



# Women in the Middle East and North Africa: A Divide between Rights and Roles

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### **Key Findings**

- Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), most publics surveyed believe women should have equal rights to men in a variety of areas including access to university education (75 percent), employment (84 percent), and political office (62 percent).
- Yet, despite widespread support for women’s rights, majorities in many Arab publics favor limiting the roles women play in society. For example, one third believe women are as effective in public leadership compared with men. Six-in-ten believe that the husband should have the final say in decision making within the family.
- Unsurprisingly, men are, in general, less supportive of women’s rights and more restrictive in their desired roles for women. Additionally, citizens with lower levels of education are often more likely to hold unequal views, suggesting that as educational attainment increases across MENA, attitudes toward women may also shift.
- Overall, these results from nationally representative public opinion surveys carried out by the Arab Barometer imply that efforts to improve women’s equality need to move beyond ensuring equal rights to focus on attitudinal shifts about the roles women should play in society.

## Support for Equal Access to Education

Citizens across MENA affirm that women have an equal right to an education compared with men. Across the region, just a quarter or fewer say a university education is more important for males than females (Figure 1). Algerians are most likely to hold this view at 25 percent, followed by fewer than one-in-five in Palestine (19 percent), Jordan (18 percent), Egypt (15 percent), Morocco (12 percent), Tunisia (11 percent) and Lebanon (8 percent).

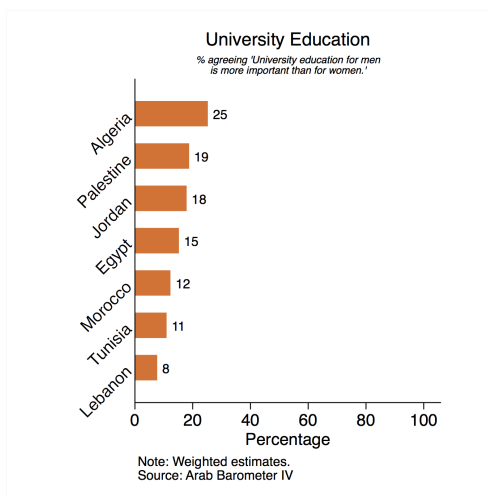


Figure 1: Women in University Education by Country

Women are less likely to say that university education is more important for a man than for a woman in a number of countries, as the left graph in Figure 2 reveals. The differences ( $\Delta$ ) in attitudes towards equal university education across gender are the greatest in Algeria, where women are 16 points less likely to hold this view. Algeria is followed by Jordan ( $\Delta = -14$  points), Tunisia ( $\Delta = -8$  points) and Egypt ( $\Delta = -7$  points). However, in Palestine ( $\Delta = -5$ ), Morocco ( $\Delta = -3$ ), and Lebanon ( $\Delta = -3$ ), views of men and women do not seem to differ substantially: both male and female respondents, are about equally likely to say that women should have equal rights to attend university compared to men.

Notably, level of education is not strongly linked with attitudes about whether a university education is more important for a man (Figure 2, right graph). Only in Morocco ( $\Delta = -12$  points) are those with higher education substantially less likely to hold this view than those who have lower levels of education. Elsewhere in the region, those with higher and lower levels of education are about as likely to affirm that women should have an equal right to a university education.

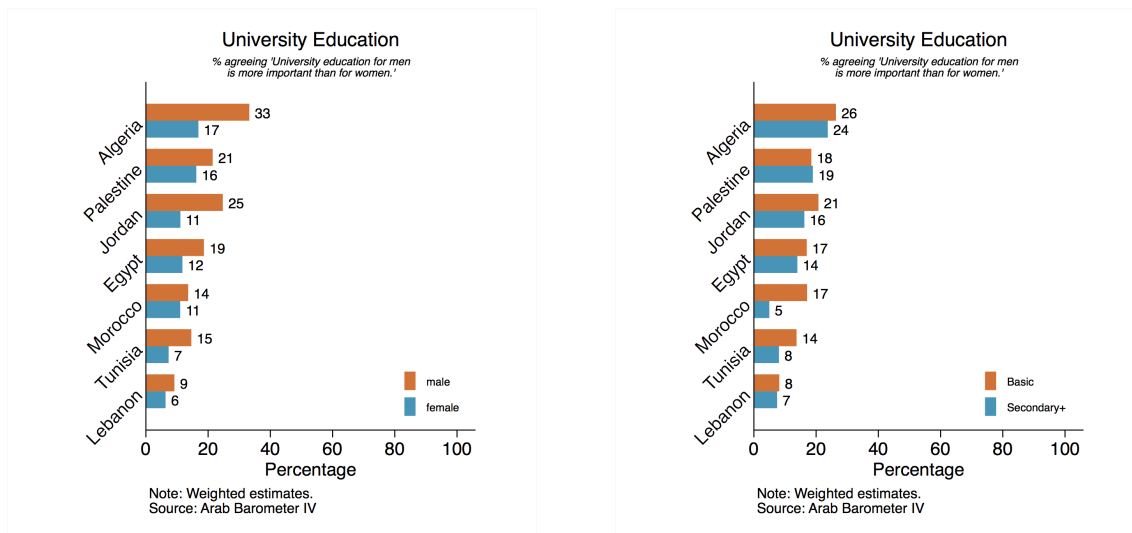


Figure 2: Women in University Education by Gender and Level of Education

Attitudes about women’s right to education have been changing in the region over the last decade, Figure 3 suggests. In 2006, approximately a quarter of those living across the Middle East believed that university education was more important for males. This level remained largely unchanged in 2011 at the time of the Arab uprisings. However, it has since declined to just 15 percent in 2016. This drop suggests that attitudes have been changing across the region fairly rapidly in recent years, likely as a result of increasing educational opportunities that are available to women combined with changing attitudes of the younger generation toward women’s equality.

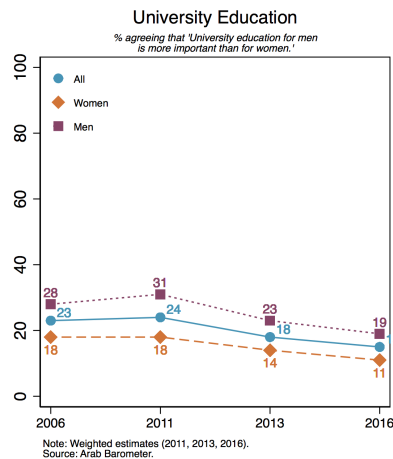


Figure 3: Trend in Attitudes towards Women in University Education

In sum, the fourth wave of Arab Barometer (2016) reveals that it is widely accepted that women should have the right to receive equal education across

MENA. Overall, small minorities say that university education is more important for a man than for a woman. Over the last decade, critical steps have been made in this area with significant declines in a preference for educating males over females in the region. If a family has the ability to send a child to university, it is likely that women will be able to take advantage of this opportunity.

## Common Acceptance of Women’s Access to the Labor Force

Despite relatively low rates of labor force participation across MENA, it is widely accepted that married women should be able to work outside the home. Approximately, eight-in-ten across the region state that a married woman can work outside the house. There is also relatively little cross-country variation as Figure 4 reveals. Nine-in-ten hold this view in Lebanon, as do 88 percent in Tunisia, 86 percent in Egypt, Palestine, and Jordan. Meanwhile, strong majorities also agree women have this right in Morocco (78 percent) and Algeria (71 percent). This trend is relatively similar to the results for other measures about views toward women’s rights and roles, with Lebanese and Tunisians being more supportive while Algerians are less supportive of women’s equality.

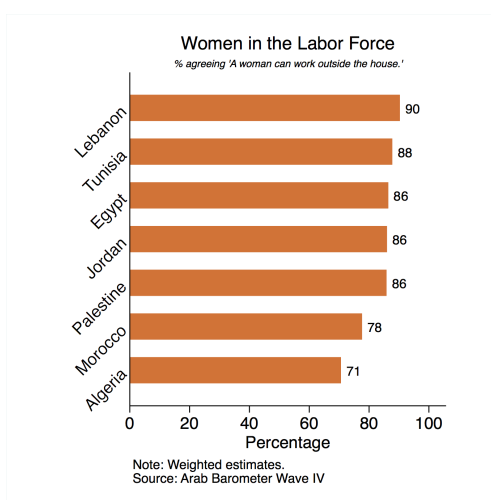


Figure 4: Women in the Labor Force by Country

There are notable differences ( $\Delta$ ) by gender, however. Across the Arab region, women tend to be substantially more likely than men to say that married women can work outside the home. The graph on the left hand side of Figure 5 suggests that this gap is greatest in Algeria, where the vast majority of women (85 percent) hold this view, compared with slightly more than half of men (57 percent) – a difference of 28 percentage points. In neighboring Morocco, the gap is 19 points while in Jordan it is 14 percentage points. Meaningful differ-

ences are also found in Tunisia ( $\Delta = +13$ ), Egypt ( $\Delta = +13$ ) and Palestine ( $\Delta = +12$ ), whereas the gap between men and women is smallest in Lebanon ( $\Delta = +5$ ).

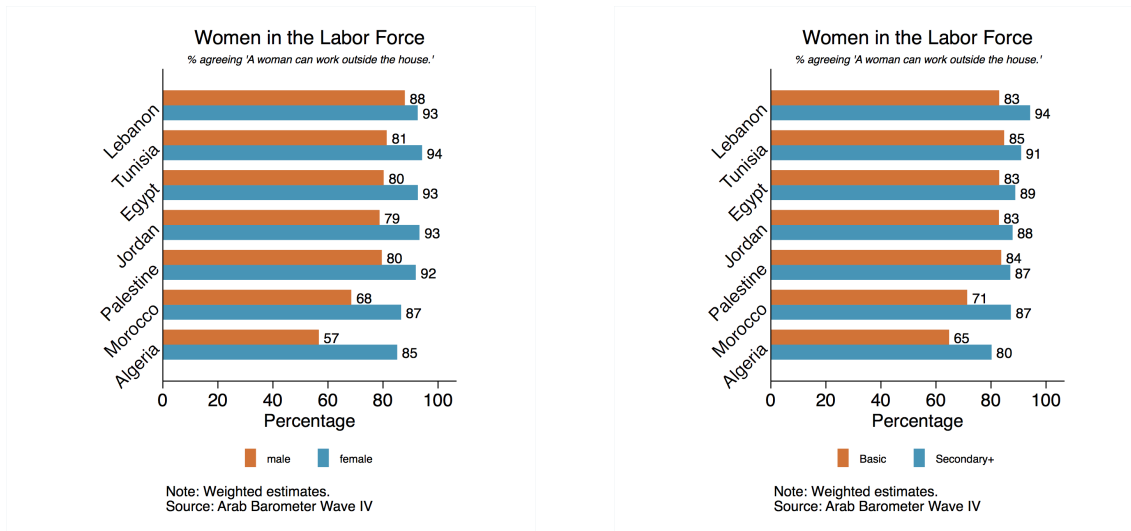


Figure 5: Women in the Labor Force by Gender and Education

Attitudes about women working outside the house do not seem to be consistently linked with education across the region though. The graph on the right of Figure 5 indicates that there is only a substantial difference ( $\Delta$ ) in views between those who have completed secondary education and those who have obtained a degree in higher education in three countries surveyed: in Morocco, the gap is 16 points, while it is 15 points in Algeria and 11 points in Lebanon. Elsewhere, the difference between those with higher and lower levels of educational attainment is small. The difference ranges from 3 to 6 percentage points.

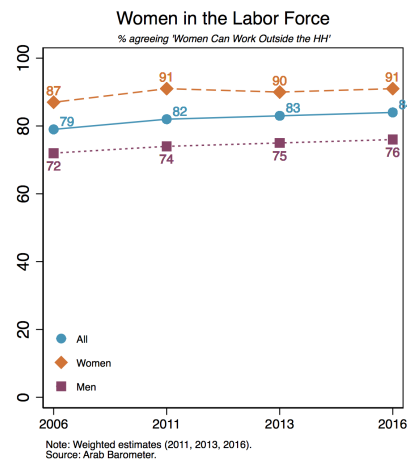


Figure 6: Trend in Attitudes towards Women in the Labor Force

Overall, the trend in Figure 6 shows that Arab have commonly accepted women in the labor force since the beginning of polling 10 years ago. The graph indicates very little variation across time for women and men.

## Declining Interest in Politics

Overall, only one quarter of Arabs report to be interested in politics in 2016. However, the Arab Barometer observes substantive cross-country variation (Figure 7). The most interested appear to be Palestinians with roughly four-in-ten stating to be interested in politics, followed by one third of Tunisians. Lebanese (27 percent), Egyptians (27 percent), and Jordanians (26 percent) also display above average interest in politics. Morocco (18 percent) and Algeria (17 percent) stand out as the countries with the lowest levels of interest in politics.

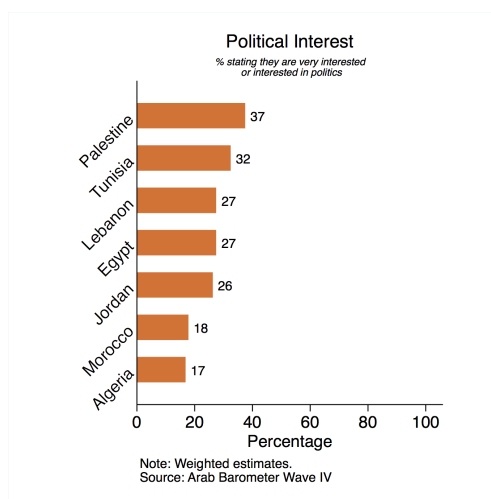


Figure 7: Political Interest by Country

Less than half of women in all countries surveyed across the Middle East and North Africa report being interested in politics. The graph on the left of Figure 8 reveals clear differences across countries: women in Tunisia and Palestine are most likely to say they are interested or very interested in politics at 28 percent, respectively, followed by 21 percent in Egypt, 19 percent in Jordan and 16 percent in Lebanon. Meanwhile, only one-in-ten are interested in Algeria (11 percent) or Morocco (9 percent). Women’s political interest lags behind that of men’s in all countries surveyed in the Arab Barometer. Large gaps are found in Lebanon ( $\Delta = -24$  points), Palestine ( $\Delta = -19$  points), and Morocco ( $\Delta = -18$  points). Meanwhile, the difference in levels of interest between men and women is smallest in Tunisia at only eight points.

The Arab Barometer also observes differences across Arabs’ levels of education. With the exception of Lebanon, where an equal proportion of people with secondary education or below and higher education say they are interested in

politics (27 percent), the pattern follows the expected direction, the right graph of Figure 8 suggests: those with higher education appear to be more interested

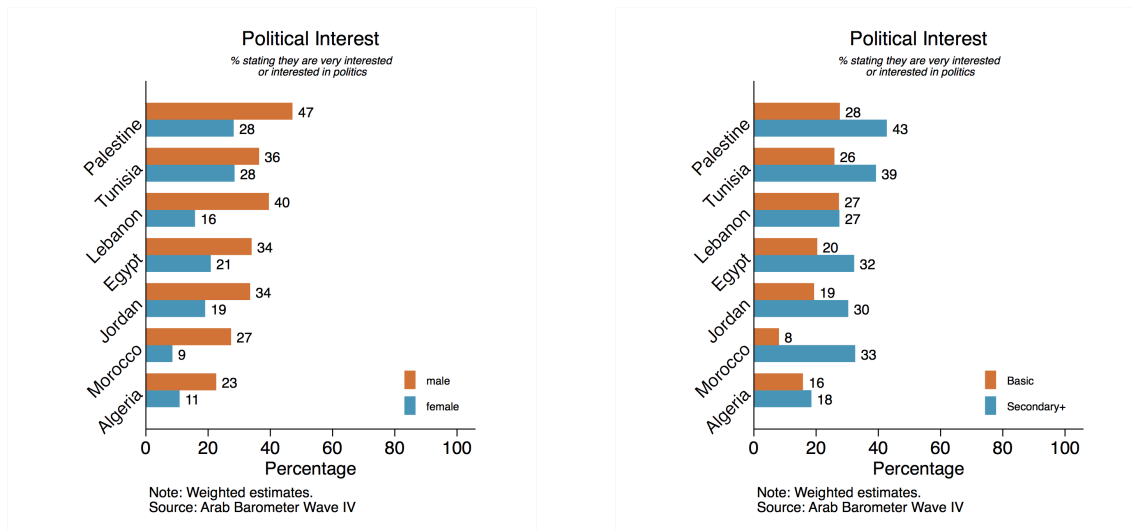


Figure 8: Political Interest by Gender and Level of Education

in politics. The gap is the greatest in Morocco with a difference of 25 percentage points, followed by Palestine ( $\Delta = +15$  percentage points), Tunisia ( $\Delta = +13$  percentage points), Egypt ( $\Delta = +12$  percentage points), and Jordan ( $\Delta = +11$  percentage points). There appears to be no substantive difference across level of education in Algeria ( $\Delta = +2$  percentage points).

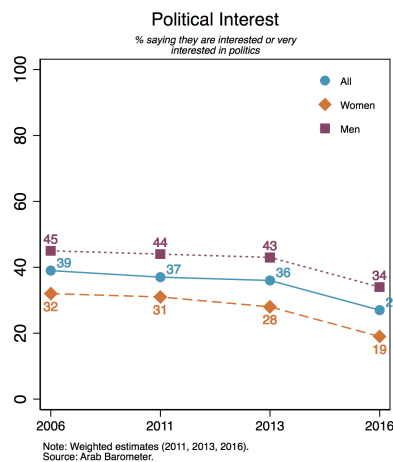


Figure 9: Trend in Political Interest

Women's interest in politics has generally declined across the region, especially in recent years. However, this is not a gender-specific phenomenon, as Figure 9 suggests. In 2006, roughly a third of women across MENA said they



were somewhat or very interested in politics compared to 45 percent of men. The trend remained largely unchanged during and after in the years after the Arab uprisings in 2011 and 2013. More recently, political interest has fallen across the region, with now just one-in-five women and one third of men holding an interest in the subject, a ten-point decline over just three years for both genders.

## Approval of Women Having the Right to Serve as Head of Government

Although no woman has held such a position in an Arab country,<sup>1</sup> the majority of citizens in the seven countries surveyed believe that a woman can serve as the president or prime minister of a Muslim-majority country. Figure 10 reveals that this belief is most widespread in Lebanon (77 percent) and Morocco (70 percent), while roughly two-thirds say the same in Jordan (66 percent) and Palestine (64 percent). Clear majorities also agree in Tunisia (63 percent) and Egypt (61 percent). The major exception to this trend is Algeria where only 36 percent hold this view.

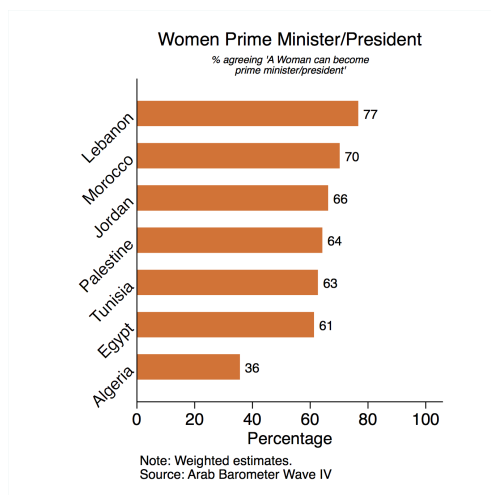


Figure 10: Women Head of Government by Country

The graph on the left in Figure 11 suggests gender differences in attitudes toward female access to the highest political office. Women are more likely than men to say that a woman can be the head of a Muslim-majority country. The difference ( $\Delta$ ) between genders is greatest in Algeria ( $\Delta = +22$  points), followed by Morocco ( $\Delta = +20$ ), Tunisia and Palestine ( $\Delta = +13$ , respectively). Notably, in all countries except Algeria, at least two-thirds of women believe that a female

<sup>1</sup>Women have served as the president or prime minister in non-Arab Muslim-majority countries including Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Pakistan.

head of government is permissible. In Algeria, women are nearly twice as likely as men to say that women can hold such a position, suggesting that Algerian men’s reluctance to accept a female head of government accounts for much of the overall difference between levels in Algeria and other countries.

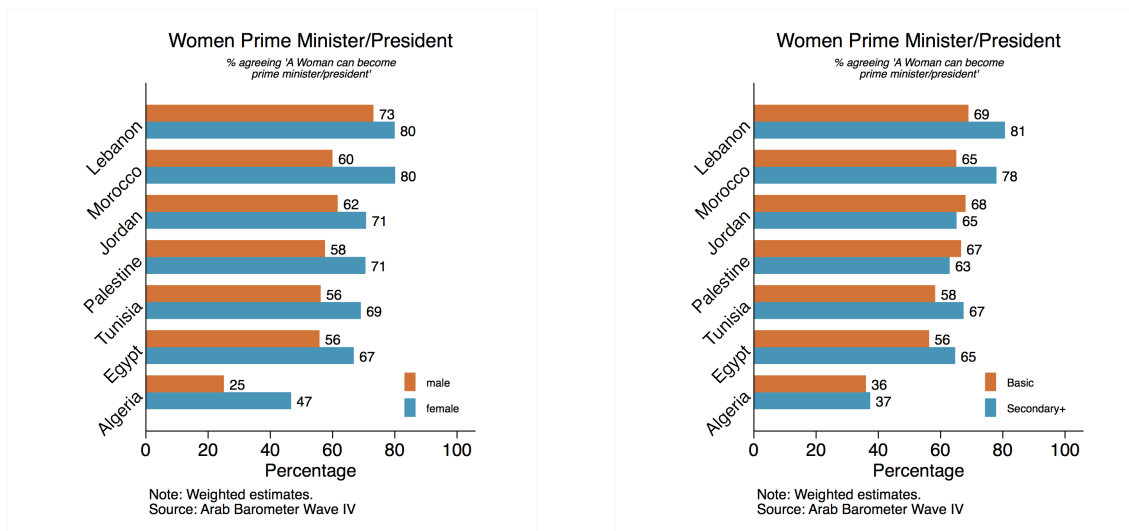


Figure 11: Acceptance of Female Prime Minister/President

Looking at the respondents’ levels of education (graph on the right in Figure 11) reveals a fairly consistent effect across the region on views about the acceptability of a female head of government. In some countries, those with at least a secondary education are more likely than those who have achieved lower levels of education to say a woman can be prime minister or president of a Muslim country. Those with higher educational attainments are more likely to hold this view in Morocco ( $\Delta = -13$ ), Lebanon ( $\Delta = -12$ ), Tunisia, and Egypt ( $\Delta = -9$ , respectively). Meanwhile, minor differences are found in Palestine ( $\Delta = -4$ ), Jordan ( $\Delta = -3$ ), and Algeria ( $\Delta = -1$ ).

Moving on to the overall trend, it is evident that attitudes about the acceptability of a woman being the prime minister or president of a Muslim country have changed relatively little over the last decade. The overall trend in Figure 12 reveals an increase of less than three points for all citizens. Attitudes among female respondents have remained consistent: in 2006, 70 percent said that a woman could serve as head of government with a 4 percent drop in 2011, and an increase back to 69 percent in 2016. By contrast, the percentage of men who hold this view has increased from about half in 2006 and 2011 to 55 percent in 2016. It remains to be seen whether this a short-term increase or if this trend will continue in the future. Men across the Arab world may be becoming more supportive of a female head of government over time.

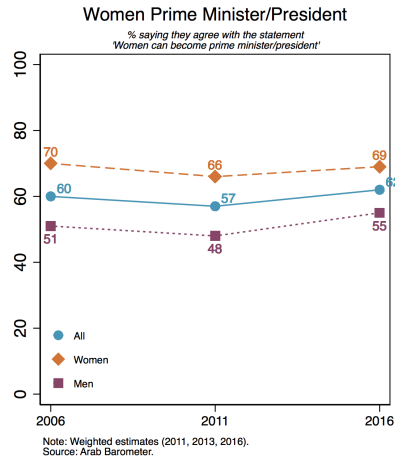


Figure 12: Trend in Attitudes towards Women Head of Government by Country

## Prevailing Belief: Men Are Better Political Leaders

Overall, the idea that men make better political leaders prevails: Two thirds across the region state they agree with the statement 'In general, men are better at political leadership than women'. Figure 13 displays the percentage of citizens agreeing with the statement that men are better political leaders by country. Four-in-five citizens in Algeria (81 percent) and Egypt (79 percent) say that men are better political leaders. Moreover, nearly three-quarters say the same in Jordan (74 percent) and Palestine (71 percent). Those living in Morocco (56 percent), Tunisia (55 percent) and Lebanon (52 percent) are less likely to hold this view, although in each case at least half prefer men over women as political leaders.

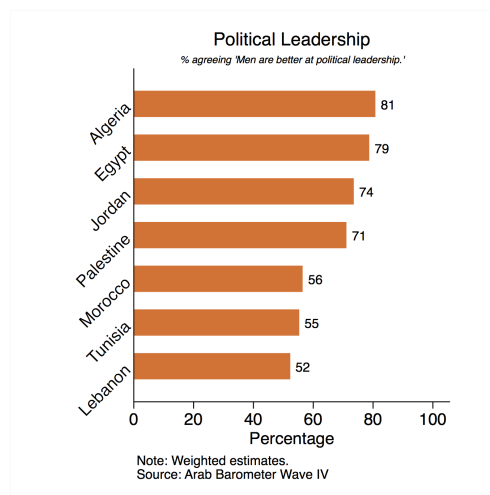


Figure 13: Political Leadership by Country

Men and women across MENA tend to hold different views about the leadership capacity of women. The graph on the left in Figure 14 indicates that the gender gap is greatest in Morocco, where women are 21 points less likely to say men are better political leaders; but smaller in Lebanon ( $\Delta = -15$ ), Palestine ( $\Delta = -14$ ), and Algeria ( $\Delta = -13$ ). A relatively minor difference is also found in Tunisia and Egypt ( $\Delta = -7$  points, respectively). Jordan stands out as the country with the smallest gap in attitudes between men and women ( $\Delta = -3$  percentage points.)

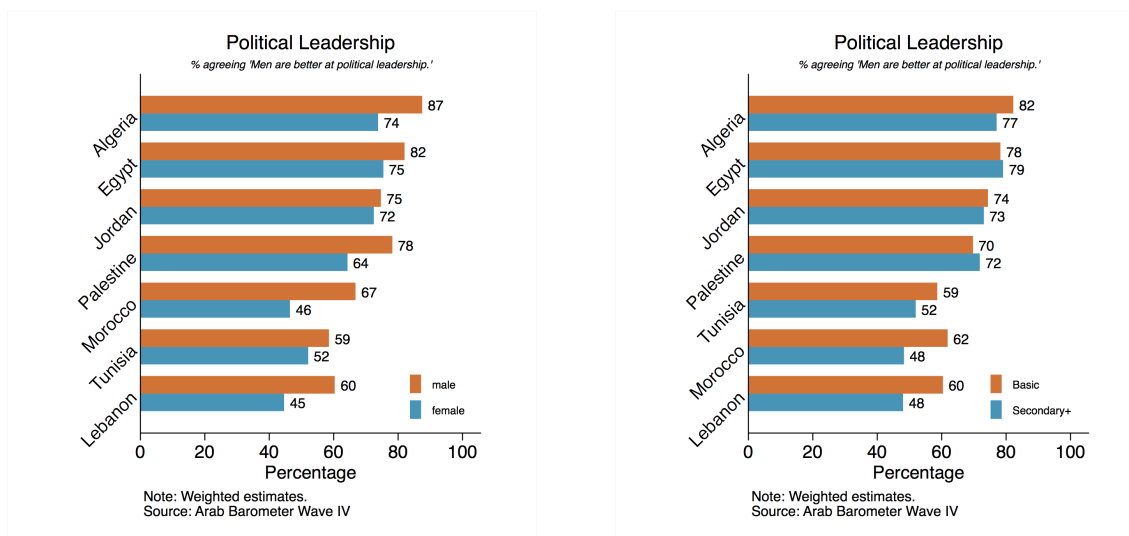


Figure 14: Political Leadership by Gender and Level of Education

The effect of education on attitudes about male leadership is mixed, however (graph on the right in Figure 14). In Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, and Lebanon, the Arab Barometer observes that those with secondary education or below are more likely to believe that men are better political leaders. In Egypt and Palestine, the data indicate that the proportion of people saying that men are better political leaders is higher among those with higher education. However, the difference between levels of education is rather small. In general, the difference ( $\Delta$ ) is the greatest in Morocco with -14 percentage points, followed by Lebanon ( $\Delta = -12$  points) and Tunisia ( $\Delta = -7$  points). The difference across level of education in the remaining countries is small. To some degree, this lack of a consistent difference may result from the fact that men, particularly in the older generation, tend to be more educated than their female counterparts.

Notably, views about the political leadership qualities of men and women are largely unchanged over the last decade, Figure 15 indicates. In 2006 and 2016, 67 percent across the region held this view. However, the results over time suggest a more nuanced pattern. In fact, from the time of the 2011 uprisings until 2013, citizens across MENA became less likely to say that men make better political leaders. During this period, the percentage of men holding this view declined from 78 percent to 66 percent while the corresponding decrease among women was from 62 percent to 52 percent.

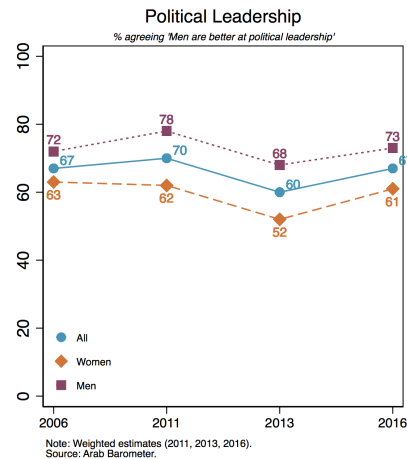


Figure 15: Trend in Attitudes towards Political Leadership

Likely, this result was a product of the drastic changes taking place in the region, with women’s increasing visibility in public life both in revolutionary settings like Tunisia and Egypt and amid ongoing reforms to increase women’s participation in parliament, combined with the ongoing effect of reforms to increase women’s participation in parliament in countries like Jordan and Morocco.

Yet, by 2016 these trends had reversed. Men became 7 percentage points more likely to say men make better political leaders, while women became 9 percentage points more likely to say the same during this three-year period. Perhaps the rise of insecurity across the region including civil and international conflict resulted in citizens, including women, favoring men in political leadership given stereotypes that male leaders may be better at ensuring their country’s security.<sup>2</sup>

## Who Should have the Final Say? Men Remain the Decision-maker in the Family

Half or more in all countries say that the husband should have the final say in decisions affecting the family. Figure 16 reveals that this view is most common in Algeria (77 percent) and Egypt (72 percent), followed by Morocco (58 percent), Tunisia (58 percent), Jordan (57 percent) and Palestine (52 percent). Only in Lebanon do less than half (46 percent) say husbands should be the final decision maker in family matters. Thus, despite a general acceptance of the equal rights of women in education, in work, and in politics, views of women’s roles in society remain unequal.

<sup>2</sup>See Young, Iris Marion. 2003. “The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State.” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29:1-25.

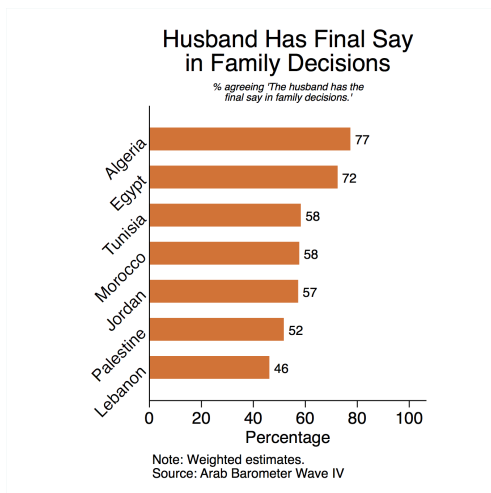


Figure 16: Final Say in Family Decisions

The gender difference ( $\Delta$ ) is captured in the graph on the left hand side of Figure 17. It is greatest in Lebanon, where women are 19 points less likely to hold this view. Similar gaps are found in Jordan ( $\Delta = -17$  points), Algeria ( $\Delta = -16$  points), Morocco ( $\Delta = -15$  points), but also in Tunisia ( $\Delta = -15$  points) and Palestine (-12 points). Egypt ( $\Delta = -6$  points) stands out as the country with the smallest difference between men and women saying on this issue. Across MENA, women are less likely than men to say that husbands should have the final say in the family.

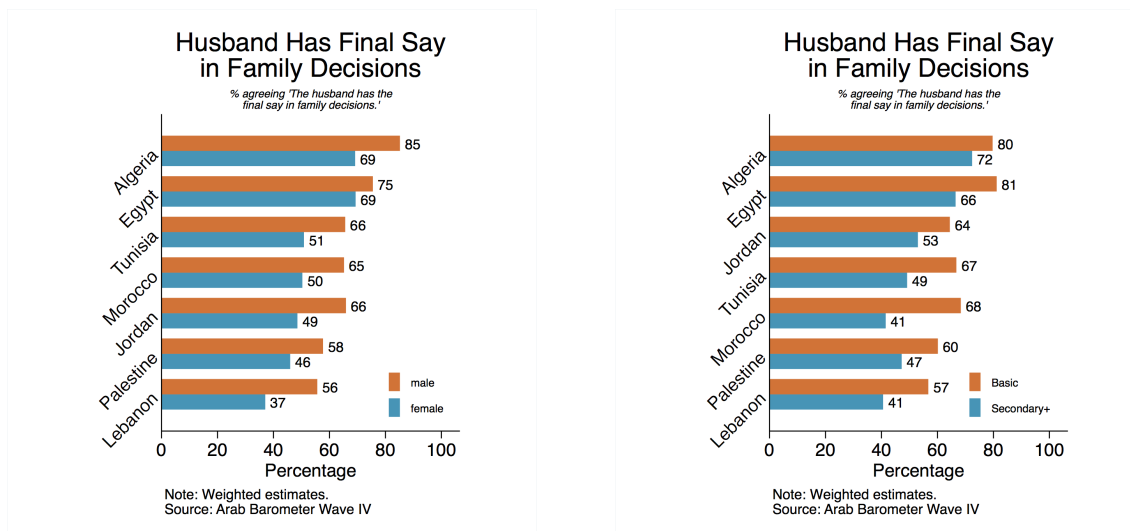


Figure 17: Final Say in Family Decisions by Gender and Education

A larger and more consistent difference is found by level of education (graph on the right hand side of Figure 17). Those with at least a secondary diploma are less likely than those with lower level of education to say that husbands should

have the final say. The difference is greatest in Morocco, where those with higher levels of education are 27 points less likely to hold this view, followed by Tunisia ( $\Delta = -18$  points), Lebanon ( $\Delta = -16$  points), and Egypt ( $\Delta = -15$  points). Additionally, smaller differences are found in Palestine ( $\Delta = -13$  points), Jordan ( $\Delta = -11$  points) and Algeria (-8 points). This question was not asked in earlier Arab Barometer waves, which is why trend data are not available.

## Conclusion

Arab publics across the region believe women should have equal rights to men in a variety of areas including access to education, employment, and political office. The findings suggest that there are substantive differences across countries. In addition, the views of women and men appear to differ, especially regarding women's roles in society. The Arab Barometer further observes views to differ across levels of educational attainment. Citizens with lower levels of education are often more likely to hold unequal views, suggesting that as educational attainment increases across MENA, attitudes toward women may also shift.

These findings may have implications for policies aimed at empowering women. Efforts to improve women's equality need to move beyond ensuring equal rights to focus on attitudinal shifts about the roles women should play in society.



## About Arab Barometer

The Arab Barometer is a nonpartisan research network that provides insights into the social, political, and economic attitudes and values of ordinary citizens across the Arab world.

We have been conducting high quality and reliable public opinion surveys of probability samples representative of citizens aged 18 or above in the Middle East and North Africa since 2006. Each country survey included approximately 1,200 respondents. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the respondent's place of residence. The error margin is  $\pm 3$  percent.

The Arab Barometer is the largest repository of publicly available data on the views of men and women in the MENA region. Our findings give a voice to the needs and concerns of Arab publics.

Until 2017, the Arab Barometer has conducted 36 national surveys over four waves including more than 45,000 interviews in 14 Arab countries.



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