Chapter 5
Beyond Patriarchy: Gender, Islam and the MENA Region

Abstract  Patriarchy has its origins in the Middle East. This legacy is still apparent in the Middle East where gender discriminatory legislation and attitudes remain the norm. What are the reasons for such misogynistic practices? For some scholars, the Islamic faith and related cultural practices lay at the heart of the problem. Others place their emphasis on more structuralist explanations such as economic considerations and ongoing insecurity in the MENA region. Despite the challenges confronting women, this chapter also maps the positive trends of a post-patriarchal order in the region. These include women taking up arms to defend themselves, political mobilization on the part of women as they challenge both authoritarianism and patriarchy and the rise of feminist Islamic scholarship. The momentum for a post-patriarchal order also exists because of changing inter-generational attitudes about the place of women in society. A younger, more educated generation holds less gender bias than their parents’ generation.

Keywords  Gender · Islam · Masculinity · Patriarchy · Sexual violence

5.1 Introduction

It was in the Ancient Near East (specifically Mesopotamia) – where patriarchy first developed between 3100 BC and 600 BC. (Lerner 1986). It was, however, only in 1947 when Max Weber first used the term “patriarchy” to describe a system of government where men used their positions as heads of households to rule societies. Whilst Weber’s use of the term was innovative in that it linked what was until then regarded as a largely social issue with the state, it is equally true that Weber was more focused on the intergenerational issue than the oppression of women. More specifically, Weber was concerned about the domination of younger men who were not household heads (Walby 1990). Radical feminists appropriated the term in the 1990s to refer to a “…system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. The use of the term social structure is
important here since it clearly implies rejection both of biological determinism, and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate position” (Walby 1990).

There are three inter-related reasons why identifying patriarchy in this way is important. First, reference to social structures and practices suggests that the practices of patriarchy were constructed and can be deconstructed as several European countries could attest to. Behaviour – both individual and institutional – therefore can be unlearned (Lerner 1986). Second, issues of gender are mediated through other variables like class, race, ethnicity and religious affiliation. Third, patriarchy viewed systemically allows one to understand the oppression of women from work place to the home, from issues of culture and faith to the administration of the state. Such an expanded view of patriarchy is imperative if one consider the origins of this practice and its institutionalization. The evolution of patriarchy is intimately connected with the changing organization of kinship (matriarchal and matrilineal to patriarchal and patrilineal), religion (the ascendancy of male god figures over female goddesses). Moreover, patriarchy is linked to issues of ownership and domination. The appropriation of women’s sexual and reproductive capacity by men was followed by the institutionalization of private property and the emergence of class stratification. Similarly, the enslavement of women preceded the enslavement of other groups. The first states, meanwhile, owe its origins to the patriarchal family. The earliest states therefore had a vested interest in the subordination of women and the earliest law codes institutionalized this subordination. By the second millennium BC, Babylon already had legislation controlling women’s sexuality (ibid 1986). Attempting to control women’s sexuality has been an enduring feature of MENA society. The most recent fifth wave of the Arab Barometer, for instance, found that almost a third (32 percent) of Egyptians approved of the barbaric practice of female genital mutilation. From the foregoing, it would be difficult to dispute the logical conclusion of Gerda Lerner, “Men learned to institute dominance and hierarchy over other people by their earlier practice of dominance over the women of their own group” (Arab Pulse 2020). Conversely, the emancipation of women is intimately associated with true societal emancipation. It is not coincidental, therefore, that the MENA region is characterized by both a democratic deficit (as discussed in Chap. 2) and the subjugation of women.

By employing the concept of patriarchy, this chapter seeks to explore the current status of women in the MENA region, to explain how this situation came about as well as to examine a MENA region where patriarchy ceases to exist.

5.2 Current Status

It is abundantly clear that women in the Middle East North Africa region have experienced the least progress in gender equality than any other region in the world (Ross 2008). Nemat Shafik describes the MENA region in this way:
... the largest gender gap of any region in the world, despite the considerable evidence that gender equality is associated with higher economic growth and improved human development. Middle Eastern and North African women are consistently under-represented in schools and labour force, they die relatively younger than their sisters in other parts of the world, and they give birth to a large number of closely-spaced children that jeopardizes their own and their children’s health (Kazemi 2000).

Given the widely held view that women belong in the domestic sphere focusing on keeping house and child-rearing, there are low rates of participation of women in the labour force (Robbins and Thomas 2018). Only 24 percent of women in the MENA region are employed, whilst the figure for their male counterparts is 77 percent (Bremer 2017). Moreover, according to a report of the International Labour Organization (2018), young women with higher education have less chance of entering employment than their less-educated male counterparts. This holds negative consequences not only for the household economy and the economy at large but also enables woman’s greater dependence on their male family members (husbands, fathers, brothers). In the process patriarchy, built as it is on vertical power relations, is further entrenched.

The absence of women in positions of power is quite glaring in the MENA region. Their absence in governance is made possible by both patriarchal attitudes and women’s own relative disinterest in politics. According to the Arab Barometer, the majority of respondents believe in limiting the role of women in society. Within the home, 60 percent believe that the husband should be the final decision maker in matters impacting the family. Moreover, only a third of the Arab public believe that women are as effective as men in public leadership roles. There is however regional variations. Whilst four-fifths of Algerians and Egyptians believe that men are better political leaders, the figure for Tunisia and Lebanon is 55 percent and 52 percent respectively (Robbins and Thomas 2018). Part of the problem could well lay with women – more than half of whom display no interest in politics. Whilst 28 percent of Tunisian and Palestinian women express interest in politics, the comparative figure for Algeria and Jordan is 10 percent and 9 percent, respectively (ibid 2018). This relative disinterest could be related to the fact that the state and its apparatus has lost legitimacy and credibility (a process discussed in Chap. 2) and that women see no need to engage with it. This, perversely, however may serve to reinforce their discrimination. Without women challenging patriarchal governments, the state can dismiss the gender dimension in policy-making processes as it is one less constituency they need to bother with.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, women have learned this lesson the hard way. Recognizing that their concerns will only be addressed by legislators if they remained engaged with political processes, women in Latin America and the Caribbean have formed Regional Feminist Action Groups to ensure that law-makers take their concerns into consideration (Reperger 2018). Women in the MENA region are however learning this and increasingly women are beginning to engage with political processes – on the streets and in parliaments as will be discussed below. An important caveat, however, needs to be borne in mind. Political processes cannot be separated from social norms. Thus, whilst women have won the right to vote in many
countries, they are often prevented by social norms which allow husbands, fathers and brothers to tell them how to vote or prevent women physically from exercising their democratic rights to either cast a ballot or engage in political activism (Habib 2018).

Sexual violence, meanwhile, has increasingly become weaponized from the killing fields of Rwanda and Bosnia to the Middle East. Often, it forms part of a strategy of ethnic cleansing. The employment of rape is also used in the various conflicts plaguing the MENA region as part of a strategy of causing shame and demoralization amongst the target population (Oppenheimer 2019). In Syria, government forces have used rape to intimidate and ethnically dominate communities associated with rebels. Islamic State, meanwhile, has systematically imprisoned and raped Yazidi women. In both Iraq and Syria, other forms of sexual violence are also routinely used, including sexual torture, forced incest and forced abortions. Exploiting their economic vulnerability, women refugees fleeing these war zones into countries like Lebanon and Jordan are also routinely sexually abused by landlords and potential employers. It is also important to acknowledge that in the MENA region with its hyper-masculinity cultural norms, males are also targeted for rape in conflict zones as part of a deliberate strategy to demoralize the proverbial other (Crawford et al. 2014).

Rape, however, is not only confined to the warzones of Iraq and Syria. Repressive governments often make use of rape as a form of intimidation against pro-democracy activists. In Sudan, tens of thousands of women – students and teachers, housewives and street traders – took to the streets to protest against the brutal and corrupt three decade rule of Omar al-Bashir. Under pressure, Al-Bashir was compelled to step down in April 2019. A military junta replaced Al-Bashir’s decrepit rule. Women, however, once more mobilized on the streets of Khartoum, Omdurman and Port Sudan as they sought to pressure the junta to transfer power into civilian hands. This prompted the military to crack down on pro-democracy activists from 3 June 2019. Women were particularly targeted by security forces. What happened next was scores of rapes and sexual harassment of these women. Hala al-Karib notes that this was a form of intimidation to force these women “back into the home” as well as retribution for their role in overturning the political order (Middle East Monitor 2019).

In Egypt, a similar dynamic is at play according to a report of the International Federation for Human Rights. As in Sudan, Cairo deploys sexual violence in an effort to eliminate public protest. The report cites one such ordeal of a female student,

I saw an officer who was grabbing a young woman by the breasts and I said to him: “If you want to arrest her, then arrest her, but you have no right to touch her breasts”. He grabbed me exactly as he had her, before calling two other officers to come and hold me. They beat me, insulted me. In the van they insulted me and beat me so much that I could no longer stand up. Two soldiers started to assault me. The officer from the start got into the van and said to me: “Come here I’s going to show you if I’m a man”. He sexually assaulted me, the soldiers laughed, and then he raped me completely. I was paralysed, I started to vomit blood. My life is ruined. I’m afraid of my son, my husband and even my father (BBC 2015).
Neither is this an isolated case. Such sexual violence is systematic and is designed to intimidate. As Amnesty International noted, “The very high level of repression involves an underlying violence. Security forces are using force to keep people under control and punish those who dare to go against the authorities. This explains why they mainly use sexual violence” (Middle East Eye 2015). In the cases of both Sudan and Egypt, the persistence of systemic rape and sexual violence is linked to the “omnipotence of the security forces.” It is no coincidence that such actions took place during the dictatorship of Al Bashir who came to power in 1989 through a military coup and that in Egypt these incidents increased following the coming to power of Al Sisi in a military coup in 2013 (ibid 2015). In an environment with personalized rule, inversed civil-military relations and a resultant democratic deficit, accountability does not exist and impunity of the security forces is the norm. It is therefore essential to link women’s rights with the broader human rights struggle and the imperative for democracy.

The persistence of sexual violence is not only a phenomenon confined to war zones and as a tool of political repression. Because sexual violence is fundamentally linked to patriarchy, it exists in other settings in the MENA region. Indeed, it is a daily lived experience for many women. The latest statistics from the Arab Barometer Wave V clearly demonstrates this sad truism. Twenty-nine percent of women experienced verbal sexual harassment and 18 percent physical sexual harassment. Young women aged between 17 and 28 years old are particularly prone to such sexual harassment (Bouhlila 2019). What is noteworthy is that Tunisia which has the most female friendly legal code in the Arab world has the lowest percentage (2 percent) of sexual harassment in the MENA region. This suggests that the enactment and enforcement of legislation which deliberately counters patriarchy might well result in greater disincentives to engage in sexual harassment.

Whilst sexual harassment against women is largely an urban phenomenon, domestic violence against women remains a rural occurrence. Countries with the largest female victims of domestic violence according to the Arab Barometer include Yemen (26 percent), Morocco (25 percent), Egypt (23 percent), Sudan (22 percent) and Algeria (21 percent) (Bouhlila 2019). The fact that a cultural taboo exists from speaking out against such domestic violence also allows it to continue to fester in the shadows. As it is regarded a private or family matter, victims seek help from inside the family. Invariably, the abuse continues. The fact that victims are often financially dependent upon the perpetrator also results in the abuse not coming to light.

5.3 Patriarchy and Islam

The debate amongst scholars about the relationship between gender and Islam is often acrimonious (Kazemi 2000). Generally there are two scholarly camps. One supports a cultural interpretation where patriarchy is an inherent attribute to Muslim identity. From this perspective, Islamic norms therefore provide the greatest impediment to women’s socio-economic and political advancement. Structuralists,
However, argue that the persistence of systemic discrimination against women has its roots in the structural conditions existing in MENA countries (Alexander and Welzel 2011).

Those subscribing to the cultural interpretation for patriarchy note how women are excluded from speaking at the pulpit during Friday congregational prayers and how women are compelled to pray behind men and sit behind men during community events. The fact that no women have become heads of state in the MENA region is also striking. Muslim women, however, have become heads of state in other Muslim majority countries, notably Bangladesh and Pakistan. Explaining this apparent contradiction, Maha Elgenaidi (2019) explains that this does not represent acceptance of female political leadership, rather a woman’s political position is determined by her relationship to a male family member – a father, husband or brother.

Women’s discriminatory personal status in law and criminal code are rooted in both the Qur’an and the Hadith (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammed). A daughter for instance inherits from her parents only half of that of her brother. In cases of divorce, the mother can only enjoy custody of her child for the first two years after the child’s birth. In Shia Iran, meanwhile, marriage based on a temporary contract or muta’a is common. This practice hardly protects the rights of women in the marriage. The testimony of a man in a court of law is viewed as twice as valuable as that of a women. Some so-called Islamic laws based on questionable Hadith actually deny women the right to be a head of state (AbuKhalil 2005). In Lebanese civil law, married women are regarded as wards of their husbands and are therefore de facto second class citizens (Kazemi 2000). This diminution of the role of women in Islam came about because early ulama’ viewed women’s duties and functions in society from the perspective only of their being “daughters,” “sisters,” “wives” or “mothers” (Ramadan 2009). From this position, women’s roles were always ancillary to their male counterparts – their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons. The subordination of women was therefore entrenched from Islam’s early beginnings. These early Islamic interpretations, according to As’ad AbuKhalil (2005), have also resulted in religious sanctions for such sexist practices as a wife’s complete obedience to her husband and the stigmatization of menstruation.

Despite changes in legal practices in the Muslim world, patriarchal family laws have remained largely intact. Explaining this disconnect Leila Ahmed opines, “...family law is the cornerstone of the system of male privilege set up by establishment Islam. That it is still preserved almost intact signals the existence of enormously powerful forces within Middle Eastern societies determined to uphold male privilege and control over women” (Ahmed 1992). With the penetration of new technologies in the MENA region, states have attempted to control women in more sophisticated ways. The Saudi government, for instance, has sponsored an application called Absher. This has been downloaded 11 million times in the kingdom by February 2019 and allows male guardians (fathers, brothers, husbands) to set travel restrictions on women’s visas, effectively preventing them from leaving the country (Solomon 2019).

Leila Ahmed’s a description reinforces Gerda Lerner’s position elucidated earlier in this chapter where she explains the formation of the first states in the Middle East
resting on patriarchal families and where the first legislation was focused on controlling women’s sexuality. Utilizing data from the Arab Barometer, Kcuinskas and Van der Does (2017) reinforce these cultural explanations for gender discrimination. In their article, they demonstrate that Political Islam is strongly related to Muslim men’s patriarchal attitudes across the MENA region. Inglehart and Norris (2003a, b), meanwhile, whilst confirming the cultural chasm that exists between the “West” and Islam, also note a very important caveat. Whilst Muslims continue to support democratic norms, they oppose the emancipation of women. Recent opinion polls from the Arab Barometer to the World Values Survey give evidence to Inglehart and Norris’ position.

Moghadam, however, rejects the cultural perspective noting that patriarchy existed prior to the emergence of Islam in the MENA, that other faiths are no less patriarchal than Islam and that the persistence of discrimination of women in the region needs to be found in the broader socio-political and economic order within which patriarchy is practiced (Moghadam 2003). Also stressing the structural context as opposed to Islam, Ross (2008) blames oil not Islam for the patriarchy in the region, “Oil production reduces the number of women in the labour force, which in turn, reduces their political influence. As a result, oil-producing states are left with atypically strong patriarchal norms, laws, and political institutions.”

There is an emerging group of scholars who do not neatly sit in either the cultural or structuralist camp. Rather these straddle the two camps – in the process rejecting simplistic binary positions. Amongst these more nuanced scholars is Arno Tausch. Whilst there is a connection between the Islamic faith and patriarchy, Arno Tausch (2019) reminds us that violence against women is wide-spread – going far beyond Muslim majority countries – from Serbia to Zambia and from the Philippines to India. This suggests that other factors need to be taken into account. Drawing from Hayek’s neoliberal political economy approach, Tausch suggest that the decay of property rights and disrespect for family values could explain the preponderance of intimate partner violence across the Muslim world. The fact that more Muslims in the MENA region are becoming secular in their orientation (as discussed in Chap. 2) lends credence to Tausch’s explanation. Quoting the famous line of Fyodor Dostoevsky in The Brothers Karamazov – “If God doesn’t exist, everything is permitted” – Tausch (2019) warns against simplistic arguments which relate to the status of women as a result of Islam. General lawlessness and the weakness of state structures also contribute to the violence perpetrated against women since there are little consequences for one’s actions. The fact that the failed state of Yemen has the highest domestic violence incidents lends further weight to Tausch’s conclusions. The violence currently convulsing the Middle East also threatens men’s ability to achieve masculine ideals. This, in turn, may fuel their overcompensation in engaging in acts of gender violence and insisting on male supremacy in every sphere (Kcuinskas and Van der Does 2017).
5.4 Beyond Patriarchy?

Whilst the marginalization and oppression of women is a sad truism of MENA countries, this should not be accepted as a norm. Patriarchy was constructed and can be deconstructed. Sylvia Walby (1990) reminds us that gains made by Western feminists during the twentieth century was a result of both active resistance made against patriarchal values as well as by rapidly changing context, in particular, the demand by capitalists for more labour in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The challenge for feminists then is to actively resist their marginalization in conjunction with other progressive players as well as to utilize the tectonic changes that the Middle East is undergoing – from the penetration of the internet to making common cause with progressive forces in society to open up the democratic space. Democratic space in this sense does not only mean the fight for the ballot but also emancipation in every sense – including freedom from patriarchy. There is reason to believe that some of this is beginning to happen in the region. Consider, for instance, how Morocco’s rural women in an effort to access land from conservative tribal authorities, formed themselves into action committees called Sulaliyyates. Not only did these challenge tribal authorities but also women’s subordination in the family and the work place (Langohr et al. 2016).

We discuss the rise of a post-patriarchy order in this section from the perspective of women challenging the protection myth, women taking to the streets and challenging the repressive order and a growing challenge to fundamentalist patriarchal interpretations of Islam from amongst Muslim scholars – both male and female.

Patriarchal definitions of masculinity and feminity view women as protected whilst men are seen as the protectors. Tickner and Sjoberg (2013) challenge this myth of protection which views men as going out to wage wars in defence of vulnerable women and children. However, they point out that women and children constitute 90 percent of all casualties of war by the turn of the century and that 75 percent of those who fled armed conflicts were women and children. Kurdish women have aggressively challenged this patriarchal narrative when they first picked up arms to defend their homes, their children and their communities. These Kurdish female fighters came to prominence in October 2017 when photos of them capturing the erstwhile Islamic State capital of Raqqa (Oppenheimer 2019). Formed in 2013 as the Women’s Protection Units (YPG) of the Syria Democratic Forces, these women played a key role in securing Rojava, the Kurdish autonomous region in Syria. A YPG spokeswoman, Nesrin Abdullah, passionately declares that they have taken up arms not merely to protect their communities and create a more democratic society – but one which also ends patriarchy, “There is no other system like ours anywhere else in the world – an administration that promoted and has achieved gender equality” (Oppenheimer 2019). From her response, it is clear that Abdullah understands the connection between her attempts at defending her community and eradicating patriarchy as part of an effort to create a more egalitarian society. The existence of the YPG also makes a mockery of patriarchal myths of strong men defending weak women.
There is reason to believe that women’s experiences in mobilizing against authoritarian regimes in the region have resulted in a new consciousness on their part where they see the connection between their own oppression and the need for emancipation of the broader society. When women took to the streets against Al-Bashir in Sudan it was their awareness of how fuel shortages and inflation brought on by corrupt and inefficient governance were increasing household food insecurity. Following the July 2019 agreement between the military junta and the alliance of opposition parties, there was an effort to force women back into the home to play their “traditional” roles. However, women have remained politically engaged and mobilized – decrying everything from the persistence of sexual harassment to demanding for the prosecutions of those involved in wrong-doing from the Bashir era (Middle East Monitor 2019).

Women’s activists are also pushing back on the streets of Tehran, Ankara and Algiers. In Tehran, women’s grassroots movements are calling on Islamic Republic to fulfil their promises of social justice and gender equality. Their resistance to patriarchy has taken the form of disobedience, refusal and subversion (Kazemi 2000). Initially their activism sought to reform the rule of the mullahs within the prevailing system spurred on by a reformist president – President Khatami who demonstrated greater receptivity to gender equality. In the past two years, women’s groups in Iran are increasingly calling for the end of Iran’s post-1979 system of governance as they view such theocracy as antithetical to the cause of gender emancipation. In Ankara, feminists have taken on domestic violence by forming the Purple Roof Women’s Shelter Foundation in an effort to collectively fight abuse in the family (ibid 2000).

Meanwhile, in Algiers, women have been at the forefront of the protest movement against the establishment or what Algerians term a “Le Pouvoir” – the cabal of generals, businessmen and politicians of the ruling party which govern this North African country. For 19-year-old Miriam Saoud, it was to see the back of this political elite which has impoverished ordinary Algerians through their corrupt practices. For 22-year-old political science student Amina Djouadi, it was about real political representation for male and female citizens (Guerin 2019). Whilst the presence of this younger generation of women makes sense given the fact that half of Algeria’s population is below thirty years of age, and these bear the brunt of unemployment, older women have also been on the Algerian streets. Elderly women like Nissa Imad were also on the streets protesting. All five of her children are unemployed. Explaining her presence against the barricades she defiantly states, “I am here for the young, for our kids. There’s nothing for the young generations. No jobs and no houses. They can’t get married. We want this whole system to go” (ibid 2019). It is clear from the narratives of these women that they see the connection between their daily lived experiences of disempowerment and marginalization and the broader structural causes and therefore are actively seeking the ending of this patriarchal and oppressive political and economic order.

Muslim feminists have taken on patriarchy from within Islam. Adopting a liberal paradigm, these feminists are attempting to adapt the religion to make it more relevant to the contemporary period. Muslim feminists maintain that the dominant
patriarchal interpretations of Islam do not reflect an authentic Islam (Ebbitt 2016). Rather, pre-Islamic cultural norms seeped into the faith in the manner Gerda Lerner described in our introduction. Islamic feminism, according to Iranian scholar Nesta Ramazani, “...helps Muslim women’s emancipation by allowing for a more nuanced critique of gender discrimination in Islam, without disregarding the importance of the faith” (ibid 2016). In other words, it allows for women to be both Muslim and modern simultaneously.

In keeping with this liberal tradition, Zainah Anwar critiques Muslim husbands who beat their wives. She believes that domestic violence is fundamentally un-Islamic as it contradicts Islamic values of compassion, serenity, dignity and kindness. She notes, too, that the Qur’an calls on men and women to be each other’s friend and protector (Kasraoui 2019). Anwar also notes the practice of Islamists to selectively quote from the Qur’an. This is evident when it comes to polygamy. Whilst Islamists quote the Qur’anic verse which allows Muslim men to marry up to four wives, this is not the entire verse. The verse goes on to state “...if ye fear that ye cannot do justice (to so many wives) then marry one” (ibid 2017). Justice, as used in the Qur’an, is all-encompassing and refers to not only equality of food and accommodation to one’s wives but also love and affection. As such absolute equality is impossible to achieve, monogamy, not polygamy, is the norm in Islam (Khan and Ur Rehman 2016).

In similar vein, Maha Elgenaidi (2019) reiterates the Islamic conception of God as The Just. Therefore, anything which is manifestly unjust, including injustice against women, is not simply wrong but a sin. Muslim male scholars too are beginning to question Islamic fundamentalist interpretations of gender relations. Responding to the issue of veiling women, Rafiq Abdalla and Moshamed Keshavjee (2018) prove that Islamic jurisprudence borrowed from Christian and pre-Islamic pagan traditions. Whilst the Qur’an calls on Muslim men and women to be modestly attired, early Muslims copied the customs of Zoroastrian Persians and Christian Byzantines when forcing women to cover up. By demonstrating the man-made origins of shari’a, these scholars have relieved Muslim women to regard the hijab, niqab or burqa as a religious duty (Ebbitt 2016).

The MENA region is engulfed in tectonic economic, political and socio-cultural changes wrought by processes of globalization, technological innovation and urbanization. These have fundamentally transformed the region towards greater levels of education and labour market participation. In the process, it is contributing to less Muslim support for patriarchal values. As people acquire more education, they grow more tolerant and egalitarian in their values. This serves to undermine patriarchal values. Younger people in the MENA region are more educated than their parents’ generation and demonstrate less patriarchal values according to various surveys undertaken. Moreover, despite the contradictory attitudes displayed by Muslims in supporting democracy but not that much in support of women’s emancipation, work by Alexander and Welzel (2011) demonstrates that the more political open societies become, the less patriarchal they are. Similarly economic changes in MENA societies have seen more women entering the work force. Not only are these women financially independent but they choose to either marry later in life or choose
non-traditional forms of cohabitation. These developments also serve to undermine fundamentalist patriarchal norms (ibid 2011).

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter began with the truism that one cannot understand patriarchy narrowly – for instance – women’s representation in public institutions. Women’s activists in the West secured the right to vote in the early part of the twentieth century but gender discrimination was still a reality in other areas – such as women’s participation in the armed forces or the discrimination they faced in the area of differing pay-scales in the work place. It is imperative that the gains made by women’s activities and other progressive forces in the MENA region need to be consolidated and expanded upon. Outside actors, for instance, the World Bank, bilateral donors and international development agencies should make their loans and assistance conditional on improvements in women’s rights. Moreover, these international bodies could also assist female enterprise development and creation. As the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has made clear in their report, female-owned businesses often are often home-based enterprises with little capacity to scale up on account of a dearth of capital. With even modest sums ejected into these businesses, they could grow and women could become financially independent of their male “guardians.” Research conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2018) has also noted how the provision of such micro-finance to female entrepreneurship together with skills training to grow their businesses has resulted in an improvement in women’s self-esteem from countries as diverse as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia.

Despite the MENA region having the largest gender gap of all regions in the world, there is hope too. Attitudes are changing and becoming less patriarchal. The Arab Barometer starkly demonstrates this. Seventy-five percent in the MENA region support women’s access to tertiary education, 84 percent believe that women should be allowed to work in the labour force, whilst 62 percent believe that women should be allowed into political office. What account for these progressive attitudes? First, there seems to be a generational divide with younger people (which comprise the majority in the MENA region) holding less patriarchal views. Second, with access to tertiary education, those holding post-secondary qualifications are less discriminatory in their attitudes than those without post-school qualifications (Robbins and Thomas 2018). The momentum for a post-patriarchal MENA region is therefore increasing.

Awareness of the economic costs of patriarchy is also waying on the minds of the region’s policy-makers. According to the OECD, the region is losing US$ 575 billion per annum as a result of gender-based discrimination in laws and social norms. Furthermore, the OECD notes that by merely raising women’s participation in the work force to the same levels as that of men could boost the GDP of MENA countries by 26 percent (Bremer 2017). Recognizing this, governments are reacting
positively. In the UAE whilst women make up 40 percent of the private sector’s employees, they constitute 66 percent of all public sector workers. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, which is known for its religious conservatism has set the target of 30 percent female participation in its labour force as part of its National Vision 2030. Moreover, a Price Waterhouse Cooper survey of the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt found that two-thirds of the public are in favour of government intervention in private companies to set targets for gender diversity (Ashkar 2019).

Changing attitudes are increasingly reflected in government policies. Morocco’s Mudawannah (family code) makes men and women equally responsible for the well-being of their family (Kasraoui 2019). In Tunisia, meanwhile, President Beji Said Essebi established a Commission for Individual Freedoms and Equality in 2018. Following recommendations from this commission, a raft of gender friendly legislation was enacted. These included equal inheritance between the sexes, overturning the ban which prevented women from marrying outside of their faith and criminalizing violence against women (Al Jazeera 2017; Mantashe 2018). On the political front, too, there has been progress. Whilst the Inter Parliamentary Union is correct in noting that elected female representatives in the MENA region lag behind all other countries in the world, it is important to note women have served as ministers in Syria, Jordan Egypt, Iraq and Tunisia. Moreover, Turkey has had a female president and Iran a female vice-president (AbuKhalil 2005).

The inclusion of women in political processes and their representation in the region’s parliaments is imperative not only for the cause of women’s emancipation but in an effort to deepen the democratic experience in countries. Despite women constituting only 17 percent of Moroccan parliamentarians, they asked 58 percent of the questions (Langohr et al. 2016). In the process, refuting notions of women being docile, largely passive and giving way to their male peers. It is important to note that female members of parliament in countries like Jordan, Kuwait and Morocco did not only confine themselves to focusing on issues of women’s and children’s right but also on issues of economics and education (ibid 2016). This suggests that these women see the connection between their lived experiences and broader structural conditions which lead to their marginalization. Given women’s increased visibility in the political sphere from the Arab Spring to the current wave of protests from Algiers and Tehran to Lebanon and Baghdad, the possibility that female political representation will increase in the region is highly likely.

None of this means the road to gender equality will be without difficulty. In Saudi Arabia, the persistence of so-called honour killings and a push-back against liberal reforms is discernible (Bustanji 2020). In the final instance, it is best for the men and women of the MENA region to find their inspiration in the sage advice from Maha Elgenaidi (2019),

The task of overcoming patriarchy cannot be left to women, as if they bore responsibility for their oppression; rather, men must take responsibility for changing a situation which was created and is maintained by men. Achieving complete equality is a task that requires men and women working together.
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