
Fostering Gender Equality in the Arab Region is Non-Negotiable

ABSTRACT Lina Abirafeh describes the global conditions of gender equality and violence against women. She offers a brief history of her work to prevent violence against women and to build a better world for women. The author outlines the current promises and challenges for women's equality in the Arab states, and the role of the Arab Institute for Women in realizing those promises and overcoming the challenges. She ends with a call for support of feminist activists and gender equality-focused organizations, including the Arab Institute for Women. **KEYWORDS** Arab countries, Arab Institute for Women, equality, leadership, women

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT FOR WOMEN

No country in the world has achieved gender equality. Women and girls worldwide are still unable to fully participate in all aspects of social, economic, and political life. They have less choice, voice, and access to opportunities and resources than men. Gender equality is not only a human rights principle, it is a precondition for a safe, just, and sustainable future. At this pace, the World Economic Forum reminds us, we will need one hundred years to close the gender gap.

We live in a fundamentally unequal world. There is ample evidence of this inequality. For instance, we know that women are more likely than men to live in extreme poverty. More than 2.5 billion women live in countries with discriminatory laws, such as laws restricting opportunities for women in the workplace, where women actually need their husbands' permission for certain work.

Nearly half a billion women and girls in the world are illiterate. The majority of children who are out of school are girls. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this, with the risk that many girls may not ever return to school. The pandemic has increased forms of violence for girls, such as female genital cutting and child marriage. Every year, 15 million girls are married before the age of eighteen. The pandemic has resulted in an *additional* 13 million cases of child marriage and 2 million cases of female genital cutting. The damage to girls' lives as a result is irreversible.

Inequality is most visible in politics and positions of power because, when it comes to leadership and decision-making, women are rendered virtually invisible. We still see too few women leaders. Those we do have remain the exception and "first," rather than the norm. Nearly 120 countries have never had a woman leader.

The most shocking statistic is this: one in three women and girls worldwide will experience some form of violence in their lifetime. And 81% of women have experienced

sexual harassment—verbal or physical. The global cost of violence against women is a staggering \$1.5 trillion!

In the working world, the unemployment rate for women is higher than for men. Too many women remain relegated to the informal sector, with its low wages and high risks. Women worldwide perform 76% of unpaid work—now made considerably worse as a result of the pandemic. Women spend anywhere between two and ten more hours a day than men in caring for children, the elderly, and the sick. And the wage gap is real—in every country. If it were to close, the world's gross domestic product could grow by \$12 trillion by 2025.

The global pandemic has made an already precarious situation worse. Women are the majority of the world's careers—paid and unpaid. As such, the burden of care falls squarely on them. Violence against women—mostly intimate partner violence—has increased as a result of lockdown measures. Women's support and services have been repurposed for the public health response. And women have fallen into deeper levels of poverty. Sex for work, sex for food, sex for rent—all of these have increased in the last year, and will continue to do so long after the pandemic is over.

Why do we need to know this? Because we cannot change what we do not see. And in seeing this, it becomes impossible to un-see it.

MOVED TO ACTION

It was information like this that galvanized me into action. I was 14 years old, an immigrant girl in a liberal all-girls high school outside of Washington, DC. In a class called *Comparative Women's History*, we toured the world through stories and images of violence against women. I saw a bound foot, female genitalia after it had been cut, a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, a woman's broken ribcage after tightening a corset, acid burns of domestic violence survivors, and on it went. I never forgot the images. And I was angry—but I did not yet know what to do with that anger.

I went on to have a career spanning over two decades and twenty countries—Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Haiti, Mali, Papua New Guinea, to name a few. My work has always focused on women—and more often than not on preventing violence against women. This violence happens everywhere, but it is magnified in emergency settings. Women's bodies have always been warzone battlegrounds.

Afghanistan was my first war. I landed in 2002, armed with \$20,000 and a plan to establish the Afghanistan country office of Women for Women International, a nongovernmental organization supporting women in conflict. I remember a young Afghan man who told me: "The world thought they could bring freedom to Afghan women, but freedom is only won from the inside." This became my mantra.

I lived and worked in a long list of emergency countries, ending with Nepal in 2015. I left Nepal to give a TEDx talk in London inspired by graffiti I had seen in Kathmandu following the earthquake: START WHERE YOU STAND.

During my time in the field, I completed my PhD from the London School of Economics and published a book with a long academic title, built from my years in

Afghanistan. And so, I also became an accidental academic, seeking education opportunities when I needed a platform to complain constructively.

I write now as a woman, an Arab woman, a Lebanese-Palestinian woman, an Arab American woman, an activist, an academic, an aid worker. Most of all, I write as a feminist, committed to making change in my lifetime.

The challenge of working on equality is that even this has been rendered “women’s work”—we are burdened with rectifying an imbalance that we did not create.

FIGHTING FOR WOMEN IN ARAB COUNTRIES

In 2015, after too many emergencies to count, I moved to Lebanon, in part to connect with my roots, but mostly to serve as Executive Director of the region’s first academic institute for women—the Arab Institute for Women, housed under the Lebanese American University.

I knew well the challenges in the Arab region—with its patriarchal structures and protracted crises. What I did *not* know was that this region ranks the lowest in the world in terms of women’s rights, with frequent backlashes against women’s fundamental freedoms. The Arab region needs 153 years to close its gender gap—and no Arab country is even among the top 100 in this list.

Women in Arab countries are an underutilized economic force, with the lowest female employment rate in the world. When employed, women are more often relegated to traditionally feminized work, in addition to their disproportionate share of unpaid care.

Arab women are significantly behind in terms of women’s participation and representation in politics. Even when women are present in politics, they are still kept from exerting power to influence change. This lack of political participation is largely due to cultural barriers, little access to economic and financial resources, and the absence of female role models in political and public life.

Sexual violence and harmful practices, such as honor killing, female genital cutting and child marriage, also continue to be prevalent and show no signs of abating. As the region continues to face insecurities, these forms of violence will only increase. Rights, freedoms, and opportunities cannot be named and claimed as long as women are unsafe in public and private space.

Even without the pandemic, instability and insecurity are the norm across the region—from humanitarian crises in Syria, Palestine, Yemen, and Iraq to economic collapse in Lebanon. These shocks continue to be felt throughout the region, destroying already-scarce systems of social protection and women’s services and support. Refugee and displaced people continue to face even greater vulnerabilities. In times of insecurity, pre-existing vulnerabilities are magnified, and women’s rights are the first to be stripped and the hardest to revive.

The Arab region’s diverse collection of 22 countries have one thing in common: women continue to experience a backlash against their own long-overdue rights and fundamental freedoms. Most Arab countries have signed and ratified universal conventions supporting human rights (with reservations), but these have not brought

meaningful change for women. Inequality remains the greatest impediment to regional progress. Progress or regress in any of these areas has an impact on all aspects of women's lives. Insecurities don't stay neatly confined within their borders. Instead, they intersect rather messily. Unless we're addressing inequalities everywhere, we will achieve equality nowhere.

Meaning: There is a lot of work to do.

Meanwhile, women—especially young women—are leading the charge and demanding change. Women are the face and the force of revolutions across the region. This much I knew.

PROGRESS AND REGRESS

Yet, I did not know of the rich history of the Institute I now led. The Lebanese American University dates back to the 1830s—built by an American missionary as a school for girls. As such, it has always promoted education, equality, and empowerment for women and girls. Even at a time when the rest of the world did *not*.

And I did not know that I was destined to be there: I am the third generation of women in my family to work at the university. My late grandmother graduated from the school in 1938 and went on to work at the university for 20 years. Her diploma hangs on my wall. Her eldest daughter, my aunt, wrote the *Bibliography on the Status of Arab Women* in 1980 under the auspices of the Institute I now lead. So, I came full circle.

Why is there even such a thing as a “women's institute?” Because we are building women back into a narrative that has historically excluded them. I like to think of these things as mandatory measures to rectify a dangerous imbalance. One day, there will be no need for this because we will understand and engage with all people—regardless of sex, race, ethnicity, whatever—as equals with a voice, with experiences, with dignity. Until then, women's institutes, women's studies, women's quotas, and work on women's equality must continue.

In 1973, when the Arab Institute for Women (AiW) was established, there were hardly any women's studies institutes in academic institutions. And none in the Arab region. This Institute was the first of its kind.

The impetus for women's studies arose from women's activism in the United States in the late 1960s to redress inequalities and rectify historic imbalances. Unfortunately, there is incomplete information about the origins of women's studies as a specific field. We don't even have complete information about our own history.

What we do know is this: The first women's studies course was offered at Cornell University in 1969, and the first women's studies program was established in 1970 in San Diego State University. These were both at the undergraduate level. Graduate and post-graduate programs in women's studies and gender studies evolved much later. The first women's studies journal, *Feminist Studies*, began in 1972. And the National Women's Studies Association in the United States was established in 1977.

Stanford University founded its institute for gender research in 1974, one year after The AiW was established. Rutgers followed suit in 1975, and Yale launched its first

program in women and gender studies in 1979. The 1980s and 1990s saw more universities launch women's studies programs and institutes.

In 1976, Mary Turner Lane, founder of the Women's Studies Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill argued that "there has been neglect, bias, and omission in the fields of study and disciplines which should include the study of women . . . And because the systematic, scholarly study of women had not been fostered, there is no accurate presentation of women" (Lane 1975: 3).

The Institute is built on the premise that it provides an "accurate presentation of women" and also a strong champion for their cause. Incidentally, Mary Turner Lane herself was interested in Arab women and served in Cairo as a consultant to the Egyptian Ministry of Education from 1978 to 1981. Following her death, her daughter established an award for research on women at the AiW in honor of her mother.

By the 1970s, half the Arab states had given women suffrage—first among them was Lebanon, as early as 1952. During the 1950s and 60s, industrialization fueled the need for a larger labor force, thereby offering women some opportunities, and introducing a few progressive laws.

The AiW was founded shortly before the start of the Lebanese Civil War. It was against this backdrop that the Institute learned how to survive.

In 1975, Mexico hosted the United Nation's first World Conference on Women, and the launch of International Women's Year and the UN's Decade for Women. This marked a major turning point in women's rights—rights that, nearly five decades later, we have yet to achieve.

Among other things, these events called for an increase in the study of social trends and data on women. This was a driving force behind the creation of the Institute's seminal journal *Al-Raida*, meaning "the female pioneer" in Arabic, in publication since 1976.

In its long history, the Institute's scholars, staff, and students have lived through progress and regress in the Arab region—multiple crises, regional wars, layered insecurities, ongoing discrimination. We have continued to operate despite every pushback and setback.

Today, The AiW operates at the intersection of academia and activism to amplify women's voices in the region and around the world. The Institute is a bridge connecting women in the region to global platforms—because representation matters. The Institute works across the 22 countries—with their half a billion inhabitants—and also with the Arab diaspora—in the millions. Over the past five decades of its existence, The AiW has been a champion for women in the Arab region, studying and supporting changes in women's roles, responsibilities, and realities while also pushing for social and policy change to bring us closer to equality.

And now, lack of funding due to the pandemic has compromised the survival of women's rights organizations, such as the Institute. If women continue to be left out of leadership—undermined and underfunded—it will have devastating effects on women's rights, equality, and autonomy. Feminist groups need to be given space and support, tools and resources, in order to strongly advocate and act on behalf of women and girls.

The Institute is a hub for these groups, a fueling station for feminists, a center of support, resources, and inspiration. The Institute has survived decades of insecurity all while continuing to provide women—particularly young women—with the opportunities to enhance their leadership and skills to strengthen their force on the frontlines.

The Institute has a huge role to play in the region—and for the region. Today like never before, women’s movements are leading the call for change. The AiW brings 48 years of experience, engagement, and action at the frontlines of Arab feminist movements. These movements will be the turning point.

Fostering gender equality in the Arab region is nonnegotiable. This is a historic moment and a future imperative. Women’s leadership will enable the region to better withstand future shocks. The region cannot move forward when half of its population is continually left behind.

And this isn’t just about women. Research has shown that a country’s chances of peace, prosperity, and progress are not based on the government or the economy—it is based on how a country treats its women. There’s evidence for this: when women lead, we all benefit.

Today, as the Institute approaches its 50th birthday, it remains a legend, a pioneer, and the force for our feminist future in the Arab region and beyond. It is a center of power for women.

Now more than ever, women’s rights hang in the balance. And yet, it’s 2021, we like to remind ourselves. Why is this even still on the agenda? There are 3.7 billion women in the world—equality should be a given. ■

REFERENCE

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