

ECONOMIC FREEDOM AND WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION IN THE MENA REGION

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Abstract

The position of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a complex topic, difficult to comprehend without allowing for socio-cultural norms, legal frameworks and the global gender context. In thinking about a practical framework for action, the free market perspective is relevant and necessary. However, this alone does not seem to provide a complete answer to the problem of promoting women's economic status. This article makes the case for the importance of market-friendly, but also gender-sensitive, policies to promote women's economic freedom and hence women's emancipation in the MENA region.

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1. Introduction

Women's issues have been conceptualised in the international development context in many different ways, and this has affected local policy. Arab countries, like all the countries that signed and ratified the UN treaties related to gender and women's issues, have faced problems trying to comply with what they previously signed up to. 'Women in Development' (WID) was the first paradigm that framed and oriented policies in the early 1970s. In this approach, women's issues were made relevant to development on the basis of an assumed positive correlation between economic growth and investing in women (Ravazi and Miller 1995, p. 2). The approach has its shortcomings, as it has resulted in policies promoting women's empowerment regardless of the context they live in. Governments and civil society organisations acted without taking into account the initial structural inequalities and power relations associated with women's subordination. Increasing awareness of this context gave rise to a shift from the WID paradigm to the 'Gender and Development' (GAD) approach. GAD recognises gender power relations and the influence of socio-cultural norms in defining women's subordinate status.

In a region such as the Arab world, which approach makes greater sense? Neither has been particularly effective. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, gender power and gender relations are heavily affected by socio-cultural and religious norms, and women are generally excluded from the public sphere and arenas of development, and especially from the economy. The MENA region records the world's lowest rate of female labour force participation (World Bank 2013a, p. 40).

In this article, I compare the two approaches and their application in the MENA region and argue that a combination of the two is necessary in advancing women's position in the Arab

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world, especially given the current context of rising violence and conflicts that weaken the position of women in many ways: if women and girls are physically more vulnerable in such a context, the implication is that they are now in greater need of men's protection. In such a dangerous world, men are easily portrayed as the natural protectors and women the ones in need of protection, with all that this implies, home being perceived to be the safest place for women (Enloe 2014, p. 30). Men, given their role as breadwinners, are more likely to be found in the public sphere even in contexts of instability and turmoil. Unfortunately, the current context in the Arab world entrenches the historical division between the 'public' and the 'private' and the consequences of this division for the perceived roles and responsibilities of each gender. How can women's position be advanced in such a context? What kind of policies would help emancipate women in the Arab world?

Using the insights of both the WID and GAD approaches, I make the case for the importance of promoting women's economic freedom in the Arab world in order to advance their status. This article argues in two directions: first, in favour of a market-friendly environment, showing how it could promote women's access to the job market and their economic freedom; and second, in favour of a gender-sensitive approach which should accompany market-friendly policies, to reduce entry barriers that limit women's agency and prevent them from benefiting from the opportunities that economic liberalisation can create.

2. WID versus GAD: implications for policymaking in the Arab world

The conceptualisation and framing of women's issues has influenced development policy, both internationally and locally, and given rise to a myriad of practices. The first major trend, Women in Development, 'is associated with the wide range of activities concerning women in the development domain, which donor agencies, governments and NGOs have become involved in since the 1970s' (Ravazi and Miller 1995, p. 2). WID advocates have adopted an economic efficiency argument, making the case for women's potential contribution to the development process, and so have approached policymakers and influenced policies in that direction. The approach has had a lasting impact on development policies and practices.

The WID approach was born in a context where policymakers had previously identified women primarily with their roles as mothers and wives. Policies related to women's issues were restricted to what Ravazi and Miller call the 'welfare approach'. In reaction to this general policy environment, WID was shaped around the liberal feminist idea that 'women's disadvantages stem from stereotyped customary expectations held by men and internalized by women, and promoted through various agencies of socialization' (Ravazi and Miller 1995, p. 3). WID aimed at breaking down the stereotypes by promoting 'new' roles for women essentially through training and economic empowerment. This has taken the form of development programmes and policies directed to women, which did not, however, take into account the power relations between men and women and the structural inequalities that would and did limit women's participation in such opportunities. This has been more severe in patriarchal settings such as the Arab world, where many projects and policies aimed at the economic empowerment of women have turned out in practice to be 'welfare' projects. The prevailing socio-cultural norms, societal structures and power relations in the region have continued to constrain women's economic freedom and the opportunities to which they have access. This contrasts with 'projects for women' in sub-Saharan Africa to promote their economic role in

farming; these have resulted in real empowerment, because in this region women are responsible for providing food for their families. Similar projects did not work out in the MENA, as men are identified as the breadwinners in this part of the world (Ravazi and Miller 1995, p. 10).

By the late 1970s, WID advocates and practitioners had started to question the model and its efficiency. Addressing women's issues without regard to the power relations and structural inequalities that initially led to their subordination, and hence limited their access to resources, has not been a successful strategy. WID-related research undertaken from a liberal feminist perspective did great work in analysing women's subordination and its causes and in prescribing relevant ways to break down the subordination cycle by providing women with more access to resources. Its practice, however, has suffered from the major shortcoming of dealing with women's subordination in isolation from the very context and social systems that produced it.

This 'new' awareness was also promoted by a growing critique within feminist scholarship of treating women as a single homogeneous group regardless of the different contexts they live in (Ravazi and Miller 1995, p. 12). By focusing on gender power relations, on the role of socio-cultural norms and on how both men's and women's positions are forged and sustained, a new paradigm emerged that also served as a general policy framework. Gender and Development calls for gender-sensitive policies in all fields instead of specific policies or projects directed only to women. The gender language is currently the one used in the policy field and development practices. Despite this, the outputs are not very different from those of WID, especially in developing countries. Operationalising GAD in policymaking is still a confusing and challenging process, especially in countries where conservative socio-cultural norms shape gender relations. The MENA region is a major part of the belt of what the literature refers to as 'classic patriarchy' (the Indian subcontinent is another part). It represents probably the most challenging case in terms of operationalising GAD in policymaking, given its complex patriarchal nature in which the social, the cultural and the religious come into play simultaneously.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted during the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, and reaffirmed by the UN in 2000, is the culmination of the 'gender' language and the most comprehensive global framework that has affected policymaking around the world, including in the MENA region. Looking at the extent of implementation and compliance with its provisions (by both governments and social agencies) shows the great challenge that the MENA countries face in operationalising the GAD framework. Almost all national reports of Arab countries on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 20 years on continue to highlight the challenges related to the cultural environment in those countries. Even when legislation and policies promoting gender equality exist, local contexts in Arab countries respond poorly to them, creating a 'gap between planning and implementation' (UN Women 2015, p. 6). The conventional gender role attributed to women, expecting them to be at home or to spend more hours at home than men, restricts their presence in the public sphere.

The rise of armed conflicts and violence in the region has worsened the situation, and strengthened the perception, of the home as a safer place for women. Political instability and turmoil in many countries of the region have affected men and women differently. While men are more likely to die in such conflicts, women are more likely to experience many forms of

sexual violence. Indeed, reports denounce the use of sexual violence to target opponents in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria during the period of unrest that is still ongoing in some areas and countries. Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Libya tend to marry off their daughters at a young age, believing that marriage will provide them with some form of protection. In Egypt, civil society organisations have reported intense forms of harassment of women in the streets, especially during demonstrations (UN Women 2013, p. 10). In such contexts, women's freedom of movement is further limited and women are even more confined to the private sphere for protection.

In spite of the GAD approach, which urged 'gender mainstreaming', projects related to the economic empowerment of women in the MENA region have mainly taken a 'women-only' form. The most recurrent example of women's economic empowerment, one important pillar in the Beijing Declaration, is income-generating activities. While encouraging women's entrepreneurship is very important, implementing income-generating activities without the necessary prerequisites does not produce the desired outcome in terms of participation and revenues. National reports highlight another set of socio-cultural impediments limiting women's economic freedom, including 'barriers to service access for rural and poor women, administrative complications; delays in amendments to laws on women's economic independence; the limited access of women to production tools, property ownership and resources' (UN Women 2015, p. 7). All of these problems necessitate policies that are both market-friendly and gender-sensitive if they are to be overcome.

3. Women's economic participation in the MENA region: facts and figures

Most Arab countries now show relative gender equality in health (as measured by healthy life expectancy and sex ratio at birth) and education (as measured by literacy and school enrolment ratios, while women actually outnumber men in higher education). This has improved their Human Development Index scores, which record the world's fastest progress since the 1970s (World Economic Forum 2014). Higher per-capita incomes have accompanied this progress in human development. However, this has not led to increases in women's economic participation such as other parts of the world have experienced. This anomaly, specific to the MENA region, has been referred to in World Bank reports as 'the MENA puzzle'. But the puzzle is solved when we allow for two factors. The first is the specific patriarchal nature of MENA societies characterised by segregation between the 'private' (the home and traditional settings for women's gatherings) and the 'public' (public spaces including streets, markets, services and facilities) that frames and maintains gender roles. The second is the particular nature of economic growth in the MENA region stemming mainly from 'rent economies' that do not necessarily promote economic freedom for everyone.

The MENA region records the world's lowest rate of female labour force participation: 25 per cent compared with a global average of 50 per cent. Rates vary from one country to another, however, ranging from 16 per cent in Jordan to 51 per cent in Qatar.

Young women in the MENA region face the highest unemployment rate in the world (nearly 40 per cent compared with 22 per cent among young men) (World Bank 2013a, p. 46). The MENA region also records the lowest regional average score on the Global Gender Gap Index (GGI), its highest-scoring country, Kuwait, being below the regional averages of all the other five regions (World Economic Forum 2014). In spite of the noticeable improvement in

health and education (which constitute two of the four subindexes of the GGI, economic participation and political empowerment being the other two), the region is still lagging with only 60 per cent of its global gender gap (accounted for by the four GGI subindexes) closed in 2013. Economic participation is the component that most widens the gender gap in the MENA region. Indeed, 'the [MENA] region continues to rank last on the Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex, with only 42% of the economic gender gap closed' (World Economic Forum 2014, p. 24).

While economic growth has spurred investment in MENA women's health and education, it has also provided for better living standards, which has reduced the need for women to enter the job market. In Europe, women first joined the labour force in critical numbers when they needed to work to provide for their own living standards and those of their families, and men had no choice but to accept it. The socio-cultural and legal contexts in the Arab world have not experienced similar pressures to change and to boost women's economic participation.

Limited female labour force participation in the MENA region can be explained, then, by a set of interacting influences. There is no single factor, though, that could explain on its own the gender gap in economic participation of women in all the MENA countries, given the wide diversity in the region in law, demographics, and social, economic and political structures. However, a general trend exists along with major factors which may apply to some degree in all countries in the region, and so a set of policy recommendations could be relevant to them all. Although not exhaustively, these factors, drawn from different World Bank, UN agencies and national reports) are summarised in Box A.

Box A: Factors limiting female labour force participation

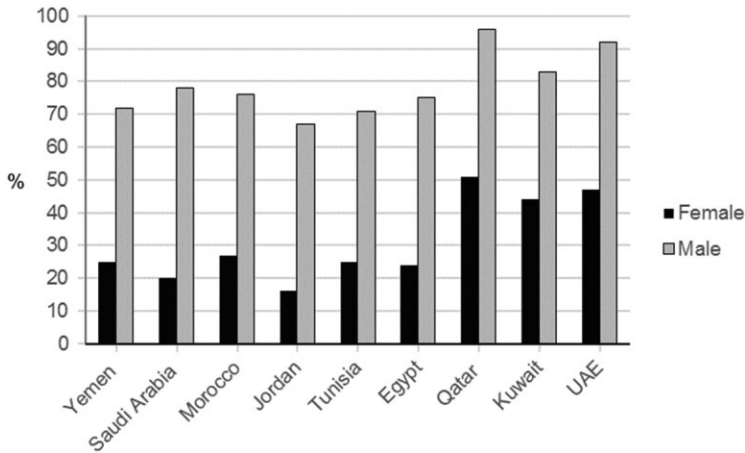
- Legal restrictions partly reflecting social norms and limiting women's agency.
- Restricted access to assets (bank accounts, loans, land).
- Unfriendly environment for women doing business (administrative complications and requirements, which are more likely to intimidate women given the cultural context and sexist stereotypes).
- Unfriendly environment for businesses which would have employed women (tax rates, complicated administrative requirements, fraud, corruption, political instability).
- Employment regulations that end up encouraging employers to discriminate against women (e.g. regulations pertaining to maternity leave).
- Mismatch between the skills required by the private sector and education outputs (girls are often oriented to subjects with low employment outcomes and discouraged to study subjects perceived to be more competitive and hence better adapted to men).
- Socio-cultural norms (traditional gender roles requiring men to play the role of breadwinner and women the role of housekeeper).

Table 1: Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) data for selected MENA countries

Country	GGI score	GGI overall rank within a total of 142 countries	Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex (score and rank)	Ease of Doing Business index (rank within a total of 189 countries)
Yemen	0.514	142	0.359 (138)	137
Saudi Arabia	0.606	130	0.389 (137)	49
Morocco	0.599	133	0.400 (135)	71
Jordan	0.597	134	0.358 (140)	117
Tunisia	0.627	123	0.463 (130)	60
Egypt	0.606	129	0.461 (131)	112
Qatar	0.640	116	0.619 (101)	50
Kuwait	0.646	113	0.608 (106)	86
United Arab Emirates	0.644	115	0.515 (123)	22

Notes: The index scores range from 1 (equality) to 0 (inequality). Numbers are rounded to three decimal places.

Sources: Global GGI and Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex: World Economic Forum (2014); Ease of Doing Business index: World Bank (2014).

**Figure 1:** Male and female labour force participation rates (%) in selected MENA countries, 2010.

Source: World Bank (2013a).

Table 1 shows the GGI scores of the countries depicted in Figure 1. The table helps us to examine the association between women's economic participation and the ease of doing business in different countries across the MENA. The table also supports the relevance of some of the above-mentioned factors, as demonstrated in Section 4.

4. Market-friendly policies and their potential for advancing women's position in the Arab world

Low levels of economic participation in the region have important implications for wider aspects of women's position. Their absence from the public sphere implies more presence in the private one, resulting in power imbalances and gender inequalities. Women's limited access to economic opportunities reduces their resilience and makes them financially dependent on men,

which creates and maintains other types of dependence (affective, social, in terms of decision-making, and so on). It also constrains their access to basic needs such as health and education.

The concentrated presence of women in the private sphere and their exclusion from the public arena increase the probability of domestic violence, with power being in the hands of men and domestic violence being considered as a private matter. Associating women almost exclusively with the private sphere weakens their position within society in general, limiting their individual freedoms such as freedom of movement, of expression and of decision-making. As mentioned earlier, the dichotomy between the private and the public defines the particularity of 'Arab patriarchy' and is very important to understanding the power imbalances and gender inequalities that for centuries have shaped women's position in the Arab world (Adnane 2013). The World Development Report 2012 (World Bank 2011, p. 154) highlights how greater access to economic resources improves women's agency through enhancing their bargaining power and allowing the accumulation of personal assets (physical, personal and financial). The report shows graphically how women's control is greater in wealthier households. The MENA region is no exception but rather shows a steeper increase in the share of women with some control over decisions as we move through the wealth quintiles until it almost reaches the levels of the developed world regions. However, the obstacles to women's economic freedom in the MENA region seem to be greater than in any other part of the world. Informal socio-cultural obstacles intervene not only directly in limiting women's presence in the private sphere but also indirectly, rendering women particularly intimidated by the formal obstacles to economic participation.

Globally, women are more likely to be intimidated by the large amount of requirements, administrative procedures and time needed to start a business. 'Some 75 percent of the world's women cannot get bank loans because they have unpaid or insecure jobs and are not entitled to property ownership' (World Bank 2010a). Women's entrepreneurship is particularly low in the Arab world, as can be inferred from the Ease of Doing Business scores in Table 1. Arab countries, except for United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait, score very badly on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index. Not surprisingly, Arab countries also score badly in the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2014*: they are actually among the worst 20 countries, with the exception of Kuwait, the Emirates and Qatar. These three countries also record the highest female economic participation in the region (see Figure 1). Market-friendly environments promote women's economic participation. In other countries, though, where the general policy environment is not market-friendly, many individuals, especially women, are driven into the informal sector.

The informal sector, which is still a significant presence in many Arab countries, is more likely to involve women than men, and women account for the greater share of informal economic activities in the Arab world (World Bank 2011, p. 79). This is due, among other things, to a business climate in the region that does not promote entrepreneurship. 'While high-income countries have on average four new firms per 1000 working age people, MENA countries register only 0.63 new firms, ahead of only sub-Saharan Africa' (UN Women 2012). Although this affects both men and women, the MENA business climate remains particularly hostile to women. A World Bank finding shows, for instance, that 'female-owned firms in Egypt report needing 86 weeks on average to resolve a conflict through the legal system, compared to 54 weeks for male-owned firms' (World Bank 2010b). Stereotypes and sexist behaviour, which are

still present in the society, exist also in the judiciary and corporate worlds. As for access to finance, this requires generally immovable assets and credit histories that women are less likely to possess (World Bank 2013a, p. 138).

Jordan is a good example in that it shows the interplay between different policies that have the effect of limiting women's economic participation – the lowest in the region despite a 99 per cent female literacy rate. In Jordan, men have control over economic assets, land, bank accounts, access to loans, and family-related benefits which are included in salaries or pensions. If a woman wants to receive these family benefits directly, she has to go through complicated administrative procedures. Besides, if women happen to be unmarried and under age 30 or previously married, they are required to have male guardians to undertake basic transactions (e.g. marriage, obtaining a passport). Women's work is prohibited in some sectors (mines and quarries) during night hours in both the public and the private sectors (from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m., except in workplaces specified by the Ministry of Labour). In addition, the mandatory retirement age for women in Jordan is 55, compared with 60 for men (World Bank 2013b, p. 61).

Obviously, public policy and legislation limiting women's individual freedom diminish their economic freedom and participation in the economy even in cases where policies related to economic participation are officially gender-blind. They also make employing women less attractive to employers. In the MENA region not only general labour regulations but also those related to women in particular, concerning maternity benefits and flexible hours, make the region less attractive for investment and women less attractive for employment. Labour regulations may harm women rather than benefit them. An example of a policy reform in Jordan related to maternity benefits might illustrate how a policy could be gender-sensitive without having the side effect of making women less attractive for employers. A recently adopted social security regulation

provides for maternity benefits through a 0.75 percent payroll contribution paid by the employer on behalf of both male and female employees. . . . Distributing the cost across males and females reduces the 'per head' cost and effectively 'socializes' the cost across genders and reduces incentives to discriminate in hiring decisions. (World Bank 2013b, p. 17)

A WID framework, 'women-only' projects and policies, or positive measures do not always help women or promote their economic freedom. They are a double-edged sword that can act against women by making them less attractive to employers. They can also be a blunt sword that has no effect in the presence of prevailing social and cultural norms. The framework is necessary, though, to counter the legal discrimination faced by women in some, if not all, of the MENA countries. In that sense WID and GAD strategies overlap and complement each other.

5. Market-friendly/gender-sensitive policies: the way forward

As argued in the previous section, market-friendly policies promote women's economic participation. However, their impact is limited if they are not gender-sensitive and if nothing is done to address socio-cultural norms and the structural inequalities that limit women's agency informally through family and social networks and formally through public policies. The limits of market-friendly policies are most apparent in the case of Saudi Arabia. Although it does

better than Qatar on the Ease of Doing Business index, Saudi Arabia ranks very low in terms of women's economic participation (see Table 1). Much is left to be explained by socio-cultural norms and restrictive state policies that limit women's agency. Clearly, while market-friendly policies may be *necessary* for women's economic emancipation, they are not *sufficient*.

Addressing gender power relations, as prescribed by the GAD approach, is crucial to improving women's economic participation in the MENA region. Public policies can help, as illustrated earlier, through, for instance, eliminating male guardianship, guaranteeing equal treatment before the law, removing restrictions on women's freedom of movement and so on. Wearing 'gender lenses' to analyse and understand the market entry barriers that limit women's economic participation is important throughout the whole policymaking process.

Wearing gender lenses, for instance in assessing in which sector to attract investment, could tell policymakers a lot about 'female-friendly' sectors and the positive externalities of promoting women's employment in terms of the general economic growth of the country and the extended social benefits to children. The option should at least be considered even if it is not adopted.

Changing socio-cultural norms that cut across all sectors of the MENA societies, including businesses, is also crucial. This change must come spontaneously but should also be promoted by state regulations and policies, through eliminating legal discrimination against women. Civil society organisations should further engage in advocacy to remove such discriminations, and call for equal treatment before the law and for actual economic freedom. Women's organisations in the MENA region, like the majority of women's organisations around the world, spend more time and energy advocating for a state paternalistic model, demanding more and larger welfare programmes, thereby creating the same unwanted power structure at a macro level. Governments start to play the role of male breadwinners, leading to the same subordination and dependency, and when the state for one reason or another cuts its benefits the woman's situation becomes much like a widow's. Civil society organisations should also push for change through raising awareness, not in one or two campaigns or a few projects 'for women only' but through mainstreaming the issue of gender in all their actions. Men and women should be included and the existing power relations should be addressed sensibly.

Improving state regulations to make them more market-friendly and more women-friendly would certainly provide more opportunities for women to work and compete with men through either employment or self-employment. It would provide a more favourable climate for investment in businesses, for employing women, and for women to invest and employ themselves. It would also provide more opportunities for financial businesses to provide services adapted and tailored to the needs of women with limited resources. A gender-sensitive analysis of issues related to economic freedom shows that promoting this fundamental freedom is key to the emancipation of women in the MENA region. Increased economic participation by women in turn will lead gradually to a change in gender power relations, as illustrated by the already-observed increase of the share of women with control over decisions as wealth increases. A combination of WID and GAD is necessary to initiate the change process.

6. Women's economic participation in Islam

A final important element to consider is the role of religion. Despite the presence of significant religious minorities, Islam is a major common denominator of the societies in the MENA

region. In one way or another, Islam and Islamic culture have shaped socio-cultural norms in the region, especially regarding issues related to women. Religious interpretations are often used to justify cultural practices and shape people's perceptions. Although this topic is not the main focus of this article, a brief general overview of the problematic is indispensable for a better understanding of the issue of women's economic participation.

In Islamic history, the Prophet's wife, Khadija, is considered to be a great example of a Muslim female entrepreneur. Khadija was a rich businesswoman, well-respected among the members of her tribe. She hired Muhammed, who was not then a prophet, to take care of her business, the caravan trade. She noticed his integrity and trustworthiness and decided to make a proposal of marriage, which he accepted after 'having proved himself when put in charge of a shipment of Khadija's merchandise' (Netton 2008, p. 344). Khadija was twice widowed when she met Muhammed. She was 40 years old and he was 25 when they got married, and she remained his only wife until she died. She was the source of great financial and moral support to Muhammed when he began his mission as a messenger of God.

Islam does not impose any restriction on women taking part in commercial transactions, and no male authorisation is required. Husbands, fathers, brothers or any other male relatives are not allowed to make use of the property or wealth of women without their prior free consent. Khadija's story is a great example that tells against any restriction on women's economic freedom in the name of Islam. It is also an example that challenges the current gender role division and its implications.

On the other hand, some religious interpretations of the Quran may be taken to oppose or impair women's economic freedom. In the Quran, we read, 'And abide in your houses' (The Holy Quran 33:33).¹ The verse was originally intended for the prophet's wives and aimed at protecting them and distinguishing them from other Muslim women (Abu Shokka 1995, p. 20). The verse was, however, interpreted by mainstream scholars to refer to all Muslim women. In one exegesis of the Quran, among many others, the author claims that Muslim women should abide in their houses and not leave them unless to deal with some emergency. He supports his interpretation by referring to a couple of Hadiths that mean that women should be confined to the private sphere of their homes, and continues to argue that only women of a certain age (i.e. too old to attract men) are allowed to go out to pray at the mosque (Zuhayli 1986, p. 10). Sheikh Sharawi, who was an Azhar University scholar and a popular and respected religious figure, supported the generalist interpretation of the verse and opposed women's working, especially in top government positions or as judges (Darwish 1998). Such interpretations to a great extent inform socio-cultural norms and popular beliefs and attitudes. The issue is complex and cannot be dealt with in a single section, but it should at least be flagged for further research and analysis. Women's economic participation in the MENA region cannot be enhanced without confronting socio-cultural norms fueled by (and fueling) religious interpretations.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to recall the wide scope of the MENA region. It is highly diversified; each country has its own context, demographic characteristics and cultural specifics, which makes it difficult to generalise. However, several characteristics can still be considered as

common denominators. The two major such characteristics that make it relevant to tackle the issue of women's economic freedom from a regional perspective are the patriarchal nature of MENA societies and the barriers limiting women's economic freedom. Although examples of discrimination differ from one country to another, they still count as either socio-cultural or legal restrictions, as summarised in Box A.

Market-friendly policies are very important in promoting women's economic freedom and hence women's emancipation in the MENA region. They are not, however, sufficient, and their effect remains limited in contexts heavily influenced and regulated by socio-cultural norms and customary practices that undermine the rule of law. A combination of WID and GAD strategies, reflected in both mainstreaming gender across market-friendly policies and addressing discriminatory laws, is essential in dealing with the issue of women's economic participation in the MENA region.

To promote women's economic freedom, legal restrictions on women's freedom in general, such as the freedom of movement, should be removed. Market-friendly policies should not be restricted to making it easier for women to do business or to be employed but should include measures to make it easier for everyone to do business. In a market-friendly environment, the finance industry would be more likely to propose financial solutions adapted to poorer women; childcare services would be produced at a lower cost, all to the benefit of working mothers; and foreign investors might bring to the countries more female-friendly industries. Market-friendly policies should also be gender-sensitive to ensure a greater impact on women's economic freedom.

Civil society organisations should make more effort on the one hand to advocate the lifting of legal restrictions on women's freedom, and on the other hand to raise awareness and educate the population so as to change the socio-cultural norms that limit women's economic freedom. Economic freedom is indispensable in realising women's emancipation in the MENA region.

Note

1. English translation, retrieved from <http://www.alislam.org>

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