of a judicial branch as a means to check and balance other political branches is, although sometimes implemented, not as efficient as the West. Even in cases where a somewhat strong judicial branch is present, many Arab constitutions fall short of full gender equality. Phrases like “in accordance with Sharia³” are frequently used to qualify rights, in which the issue of interpretations rises once again. For instance, the Egyptian Constitution guarantees equality but simultaneously cites “The principles of Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation,” creating legal contradictions in areas where, for reasons not supervised by law, women are entitled to less than men.

6.2. Citizenship Laws

Citizenship laws, also known as nationality laws, define the legal manner in which a national identity is acquired and how it may be lost. The basic principles of citizenship laws are as follows:

1. Jus sanguinis (Right of blood): citizenship is passed from parents. This is most common in Arab countries.
2. Jus soli (Right of soil): citizenship is based on birthplace, regardless of parental nationality. Rare in the Arab world.
3. Naturalization: citizenship granted to foreign nationals, obtained if they meet certain conditions.
4. Marriage-based: citizenship granted to a foreign spouse of a citizen.

In the Arab world, these laws are often designed in ways that exclude women from equal entitlement to their national identity. For example, in multiple Arab states, only men have the unconditional right to pass their citizenship to their children or even foreign spouses. On the other hand, women face legal restrictions, bureaucratic obstacles, or are denied this right entirely. This means that an Arab woman cannot pass her nationality to the most important people in her life, not to her spouse, and even worse, not to her children. This effectively renders the kids fully dependent on their father’s citizenship. Children of Arab mothers and foreign fathers may be denied access to public education, healthcare, state protection, or even identity documents.

The assumption behind such laws is rooted in a patriarchal notion that national identity is something that flows from men, while women are viewed as passive participants in the national body, not bearers of legal lineage or protectors of statehood. It also reflects the fear of “outsiders” entering the nation from a woman’s side. Foreign husbands of Arab women often

³ Sharia: religious law that lays down governing principles for spiritual, mental, and physical behavior that must be followed by Muslims.

have limited to no path towards citizenship, while foreign wives of Arab men receive expedited naturalization, reinforcing legal double standards in marriage.

When the inability for a woman to pass on her passport applies to both her spouse and her children, this limits her freedom to choose a spouse. The threat of stateless children, lack of spousal rights, lack of spousal healthcare, etc. becomes a governmentally imposed factor opposing her personal decisions.

More importantly, especially in the Arab world, times of conflict expose stateless families to more vulnerability to displacement, poverty, and human rights violations than normal families.

6.3. Male Guardianship System

The male guardianship system is often seen as the official institutionalization of gender inequality. It is rooted in the conservative interpretation of Sharia and reinforced gender norms.

The male guardianship system essentially makes it legally mandated for a woman's male guardian, whether that is her father, brother, husband, son, etc., to be granted legal authority over major aspects of her life. This means, in countries where the male guardianship system is prevalent, women cannot make key, life-determining decisions without the approval of a male guardian. Usually, this approval is not something that can be fabricated but rather a legal signature.

Some typical milestones for any individual, regardless of gender: education, marriage, and work. All of those, in extreme cases, have historically needed a male guardian's approval. In those cases, a woman must obtain her guardian's permission to marry, regardless of her age. Guardianship laws or de facto practices could prevent women from pursuing higher education or employment if the guardian happened to believe in traditional gender norms. In modern cases, the guardianship system typically applies to more "unnecessary" actions, such as travel.

In our modern day, most countries have reformed aspects of this system, such as Saudi Arabia's partial easing of travel restrictions. This does not change how the system is a direct reflection of how women are treated as perpetual minors, incapable of exercising full legal autonomy over themselves.

6.4. Inheritance Laws

The Quranic distribution is detailed and explicit, with complex explanations for every situation. Nevertheless, it often grants male heirs twice the share of female heirs. Islamically, men are entitled to more inheritance than women primarily because they are expected to bear financial

responsibility for their families, from providing for spouses, to children, and sometimes extended relatives. On the other hand, women's wealth is considered solely theirs, with no obligation to spend on others. When the topic is perceived from this perspective, it becomes much easier to see Sharia as a force of liberation towards women, not oppression.

While this structure may have reflected the socioeconomic realities of 7th-century Arabia, it creates significant trouble in contemporary societies, where women increasingly contribute financially to their households.

Furthermore, while the law asserts itself when it comes to inheritance, it provides no supervision to ensure the inheritance is used for its Islamic purpose. This means it strictly defines inheritance shares, but the man-made "Islamic" laws do not enforce how those funds are later used. A man may inherit twice as much as his sister because of inheritance laws, yet the law provides no mechanisms to ensure he fulfills his financial responsibilities that Islamically justify his larger cut.

Of course, women who inherit less are left with fewer resources to protect themselves financially. It makes it harder for them to secure housing, invest, or even sustain themselves, especially after the loss of a provider. This limited financial independence makes it likely for women to remain economically dependent on male relatives, or even worse, be forced to seek marriage when they do not want to. This, in turn, reinforces patriarchal power structures.

6.5. Labor Laws, Workplace Discrimination, and Economic Inequality

While many Arab states have formally granted women the right to work, labor laws often continue to be themselves on patriarchal assumptions about gender roles. Some national labor codes restrict the types of jobs women can hold, place limits on their working hours, or bar them from working in hazardous environments. Of course, in the modern day, this is done under the guise of "protecting" them. In practice, these limitations do nothing but restrict female participation in key sectors such as mining, manufacturing, and construction.

Moreover, workplace discrimination, including unequal pay, lack of maternity protections, and limited access to leadership positions, is at an embarrassing high in Arab states. A woman from a conservative, traditional family not only has to go to hell and back to secure an education and subsequently a job, but also has to continue to suffer within that job. Of course, combined with a conservative society, the mental damage done to the woman could be irreparable.

Beyond societal judgements, economic inequality between men and women is also entrenched through social norms and informal barriers, such as employers' reluctance to hire married women or those with children. An inability to secure a lower-paying job leads to future exclusion

from higher-paying jobs, which directly impacts a woman's long-term financial security, including savings and the ability to invest in property or business.

This inequality follows the woman home: when women earn less or are excluded from formal labor markets, their bargaining power in households and society at large is weakened. Thus, labor law discrimination is not only an economic issue; it is a political and social one, reinforcing systems of oppression.

6.6. Marriage

Both religiously and culturally, marriage is a very important ceremonial institution. Since being married must include the involvement of the government, it also involves the aforementioned frameworks that reflect patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, placing gender inequalities into the legal structure of marriage, divorce, custody, and consent.

6.6.1. Unequal Divorce Laws

In most Arab states, men have a unilateral right to divorce (talaq) without needing to provide justification or appear before a court. Women, on the other hand, must often meet strict legal criteria to initiate divorce, such as proving harm or seeking judicial khula⁴ (divorce initiated by the wife, often requiring her to forfeit financial rights). This unequal access disempowers women in abusive or unhappy marriages, effectively binding them to a system that prioritizes male authority over female autonomy.

6.6.2. Child Custody Disputes

Custody laws generally grant women physical custody of children at a young age, but guardianship (the authority to make legal, financial, or educational decisions) remains with the father. This practically means that a woman must take care of the kids, to feed them, to clothe them, to protect them, and to finance their needs. Nevertheless, the man retains guardianship. When children reach a certain age (typically puberty), custody is often transferred to the father regardless of the child's or mother's wishes. This gendered split between caregiving and legal authority diminishes a mother's long-term influence over her children and treats maternal contributions as not only temporary, but also replaceable.

6.6.3. Polygamy

Polygamy⁴ remains legal in several Arab countries, permitting a man to marry up to four wives. Islamically, this is done under the unwavering condition of equal treatment.

⁴ Polygamy: the practice or custom of having more than one spouse at the same time. In Islamic contexts, it refers to a Muslim man's right to marry up to four women. Women are not allowed to have multiple spouses.

This means equal monetary providing, equal emotional availability, equal respect, etc. Once again, laws in Arab countries only legalize the existence of this practice, but does not provide any mechanisms to supervise the subsequent islamic requirements. As a result, that unwavering condition is rarely enforced in practice.

Women have no reciprocal right. Cultural polygamy often occurs without the consent or knowledge of the first wife. It reflects and reinforces the unequal power dynamic within marriage.

6.6.4. Child Marriage and Age of Consent

Despite international agreements, norms, and expectations, some Arab countries still allow child marriage with judicial or parental approval. Girls as young as 14 or even younger are legally married in rural or conservative areas, often framed as protecting their “honor.” Those cases of “honor protection” typically happen in cases of rape or sexual assault. These marriages rob girls of their education, health, and childhoods, exposing them to early pregnancy, domestic abuse, and lifelong dependence. In many cases, age of consent laws are either undefined, inconsistently applied, or unreasonably lower for girls.

6.7. Political Underrepresentation

As of 2025, women in the Arab world remain significantly underrepresented in political leadership and decision-making roles. According to UN Women and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Arab region is lagging behind the average of females in political seats. In many Arab countries, women's representation in national parliaments and ministerial positions remains low. For instance, in Egypt, women held 27.7% of parliamentary seats in 2024. Libya with 16.5%, Syria with 9.6%, Lebanon with 6.3%, Tunisia with 15.7%, and Saudi Arabia with 19.9%. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, women's representation in ministerial cabinets was 13.7% as of early 2025.

Despite some progress, several barriers continue to hinder women's political participation in the Arab region. These include the aforementioned discriminatory laws and practices, limited application of temporary special measures like gender quotas, and persistent societal stereotypes questioning women's capabilities in leadership roles. For example, while Jordan increased its women's representation quota from 15 to 18 seats in its 138-seat parliament in 2024, women still face challenges in achieving equal political participation.

The underrepresentation of women in political spheres has significant implications. It limits the diversity of perspectives in policy making, particularly on issues affecting women and families. This means that a majority-male legislative body makes laws about women’s rights, then a majority-male executive body enforces it, and a majority-male judicial body approves of its legality.

7. Gender-Based Violence and Control

Some practices are so cruel, so violent, that they could never be justified by law.

7.1. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a practice, unfortunately, very common in the Arab world. FGM involves the partial or total removal of external female genitalia for non-medical reasons and is internationally recognized as a human rights violation. As of 2024, over 230 million girls and women worldwide have undergone FGM, with more than 6 million residing in the Middle East. The practice is prevalent in countries such as Egypt, Sudan, and parts of Iraq, often justified by beliefs about purity, modesty, and “marriageability.”

FGM can lead to severe health complications, including chronic pain, infections, increased risk during childbirth, and psychological trauma. The process, in itself, is very painful, even ignoring the long-lasting effects. Despite legal prohibitions in some countries, enforcement remains inconsistent, and the practice continues, sometimes in medical settings, under the false premise of safety.

7.2. Honor Killings

The concept of honor is very important in the Arab world. Of course, it applies to men in ways that are very different from how it applies to women. When a male commits an dishonorable act, he is but a misguided individual who requires attention and support. When a female commits the very same act, she may be subject to execution. Of course, that homicide shyly hides behind the name “honor killing.”

Honor killings involve the murder of individuals, almost always women, by family members who claim to be preserving the family's honor. They are usually committed after a female “loses” her honor by committing sexual acts. In 2024, reports indicated that 38 women and girls were killed in Syria alone under the guise of honor.

Perpetrators often receive lenient sentences or evade justice entirely, as these crimes are frequently treated as private family matters rather than serious offenses. So much so that in certain countries, “it was an honor killing, can be used as a legal defense. The lack of stringent legal repercussions perpetuates a culture of impunity, where societal norms overshadow the rule of law. This environment not only endangers women but also discourages victims and their families from seeking justice.

8. Interpretations of Religious Law

8.1. Fatwas, Sharia, and ‘Urf (Customary Law)

Islamic legal thought is not monolithic. It is shaped by the complex intersection of divine revelation (the Quran), scholarly interpretation, and cultural norms.

1. ***Sharia*** refers to the divine path, derived from the Quran and Sunnah, but its practical application is mediated through ***fiqh*** (Islamic jurisprudence), which is a human endeavor.
2. ***Fatwas*** are non-binding legal opinions issued by religious scholars. While they do not carry the weight of law unless codified, they can influence state laws, judicial decisions, and public perception.
3. ***‘Urf***, or ***customary law***, is a local tradition that is considered valid in Islamic law as long as it does not contradict the Quran or Hadith. In practice, however, ‘urf has often been used to reinforce patriarchal tribal customs under the guise of religion.

These three layers—divine law, human interpretation, and societal tradition—are often entangled, making it difficult to separate religious mandates from cultural practices that harm women.

8.2. “Progressive” vs “Conservative” Interpretations

The impact of religious law on gender equality in the Arab world largely depends on who is doing the interpreting.

Conservative scholars tend to rely on classical jurisprudence, which was developed in patriarchal societies, resisting any reinterpretation of gender roles based on the modern day. They often emphasize male authority, female modesty, and rigid family structures, framing them as irrefutable religious truths.

Progressive scholars and “reformist clerics”, on the other hand, advocate for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and contextual reinterpretation. They argue that many restrictive norms reflect outdated tribal customs or political interests, not divine intent.

The tension between these camps affects everything from national legislation to family court rulings, leaving women’s rights at the mercy of religious gatekeepers. In some cases, progressive interpretations have been silenced or delegitimized, especially in countries where state-appointed religious institutions are used to maintain authoritarian control.

9. The Way Forward

9.1. Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism challenges the dominant narrative that Islam is inherently patriarchal. It argues that gender equality is not only compatible with Islamic principles but is rooted in them. They often believe that Islam was the first notion of liberation for women in Arabia.

Islamic feminists revisit the Qur'an and Hadith through a gender-egalitarian lens, often relying on *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to counter male-centered interpretations entrenched by centuries of patriarchal scholarship. They emphasize verses that stress spiritual equality, mutual consultation (*shura*), and justice. Islamic feminism plays a unique role in Arab societies where secular arguments are often dismissed as "Western." By speaking in the language of religion, it opens space for reform within a culturally and theologically legitimate framework.

9.2. Secular Feminism

A usually ignored piece of information is that secularism is not blindly followed by atheists. In the Arab world, many secular feminists are religious women. They do not oppose Islam, or Christianity, or any minority religion. They simply carry the belief that secularism is the best way to ensure equality amongst the variety of religions in Arabia.

Secular feminism advocates for a clear separation between religion and the state, especially in personal status matters like marriage, divorce, and inheritance. It insists that as long as religious law governs family life, gender inequality will remain structurally embedded, especially considering that there must be women in a non-secular society governed by a religion other than their own. Furthermore, they do not believe that women of the religion should be legally required to follow it.

Legal secularism, where civil or common laws, not religious ones, define individual rights, has proven essential for safeguarding gender equality in many parts of the world. In Arab contexts, however, secular feminists often face backlash, accused of eroding cultural and religious values.

9.3. Intersectionality

Intersectionality⁵ has proven itself necessary in every society, especially when it comes to women's rights. The experiences of Arab women in regards to gender inequality intersect with class, ethnicity, nationality, refugee status, tribal affiliation, religion, and their Arab identity.

For example, a wealthy urban woman may have access to legal resources and platforms, while a rural or stateless woman may be silenced entirely. An intersectional approach ensures that feminist movements do not only serve the privileged few, such as merely upper class women, but actively dismantle structural hierarchies within society.

It also prevents the erasure of marginalized voices such as those of migrant workers, religious minorities, or displaced women affected by conflict. For a society to be truly progressive, the voices of the oppressed must always be heard, so they can be answered.

10. Minority Religions and Indigenous Groups

10.1. Distinct Gender Roles

Minority religions and indigenous communities across the Arab world often maintain gender norms distinct from the dominant Islamic framework. In some cases, these groups preserve matrilineal or more egalitarian structures, while others enforce even stricter patriarchal codes. For instance, certain Christian sects or Amazigh communities have traditions that differ from both mainstream Islamic and Western understandings of gender.

However, these internal norms are often overlooked or homogenized under the dominant narrative of the Arab/Islamic identity. Gender-specific practices, whether protective or oppressive, tend to be subsumed, misrepresented, or suppressed in broader national discourses.

Understanding these communities on their terms is essential. Applying a one-size-fits-all feminist framework risks marginalizing their lived realities and undermining their cultural autonomy.

10.2. Islamic Cultural Dominance and Marginalization of Non-Muslim Women

⁵ Intersectionality: the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

Even in officially pluralistic Arab states, Islamic norms often dictate public life and legislation. This dominance can marginalize non-Muslim minorities both legally and socially, particularly in personal status issues, religious dress, and education. Women from minority groups may face a double bind: discrimination from state structures enforcing Islamic codes, and patriarchal constraints within their communities.

For example, non-Muslim women may still be subjected to Islamic inheritance laws or restricted from marrying Muslim men unless they convert. Moreover, indigenous and minority voices are underrepresented in national gender discourses. Their perspectives are rarely integrated into legal reforms or feminist movements, reinforcing their exclusion. True gender justice in the Arab world must also address these imbalances of power between dominant and marginalized religious-cultural identities.

11. Case Studies

In this section, we will explore specific case studies that highlight the diverse challenges and progress related to gender equality in the Arab world. These examples will provide a more grounded understanding of how religious and cultural practices impact women's rights and gender equality across different contexts.

11.1 Tunisia

Often cited as the leader of Arab women's rights, Tunisia was at the forefront of gender equality in its 2014 Constitution, which affirmed Tunisia as a civil state founded on citizenship. They have even banned polygamy since 1956. Women can initiate divorce without needing male consent, and in 2017, Tunisia repealed a law prohibiting Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men.

Nevertheless, the way forward appears to be filled with action, as inheritance laws remain unequal, and efforts to amend them have triggered national debates. The most important thing here is the tension between progressive legislation and conservative religious identity. The Constitution declares the country's determination to adhere to the teachings of Islam and stipulates that Islam is the official state religion and that the president must be Muslim. Tunisia exemplifies how secular legal reforms can coexist with Islamic cultural identity, but also shows that societal pushback is to be expected.

11.2 Saudi Arabia

Typically seen as the symbol of strict, theological, gender-based guardianship and religious control. They have made astonishing improvements in the field of women's rights, especially considering the strict, traditional nature of their population. The notion that women required male permission to travel, work, or study, albeit true, does not exist anymore. Recent reforms under Vision 2030 have allowed women to drive, changed citizenship laws, and welcomed women into the workforce in larger numbers. Nevertheless, the male guardianship system still exists in practice, although at a decreased degree. In Saudi Arabia, legal reforms are top-down and often more "cosmetic" than structural. Religious legitimacy continues to be used to justify deep-rooted gender hierarchies.

11.3 Lebanon

Lebanon is an important case study due to its lack of a unified personal status law. Religious courts govern marriage, divorce, and custody for each sect (Muslim, Christian, Druze, etc.). This results in inconsistent protections for women, as each court is subject to its ruling, one that is equally subject to the aforementioned manipulation of religion. Women cannot pass nationality to their children or foreign spouses, and personal status laws across sects generally disadvantage women. An important take from this case study is how legal pluralism under religious governance can deteriorate gender equality.

11.3 Palestine

An important case to understand the importance of intersectionality. Palestinian women face unprecedented levels of oppression, with overlapping actors. Israeli occupation, patriarchal cultural norms, etc. Can Palestinian women be "saved" by the same policies that could save Tunisian women? Of course not.

12. Questions to be Addressed

1. How can religious and cultural norms be reinterpreted to promote gender equality without alienating local communities?
2. What role do colonial histories play in shaping current gender norms and legal inequalities in the Arab world?
3. How can the international community effectively support women's rights in conflict zones like Syria and Palestine?

4. What legal reforms are necessary to ensure women's full political, economic, and social participation in countries like Lebanon and Saudi Arabia?
5. How can intersectionality be integrated into national gender policies to address the needs of marginalized groups, including minority religions and indigenous women?
6. What can be done to bridge the gap between progressive legal reforms and deeply entrenched patriarchal social norms?
7. How can economic empowerment programs be tailored to address the specific barriers faced by women in different Arab countries?
8. What strategies can be employed to dismantle male guardianship systems without provoking significant backlash?
9. How can civil society and feminist movements effectively challenge patriarchal power structures in the Arab world?
10. What lessons can be learned from Tunisia's relatively successful gender equality reforms, and how can they be adapted to other Arab contexts?

13. Bibliography and Further Reading

Academic Resources:

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Online Resources:

- UN Women Regional Office for Arab States: [UN Women Arab States](#)
- Human Rights Watch – Middle East and North Africa: [HRW MENA](#)
- The Arab Barometer: [Arab Barometer](#)