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Women Inequality in the MENA Region: Insights from the Arab Spring Revolution

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Women's inequality remains a significant global concern with important connotations for the MENA region. Preserving human rights, combating discrimination against women, and enhancing equality of life for women are critical as we work on socio-economic models that are more sustainable and balanced. Women's rights recognition in all societies has surfaced since much existing research provides significant evidence of women's valuable contribution to the development of our societies and their associated economic contributions. Gender equality is a cornerstone of human rights, and it is critical in developing a sustainable world where individuals can thrive by supporting stable economic and political systems. Core research findings reveal that Arab countries experienced a declining trend in subjective well-being due to the Arab Spring in 2011. This paper presents a critical analysis of existing research studies that demonstrate the link between life satisfaction and the major grievances that came to light during the revolution, with corruption being the primary factor affecting life satisfaction, particularly in countries that experienced significant revolts and uprisings.

1. INTRODUCTION

The existing gender gap is a significant economic issue at the global level due to its importance in hindering sustainable economic development. Many studies and reports have highlighted the importance of bringing more women into the labor force, as their participation is

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associated with increased economic growth (UNESCO. 2023; Krivkovich et al. 2022; United Nations Development Programme 2016; World Economic Forum 2018; Ostry et al. 2018). Both men and women possess distinct capabilities, insights, and strategies that are financially beneficial and help to amplify economic progression and growth.

According to the World Bank Development Report (World Development Report 2012), the lack of women's economic empowerment threatens growth and poverty reduction. It has additional implications, such as less favorable educational environments and affects children's health and social opportunities. The report estimates that the gap between the female working population and the employed female population¹ continues to expand, implying that it would take around 150 years for women to match the world average (World Bank 2006; 2012).

Moreover, women worldwide, particularly in the MENA region, are facing significant gaps regarding their active economic contribution, as they are very constrained in terms of social, economic, and political engagement and participation in public life. Karshenas, and Moghadam. (2016) note that the region has made significant progress in literacy among females, infant deaths, and lifespan. But, despite this, the proportion of women in the labor force has not experienced similar growth. As indicated by Markle (2013), although the region has made significant advances in education, there are gender conventions that prove to be a challenge to women in the Middle East and North Africa. These conventions are rooted in culture, religion, and rigid family structures.

Moreover, researchers such as Inglehart and Norris (2003) attribute women's limited participation in economic life to the Islamic culture, which carries significant influence. However, in the Middle East and North Africa, traditional norms are more influential than Islam in reducing women's involvement in the workforce (Assaad et al. 2018). The belief that religion is the major constraint toward women's integration in the labor force within the MENA region is then challenged by research findings highlighting issues related to cultural issues² and somehow shared with historical trends at the global level as countries exhibit patriarchal solid societies. Consequently, it is vital to recognize the effect of socio-economic structures in perpetuating these traditional social norms and, thus, the restriction of female labor participation and their relegation to sectors that are more connected to activities that are related to care.

¹Female working population is the number of female population ages 15 and older that is economically active. The employed female population is the number of female populations who are currently in work.

²In some countries Like Saudi Arabia religion plays a dominant role in the country's governance and legal system, deeply influences culture and women's life, while in Tunisia for example religion has less impact on women's life.

This research study focuses on the critical analysis of existing studies examining women's role in the socio-economic context and its implications for political stability and the economic development of the Middle East and North Africa region. As such, special attention is given to women's economic and social roles. More specifically, this paper shows how the Arab Spring Revolution has contributed to raising awareness of growing inequality levels in the MENA region. The next section provides an overview of gender inequality and its economic impact. [Section 3](#) reassess oil's critical role in the region and its impact on the labor force and women's empowerment. [Section 4](#) critically analyzes the case of the Arab revolution; the case of the "Arab Spring" is used here to set a background of economic instability in the region and its possible connection to women's empowerment. A final section concludes the discussion.

2. A GENDER INEQUALITY OVERVIEW

While examples of gender inequality in the MENA region may vary from one country to the other, they all reflect and share the same attributes (Madiha 2005). When comparing developed and less developed countries, Seema (2015) states that women in developing nations perform worse than men when compared to the situation in developed nations in various areas, from college enrollment to their independence and autonomy; the author relates that to the fact that women's lives are associated with a significant level of control from men. Numerous studies point to the fact that gender inequality has significant negative implications for economic growth and materializes on other macroeconomic issues at the global level (Markle 2013; Klasen and Lamanna 2009). On the one hand, there is a recognized positive relationship between economic and gender equality. Gender equality could lead to faster growth and accelerated poverty reduction. On the other hand, gender discrimination negatively affects economic growth and political stability, as it results in a decrease in access for women to the labor market, to educational and medical services, and in turn, reduces children's health and the prospects of the country in terms of future economic development and its stability (Santos Silva and Klasen 2021).

Although there are some common forms of discrimination against women in all countries, other forms can be observed in the MENA region. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women were not allowed to drive until the issuance of a decree in September 2017 that allowed women to start driving effectively from June 2018. Another example was in Bahrain, where

women participated in the country's elections for the first time - running for elections or voting in 2002 (Mohammad and Nour 2019). According to Al-Tamimi (2014), there is no legal minimum age for marriage in Yemen, with approximately 65% of underage females getting married in this country. Child marriage ruins the future of girls since it does not allow them to live a normal life, continue their education or even work and develop their skills, in addition to increasing their probability of suffering from severe health issues that may lead to early death in some cases (Yoosefi Lebni et al. 2023; McCleary-Sills et al. 2015).

Research on gender equality in the Middle East and North African region increased significantly following the Arab Spring Revolution due to the unequal rights given to women compared to men in most countries worldwide (Charrad Mounira and Zarrugh 2013). From the start of the Arab revolts in 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa, women in the region participated actively in the demonstrations. In Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and other Arab countries, women actively contributed to protests expressing discontent with their situation of exclusion and marginalization. Women activists were influential in these upheavals and expected that their presence would act as a catalyst for reforms, thus enhancing the condition of women (Halen and Heideman 2015).

3. OIL AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN THE MENA REGION

Oil plays a vital role in the Arab world as it is the most critical energy source in the region, with substantial implications for the global economy (IMF 2016). Arab countries hold approximately 71% of the world's total proved reserves. In 2011, the region's production represented almost a quarter of global oil supplies, making it the world's most important crude oil supplier (Fattouh and El-Katirim 2012). The argument put forward by Michael Rossin in his 2008 paper, "Oil, Islam and Women", is that the oil sector impairs gender equality by reducing the number of female workers in many developing countries, implying that the oil industry has an adverse effect on women. The argument suggests that various forms of economic expansion affect gender relations. Since oil – a male-dominated sector - is the driving force behind growth in these countries (Markle 2013), it discourages women from entering the labor force. Females are customarily not encouraged to join the oil industry; instead, they are urged to pursue careers in social sciences and stay away from high-earning, male-dominated roles in the oil and business sector.

However, even in countries that are not so dependent on oil, women are still unable to join the workforce because of the views of men on the role of women in society, with women facing many barriers to being able to enter the workforce (Mohammad and Nour 2019).

Another aspect that must be considered relates to the dominance of traditional Islamic views and the social understanding that men are responsible for providing for the entire household and that women should not aim to work outside their households and move away from family duties. In Morocco, even if they can find employment, women often receive a 40% lower salary than men when demonstrating equal qualifications. In addition, they only constitute 28% of the workforce. According to Inglehart and Norris (2003), women in these countries have struggled because of the Muslim culture. On the other hand, Ross (2008) found that the Middle East is where women have made the most minor progress regarding gender equality. It is widely assumed that this is because of the region's Islamic customs and the dominance of oil, which can help explain why women are left behind, with the role played by Islam requiring further insights.

4. THE ARAB REVOLUTION

For more than a decade, Arab countries have faced enormous dissatisfaction and unrest within their governments, resulting in a revolutionary movement often recognized as the "Arab Spring" or "Arab Revolution" in the international arena. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria are examples of countries where societal unrest has resulted in human conflicts, dramatic events, internal clashes, civil wars, and the loss of life of many innocent citizens. While the Arab Spring was ongoing, it was remarkable how quickly protests swept across these countries and affected others. Despite widespread interest in the Arab Spring upheaval, there has been little research into its impact on women's engagement in these countries' social, political, and economic sectors. According to Cobham and Zouache (2015), the upheavals have been stirred by Arab countries' long-term performance, which has been marked by poor economic growth and a failure to shift away from authoritarian political regimes. Furthermore, Dewey et al. (2012) argue that destabilizing factors such as slow economic growth, high inflation, rising unemployment, and considerable government subsidies in these nations led to the social unrest that materialized in the Arab Spring.

According to Dalacoura (2012), the uprisings were linked to high levels of socio-economic uncertainty and extensive political discontent. Poverty, relative deprivation, and a mismatch between expectations and actual economic and social situations were all essential variables in this explosive combination. Furthermore, the Arab world's long-standing structural difficulties have worsened since 2011. These challenges included continuous high unemployment, especially among young people, widespread corruption, internal regional and socio-economic inequities, further deterioration in economic conditions because of the 2008 Global Economic and Financial Crisis (GEFC) and rising food costs. In numerous Arab countries, the GEFC has led to a sharp drop in GDP growth since 2011. As seen in Table 1 below, real GDP growth in Bahrain decreased from 8.4% in 2007 to 2% in 2011. Egypt achieved consistent economic growth under the Mubarak regime's economic reforms but experienced a dramatic economic downturn after 2008 due to a lack of foreign investment. Tourism also declined, combined with plummeting oil prices, creating the perfect storm for social unrest exhibited by other MENA countries.

The 2016 International Monetary Fund report provides interesting insights into the performance of Arab Countries (IMF 2016). Syria's GDP in 2015 exhibited a downward trend due to the four years of conflict, resulting in a GDP half of its pre-conflict level in 2010. Yemen lost 25-35% of its GDP in 2015 alone, although Libya's scenario was different due to its significant reliance on oil, resulting in very erratic GDP growth.

Table 1. GDP and inflation rates in selected MENA countries.

Country	GDP growth rate				Inflation rate			
	2007	2011	2014	2018	2007	2011	2014	2018
Algeria	3.4	2.9	3.8	2.1	3.7	4.5	2.9	4.3
Bahrain	8.3	2.0	4.3	1.8	3.3	-0.4	2.6	2.1
Egypt	7.1	1.8	2.9	5.3	9.3	10.1	10.1	14.4
Iraq	1.4	7.5	0.7	0.6	-10.1	5.8	2.2	0.4
Jordan	8.2	2.6	3.1	1.9	4.7	4.2	2.9	4.5
Kuwait	6.0	9.6	0.5	1.2	5.5	4.8	2.9	2.2
Lebanon	9.3	0.9	1.9	0.2	3.1	5.0	1.9	6.1
Libya	6.4	-62.1	-24.0	7.8	6.3	15.5	2.6	13.6
Morocco	3.5	5.2	2.7	3.0	2.0	0.9	0.4	1.9
Oman	4.5	-1.1	2.8	2.1	5.8	4.0	1.0	0.9
Qatar	18.0	13.4	4.0	1.4	13.8	1.1	3.4	0.3
Saudi Arabia	1.8	10.0	3.7	2.2	4.2	5.8	2.2	2.5
Syria	5.7	2.9	-10.3	1.4	3.9	4.8	37.1	13.2
Tunisia	6.7	-1.9	3.0	2.5	3.0	3.2	4.6	7.3
UAE	3.2	6.9	4.4	1.4	12.5	0.9	2.3	3.1
Yemen	3.3	-12.7	-0.2	-2.7	7.9	3.2	8.1	14.9

Source: World Bank. <https://data.worldbank.org>

Libya's GDP plummeted by 24% in 2014 as conflict increased. It is interesting to note how severe these GDP declines were during times of conflict. The impact of conflict varies significantly according to parameters such as the nature, severity, duration, and geographic extent of the violence (Leeson 2007; Powell, Ford, and Nowrasteh 2008).

Social unrest and wars in the MENA countries had a significant detrimental effect on the economies of the region and, in particular, on those of the surrounding countries. For example, in 2013, growth levels in Jordan, Syria and Iraq were negatively affected. Furthermore, inflationary pressures were significant due to rising demands emerging from the growing refugee population with a limited short-term supply response. Lebanon was another country that experienced significant economic problems, with GDP growth falling to 2.8% in 2012 and 2.5% in 2013, compared to an average of 9% from 2007 to 2010. In addition, economic deterioration was very much explained by the considerable rise in food and rent prices at the start of the crisis.

One critical point to emphasize is that, in most nations, unemployment has increased due to insufficient economic growth. Even though unemployment was a major stimulus for the revolts, the situation in these countries worsened in 2011. According to World Bank official figures, all countries had double-digit unemployment rates except for Morocco. In 2012, Egypt's unemployment rate was around 13%, while Yemen had a shocking figure of 35%. Although these high unemployment rates are concerning, it is even more alarming because youth unemployment rates are expected to be two to three times higher than general unemployment rates (Mazarei and Mirzoev 2015; Khan 2014). Tunisia, too, has exceptionally high unemployment rates, particularly among university graduates (Mbazia 2017).

A substantial amount of the literature is devoted to the Arab Spring movement and the root reasons for the regional upheaval (Saad et al. 2022; Ahmad 2020; Mbazia 2017; Dewey et al. 2012). Indeed, subjective well-being indices reveal that those in the middle class felt stuck and disappointed before the Arab Spring. In nations such as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, average levels of subjective well-being were low and declined just before 2010 (Ahmad 2020). This drop reflected dissatisfaction with declining living standards, high unemployment rates, insufficient public services, and corruption (Devarajan and Ianchovichina 2018). Kamal (2013), on the other hand, contends that political scholars generally agree on a set of major elements that contributed to the social explosion known as the 2011 Arab uprisings. Economic collapse, government corruption, the authoritarian and violent nature of Arab governments, as well as the restriction of individual liberty are among these

factors. For example, many scholars have investigated the role of social media in the nations affected by the 2011 turmoil. Among those scholars, Hassan (2015) noted that the Arab Spring embraced a wide range of issues, including the significant role of social media in making political oppression more humane. Prior to the Middle Eastern revolutions, social media was recognized as a critical component in helping public protests and social movements. It successfully awoke Arabs, empowering them to confront authoritarian regimes in their pursuit of greater freedom and independence. The internet gave a forum for open debates on previously taboo themes, allowing Arabs to express themselves freely and without restrictions and boosting social and intellectual contacts.

However, Akcesme (2015) claims that the revolution of 2011 shows that the absence of democracy did not necessarily lead to the revolt. For example, the Egyptians suffered a dictator for over three decades, with little resistance. This suggests that the revolution was primarily motivated by the country's economic deterioration. As a result, Lesch (2011) found that the lack of democracy was a minor influence in Egypt's 2011 revolution. According to Mobazia (2017), rising inequalities within the country, particularly between rural and coastal governorates, were a primary cause for the 11 January 2011 uprising. According to Akcesme (2015), these inequalities caused high levels of unhappiness that worked as triggers and fueled the Middle Eastern turmoil. Furthermore, Arampatzi et al. (2018) investigated the mystery of inequality in Arab countries, identifying low and declining levels of subjective well-being before the Arab Spring as critical variables. The reviewed literature provides significant insights into a significant negative relationship between life happiness and the three major grievances proclaimed during the Arab Spring: dissatisfaction with living standards and inadequate labor market conditions, combined with high levels of nepotism, corruption and favoritism, created an explosive cocktail that translated into social unrest and deep discontent, particularly in nations where the uprisings were most intense (Akcesme 2015).

Economic and political fragility emerges as a critical factor to be considered in the MENA region. Fragility occurs with a combination of risk and inadequate capacity to cope, absorb, or lessen those risks, leading to adverse results such as an upsurge in violence, poverty, and inequality (OECD 2020). A growing body of research shows the inextricable link between gender inequality, fragility, higher levels of conflict and economic and political instability (Yimer 2021; Sweetman and Rowlands 2016; Ghazzaoui 2016). Societies defined by accentuated gender inequality are negatively affected by their entire economic and political systems, which can materialize into geoeconomic and geopolitical imbalances

(Tucker 2023; Valentin et al. 2021). Conversely, instability and fighting increase existing disparities (Goemans, Koester, and Loudon 2021). In their recent study, Saad et al. (2022) provided evidence of how gender inequality is particularly prominent in impoverished and highly fragile nations. According to an OECD report (OECD 2022), in Afghanistan women face significant discrimination regarding access to education, the healthcare system, and the labor market in a fragile context.

It follows that the MENA region has the potential to significantly increase its GDP by encouraging more economic involvement from women. It is estimated that the annual GDP in this region could increase by 47% in 2025 if efforts were directed at increasing women's labor force participation (Goemans, Koester, and Loudon 2021). Examining the causes of low female labor force participation and devising effective and practical solutions to address these issues is essential, given the potential of women as contributors to economic growth and development, as well as the trend toward diminishing gender disparities in other facets of MENA societies which help to reduce violence and internal conflicts (Verena Bruer, 2017; Justino et al. 2012). However, unlike other regions, the cultural and religious norms greatly impact the lives of women and their progression and development. These customs and principles restrain economic equality and can become an obstacle to achieving gender equality, acting as major disruptors of economic and political stability (Goemans, Koester, and Loudon 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

The reviewed literature offers evidence indicating the importance of gender equality for economic development, political stability and poverty reduction. Although these research studies have investigated different countries with different economic structures, most of them agreed that there is a negative relationship between gender inequality and economic development (Santos Silva and Klasen 2021; Nayef and Monira 2017). The main research findings suggest that having more women in the workforce improves countries' economic performance, promotes job creation, and accelerates economic growth with positive spillover effects on society, families, and children (S&P Global 2019; IMF. 2013; CAWTAR, 2007). According to the World Bank report (2013), women could play a more significant role in the Middle East region's economic model if females enjoyed equal labor force participation rates as men. Furthermore, women's empowerment frequently leads to the increased

well-being of their families and communities. Several studies have emphasized the positive effects of gender equality on economic development. The benefits of fair treatment, access to resources, and equal opportunities for both men and women are well understood. However, considerable inequalities persist, and substantial work remains to be done.

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