

The Durable Effects of Gender Policies: Social Change in Arab Countries

Veronica Kostenko and
Eduard Ponarin

About the authors

Bedri Kamil Onur Tas is a Professor of Economics at TOBB ETU as well as an ERF research fellow. He holds a PhD in Economics from Boston College.

Key questions:

- How soon can a policy result in a mass attitude shift?
- How long does a policy effect last?

In a nutshell

- Gender inequality constrains the economic development of Arab countries.
- The level of gender inequality varies significantly between Arab countries, and depends, inter alia, on state policies concerned with female education, labor force participation, legal recognition, and protection.
- The position of women has fluctuated significantly in the recent history of Arab states; women had more rights in states that deployed secular (pan-Arab, nationalist) ideology in the post-colonial period.
- Citizens of such countries who were in their “formative years” (15-25 years old) in that period support gender equality until now and are the most egalitarian generation in their societies.
- The most patriarchal Arab states have never experienced gender egalitarian policies (or secular regimes). Their youth is slightly more gender egalitarian than the elderly, but the change between generations is a lot smaller compared to the rest of the world.
- The policies that support female education and labor force participation and protect female legal rights have a durable, although not immediate, effect that can be traced decades after their implementation; they change the attitudes, values, and life opportunities of a whole generation, even if they last for only a decade or slightly more.
- The policy effect gets particularly strong when the members of the affected generation reach their prime age and become politically powerful.

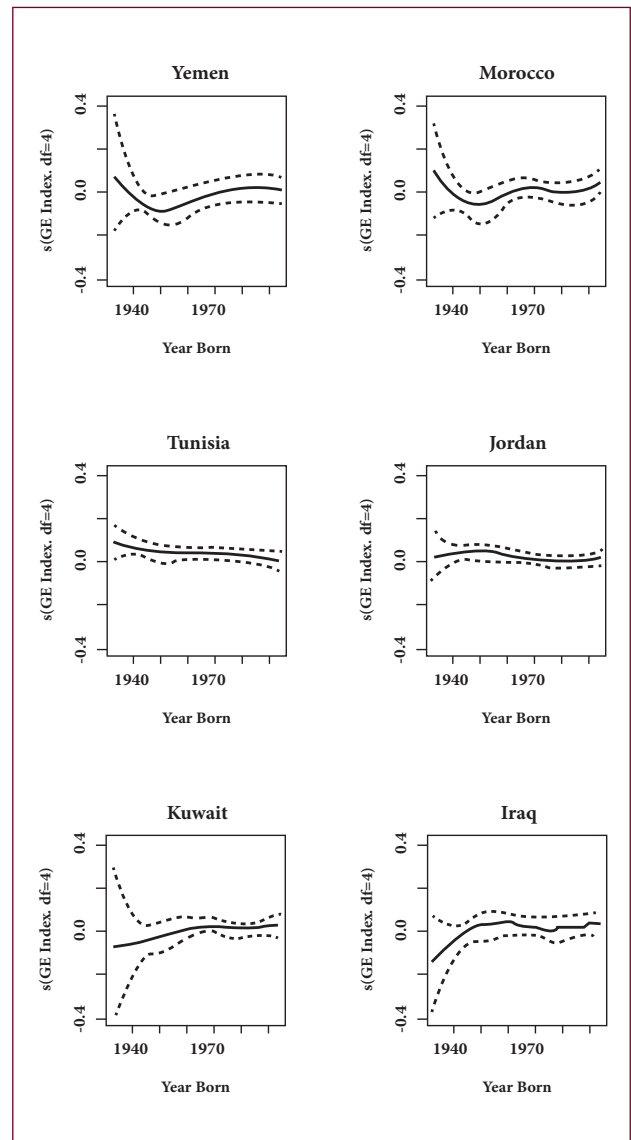
Arab countries rank lower in gender equality than other societies at a comparable level of development. When females (half of the population) are disadvantaged in terms of educational and (more often) career development, it constrains economic growth. Oil-rich countries are even more vulnerable in this sense as the lack of emancipation limits economic diversification. Women are disadvantaged across several dimensions in the MENA region, but there are immense differences in their position between the Arab countries.

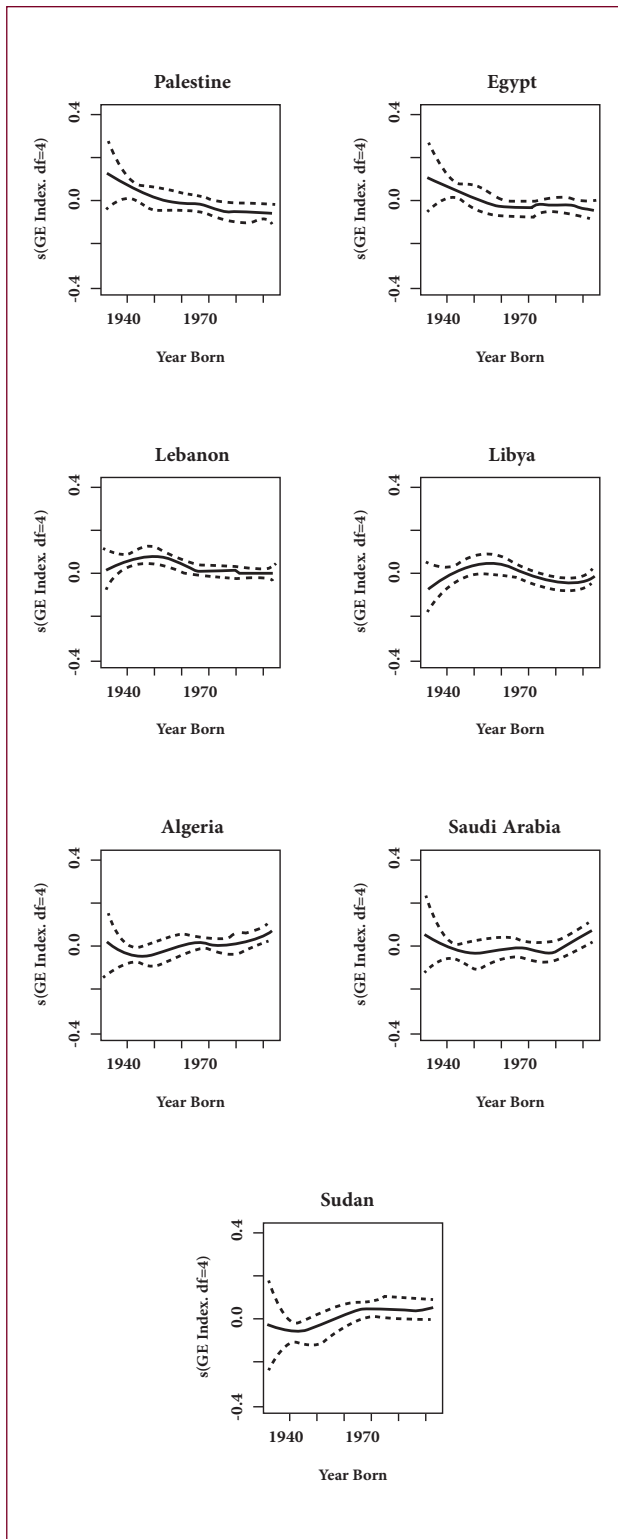
Why does female emancipation lag behind in most Arab societies, and what is the source of this cross-country variation? Along with economic and cultural reasons, there is a discernible influence of past policies. The most important policies that affect a female's position in the society include obligatory school education for girls, equal rights in admission to universities and jobs, access to contraception, affordable child care, legal recognition of equal rights in court (as inheritors and during divorce), and protection from family violence.

In order to answer these questions, we examine the trajectories of gender values in the 13 Arab societies surveyed in the third wave of the Arab Barometer Project. We interpret age differences in these data as cohort differences. Our rationale here is that the data from the five Arab countries that were surveyed in all three waves of the Arab Barometer Project confirm that differences between birth cohorts are remarkably stable over time, even if there is a change over time involving all generations. It is also in line with the strand of social theory that maintains that people develop their world-view in early adulthood and do not change their views much – barring some social catastrophes. Thus, age differences in the latest round of the Arab Barometer are indicative of social change, as people of various birth cohorts adopted values that were prevalent in their society when they were young. Therefore, when we look at the attitudinal differences between older and younger cohorts for each particular country, we discern trajectories of social change in the given country.

Gender egalitarianism was an index measured as attitudes to the following statements: “A married woman can work outside of the home,” “In general, men are better in political leadership,” and “University education is more important for boys.” Below we briefly describe the trajectories of change on a country-by-country basis.

Figure 1. Trends of gender equality support in 13 Arab societies by year of birth (the higher, the more egalitarian)





Countries with No Experience of Nationalist (Secular) Governing

The data shows that the support for gender egalitarianism generally grows in the youngest generations of the conservative states, from a rather low level. However, there is some variation across countries.

We observe a stable growth of gender egalitarianism in **Kuwait** and **Sudan**. These societies had no socialist experience and their elites preferred to support patriarchy, which was only challenged recently due to modernization, globalization, and feminist movements. In **Northern Yemen** and **Saudi Arabia**, where family laws were extremely controlling of women, the oldest cohorts are about as egalitarian as the youngest, but the middle cohorts are more conservative.

In **Jordan**, people of all ages keep the same (quite conservative) attitudes to the position of females in the society, which may be due to a large number of Palestinian refugees. If these two components of the Jordanian society have in fact opposing trends, pooling them may cancel the effects out.

The **Moroccan** case is much discussed as a story of feminist success in the Arab world. Departing from the pro-natalist and gender conservative policies in the 1960-1970s, they established women's organizations that have been influencing government policies.

Countries with Experience of Secular Regimes

Countries that had secular nationalist regimes, on the other hand, show a decline (from a relatively high level) of egalitarian attitudes in younger cohorts. This is true for **Egypt**, former **South Yemen**, **Palestine**, and **Tunisia**. Female-supportive policies in the areas of education and employment in light manufacturing led to the boost of the middle-class and to sustainable economic growth in Tunisia. It ranks very high in

terms of gender equality support, but still shows a negative trend in younger generations. South Yemen, on the other hand, started from a higher level and went down lower than Saudi Arabia. As for **Algeria**, it started from a secular base after gaining independence, but turned to a more conservative setting in 1980s. The fall of gender equity support for those born in 1950s may reflect this fact.

The case of **Iraq** is of interest as it had socialist experience, but now ranks the lowest among all the countries sampled in the third wave of the Arab Barometer. The women's movement was very strong in Iraq in the post-revolutionary phase in the early 1960s; but the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein negatively impacted most of the country's NGOs, which prevented further progress. Gender issues became even more acute after his fall due to the growth of violence, poverty, and lasting instability.

The country variation of cohort differences reflects the varying levels of female emancipation in Arab countries during the second half of the 20th century. Arab women in some societies had more freedom back in the 1950s and 1960s than they do now. Historically, states that promoted female rights used to have secular governments in the post-colonial period. The struggle for independence and the socialist ideology led to the emergence of secular regimes that revolutionized the public sphere, developed better health care and education, and recruited women to the labor force. Some regimes, looking for a larger labor force and greater political support, encouraged mass school attendance by girls. For example, Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s, Egypt under Nasser and Sadat, Syria under Hafez al-Asad, Tunisia in the 1960s-1980s, and the Democratic Republic of Yemen all included female education and employment in their development programs. For Yemen, an efficient policy also included outlawing kin and tribal control over women. A whole generation of people holding attitudes that are more egalitarian

grew up; women and men studied and worked together, and females enjoyed better opportunities in various spheres of life.

Efforts of secular politicians faced the resistance of conservatives within their societies, but more importantly, they faced their proponents' disillusionment caused by various pitfalls within a decade or two after the policies were implemented. In some socialist-oriented countries, such as Iraq, the dictatorial regimes usurped power and put the grass-root organizations that had fought for freedoms and rights (including gender) under governmental control. Some formerly pro-socialist societies used to rank high in egalitarianism but lost their position. This change might have come in part because those countries were exposed to military conflicts. Existential danger, as many sociologists point out, makes survival more important than self-expression and often results in a rise of traditional values. Libya, Yemen, Sudan, and Iraq currently rank very low in the gender equality index, while two of those countries used to promote gender equality in the past. War-battered Palestine is losing its position in gender equality, despite the fact that it used to be quite strong.

The reversal of the ideological trend towards political Islam coincided with the oil boom of the 1970s, when some conservative societies that had no socialist experience found themselves rich and able to promote their own ideology in the rest of the Arab world. The oil boom led to discrepant consequences in the "coupon-clipper" countries, simultaneously stimulating positive changes in health protection and education but also stagnation in political development. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have quickly developed from poor and isolated desert monarchies into technologically advanced and rich nations without much value change. In addition to the Gulf monarchies, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria under

Boumeddiene opted for pro-natalist policies in the 1960s, and no longer provided support for female emancipation.

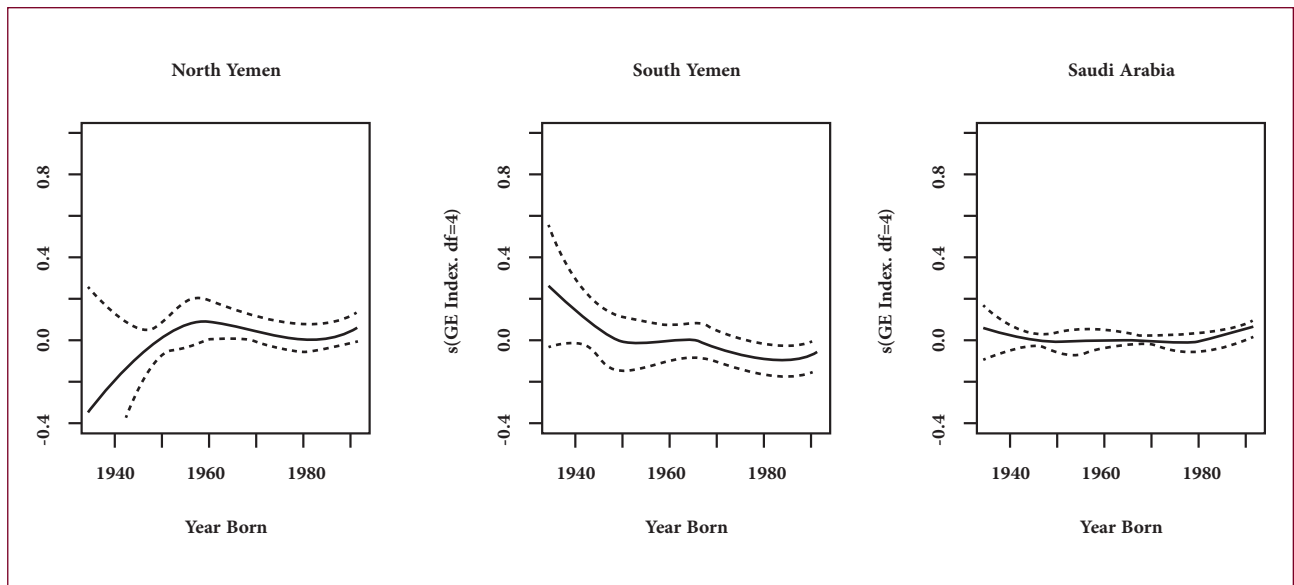
Conservation of the status quo lasted for two decades, but eventually the modernization process and the challenges coming from the outside world called for change, even in the conservative Gulf monarchies where women have been gaining more rights and freedoms recently. For example, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia declared labor feminization and appointed 30 women to the royal advisory committee in 2011, and the government started offering incentives for putting women on the payroll. Saudi women have also received voting rights and the right to drive cars in the last couple of years.

Thus, whereas there was a whole generation of people exposed to gender egalitarianism in the socialist-leaning countries (to various degrees depending on the specific country), a more conservative, religious and pro-natalist ideology continued to flourish

in the other Arab societies. The effects of those policies (or lack thereof) can be traced in surveys taken generations after they took effect. The cohorts exposed to more egalitarian gender regimes in their formative years (approximately, 15-25 years of age) retain their attitudes throughout their lifetime. This holds true even for the societies that experienced major turmoil or war afterwards, as well as for those where very conservative regimes superseded more egalitarian ones.

Modernization in some Arab countries was hindered by very conservative regimes, whereas in other societies it was forcefully shoved forward. Nowadays these two groups of countries seem to be converging in the younger generations. The history of socialist modernization sheds additional light on attitudinal change across generations and helps explain why older people are more likely to support gender egalitarianism in some countries but not others. The difference between North and South Yemen is the most poignant example of this effect.

Figure 2. Trends of gender equality support in two parts of Yemen and Saudi Arabia (the higher, the more egalitarian)



Yemen is a great illustration of policy effects, as it was divided into two parts between 1967 and 1990: the South supported by the Soviet Union and the North influenced by Saudi Arabia and the Western bloc. Secular socialist ideology made a profound imprint on the gender attitudes of a whole generation in the South, and those who were in their 20s in the 1960s were more egalitarian than young people now. People in Northern Yemen remained very conservative gender-wise, although the youngest generations express slightly higher support for equality, but still lower than elsewhere (the same holds true for Saudi Arabia).

This means that current efforts ensuring fairer positions for women, especially policies in equal access to education and labor market, legal rights recognition, affordable childcare, and protection from family violence, will have a delayed but long-lasting effect. It will take time for younger generations influenced by those policies to reach higher positions in their countries when they determine societal norms. However, the traces of current policies will be evident even 50 years after their implementation.

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ERF Contact Information

Address: 21 Al-Sad Al-Aaly St., Dokki, Giza, Egypt
Telephone: 00 202 333 18 600 - 603 | **Fax:** 00 202 333 18 604
Email: erf@erf.org.eg | **Website:** <http://www.erf.org.eg>

