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Search](#)[How Do I Print/Save/Email Articles?](#)**104610545****Title:** Globalization and women in the Middle East.**Source:** Middle East Women's Studies Review: 16, September 2002. ISSN: 1082-5371**Publisher:** Association for Middle East Women's Studies**Subject Area:****Geographic Area:** Middle East**Record Type:** Fulltext **Word Count:** 2135**Publication Type:** Journal**Publication Country:** United States, **Language:** English**Text:**

In this short paper I will briefly discuss globalization in its different dimensions, identify its gender aspects, and discuss how it affects the Middle East and especially women in the region.

First, globalization is a complex and multidimensional process in which the mobility of capital, organizations, ideas, discourses, and peoples takes on an increasingly transnational and integrated form. As such, globalization has economic, political, cultural, social, and spatial dimensions, although it is at heart an economic process driven by technological, financial, and business interests.

Globalization can be regarded as the latest stage of capitalism, with the major institutions of economic globalization being the transnational corporations (TNCs), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the US Treasury and even the ministries of finance of an increasing number of states. Economic globalization has its detractors and its enthusiasts. The enthusiasts claim that economic liberalization--of prices, trade and financial markets--will lead to domestic and foreign investments, economic growth, job creation, and higher standards of living. The detractors argue that it leads to cut-throat competition, reduced social spending, widening income gaps, growing inequalities, and rising unemployment. Feminists point out that in either case, it devolves upon women to provide both productive and reproductive labor, often with little or no remuneration, and with few social rewards. Of course, some women do fare well with economic globalization, but the available evidence shows that there is a serious downside to the global shift from Keynesian to neoliberal economics.

Political globalization refers in part to an increasing trend toward multilateralism and transnational political activity in which the United Nations plays a key role; national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) act as watchdogs over governments; transnational advocacy movements increase their activities and influence, and moves are made toward the establishment of an International Criminal Court. Some have called this the making of a global civil society, while others have raised concerns about the continued political power of the countries of the North Atlantic. Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Political scientists and sociologists have pondered the prospects of the nation-state and national sovereignty, in a context of regionalization and globalization in which international financial institutions and other institutions of global governance have increasing power over national economies and state decision-making.

Cultural globalization refers to worldwide cultural standardization--as in "Coca Colonization" and "McDonaldization"--and also to postcolonial cultures, cultural pluralism, and "hybridization." The various aspects of globalization have promoted growing contacts between different cultures, leading partly to greater understanding and cooperation and partly to the emergence of transnational communities and hybrid identities. But globalization has also hardened the opposition of different identities. This has taken the form of reactive movements such as religious fundamentalisms, which seek to restore traditional patterns, including patriarchal gender relations, in reaction to the "westernizing" trends of globalization. Various forms of identity politics are the paradoxical outgrowth of globalization.

Consistent with the contradictory nature of globalization, the impact on women has been mixed. One feature of economic globalization has been the generation of jobs for women in export-processing, free trade zones, and world market factories. This has enabled women in many developing countries to earn and control income, and to break away from the hold of patriarchal structures, including traditional household and familial relations. The neoliberal emphasis on the private sector encourages entrepreneurship and the establishment of small and medium-sized businesses run or staffed by women. Similarly, the communications revolution has resulted in the growth of e-commerce, which women can move into with some ease. However, much of the work available to women is badly paid, demeaning or insecure; moreover, women's unemployment rates are higher than men's almost everywhere. The feminization of poverty is an unwelcome feature of economic globalization. Worse still is the apparent growth in trafficking in women or the migration of prostituted women.

The weakening of the nation-state and the national economy similarly has contradictory effects. On the one hand, the withering away of the welfarist, developmentalist state as a result of neoliberal economic policies is a uniformly negative outcome for women in developed and developing regions alike. On the other hand, the globalization of concepts and discourses of human rights and of women's rights and the activities of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) is emboldening women and creating space for women's organizations to grow at both national and global levels. In turn, this represents a counter-trend to the particularisms and the identity politics of contemporary globalization. In my view, the one positive aspect of globalization has been precisely the proliferation of women's movements at the local level, the emergence of transnational feminist networks working at the global level, and the adoption of international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of the

Fourth World Conference on Women.

Theorists have distinguished between globalization-from-above and globalization-from-below. The former refers to those neoliberal economic policy measures (e.g., the "Washington Consensus" or "Atlantic Consensus") that have been criticized by anti-globalization activists. The latter refers to transnational advocacy networks, global social movements or solidarity movements across borders--environmental, human rights, labor rights, and women's rights movements and organizations. Even the groups that make up the anti-globalization movement in fact reflect the positive side of globalization--that is, the ability of people to unite and act transnationally. Although there have been international solidarity movements in the past (e.g., the abolition, suffrage, and workers movements), contemporary globalization-from-below is distinguished by its breadth, scope, and efficacy, largely the result of the Internet and the ease of travel. A large number of women's organizations, including transnational feminist networks, are part of the anti-globalization movement. As an example, the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice is comprised of numerous women's organizations from the North and the South.

Compared to other regions in the world economy, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is, for better or for worse, less integrated into the trade and financial circuits of the global economy, participating largely as an exporter of oil and receiving less Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) than other middle-income regions. This has implications for female labor and employment patterns. (1) Women of MENA still have lower rates of employment than women in other parts of the world. While the average rate of female economic activity is 40.2 percent globally, in the Arab world the rate is only 19.2 percent. The rate in East Asia is the highest, at 55.1, while rates in South Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean rates are lower, (29.5 and 28.8 respectively) but still considerably higher than in the Arab world. (Source: United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report (HDR), Table 26, p. 233, 1999. Available on-line at: <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/1999/en/>)

This may also be linked to low rates of political participation among women. Women's political participation in formal organizations--trade unions, women's organizations, political parties, solidarity networks--is usually correlated with employment and educational attainment. Estimates reported in the UNDP HDR 1999 (Table 28, p. 238) suggest that women's representation in government is quite low throughout the region. Women in North African countries such as Tunisia and Algeria have among the highest participation rates, but even in these countries, the number of women at all levels of government is estimated at 7.9 and 4.8 percent respectively. In a number of other countries, and in particular in the Gulf (with the exception of Kuwait), the percentage of women in all levels of government is estimated as zero. In fact, women in Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia still have not gained the right to vote, or stand for election.

These figures are for the late 1990s, and some significant and positive changes have occurred since then, including the introduction of a quota system in Morocco which recently brought in a 10% female share of parliamentary seats, and in the summer of 2002, the appointment of five women cabinet ministers in Algeria. At the same time, the Arab Human Development Report 2002 cited the "women's empowerment deficit" as one of the three key deficits facing the region (the other two being a freedom

deficit and a deficit of knowledge and human capabilities relative to income).

Another issue of concern is the apparent absence of Middle Eastern women in transnational advocacy networks, especially the transnational feminist networks that I study, such as Development Alternatives With Women for a New Era (DAWN) and Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), which are two of the best-known ones. Of course, individual Middle Eastern women are involved in some transnational networks, and the formation of the Amman branch of the Sisterhood is Global Institute (SIGI) is an important example. But there is still not a critical mass of Middle Eastern women involved in major transnational advocacy networks compared, for example, to the women of India or Latin America. Rather, political activism remains within a national and largely nationalistic and religious framework. Lack of involvement in transnational networks may be partly due to the fact that the Middle East has been slow to use the Internet. (2) Thus, with a few exceptions, the women of the Middle East seem to be somewhat marginal to globalization-from-above and to globalization-from-below.

The good news, of course, is that women's groups are proliferating in the region, and some are beginning to work together in a coordinated fashion, such as the Maghreb-Mashreq Link. Women's organizations include professional associations, charitable societies, women's studies centers, women's rights organizations, development NGOs that service women, and worker-based organizations, as well as the official or governmental women's organizations. Women's groups and feminist groups especially are working toward the following: (1) modernization of family law; (2) criminalization of violence against women, including domestic violence and honor crimes; (3) granting women nationality rights; (4) enhancing women's employment and political participation. These objectives entail efforts to enhance women's civil, political, and social rights. There is some evidence of human rights and women's rights groups working together as well, and such coalitions could positively affect public policy in countries of the region in the future.

However, there are serious obstacles to women's political participation, and these limit the potential for social and gender transformations in the region. The absence of democratic institutions and the continuing influence of Islamist forces are the major structural constraints to women's political participation and advancement. In addition, socio-demographic factors such as the relatively small population of educated and employed women preclude widespread activism by women as women, limiting the development of feminist activism or a social movement of women. These structural and socio-demographic factors attenuate the formation of a critical mass of politically engaged women who can influence public policy and the direction of social change in the short term.

In the longer term, secular changes such as increased educational attainment and participation in the labor force by women as well as political democratization will accelerate the development of politically engaged women. In the meantime, it is important for women activists in the Middle East to link up with transnational networks. An encouraging development was the participation by at least two women's groups in the Pan Arab anti-Globalization Gathering as well as the Lebanese NGO Anti-Globalization Gathering that took place in October-November 2001 as part of global civil society's responses to the WTO meetings in Doha, Qatar. The two women's groups were the Lebanese League for Women's Rights and the National Gathering for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Such

involvement in global political action and domestic advocacy networks can foster additional political experience and build support for local struggles toward equality, democratization, and social justice.

Notes:

(1) For details see Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), *Globalization and Gender: Economic Participation of Arab Women* (Tunis: CAWTAR, 2001), especially ch. 2.

(2) Exceptions include, of course, Israel and, to a lesser extent, Turkey. Jordan's Internet usage is increasing. Iran saw the growth of many Internet cafes, but the government shut down about 450 of them in the spring of 2001. Government repression is a major factor behind the slow growth of the Internet in the Middle East, along with lack of facility with English and lack of disposable income. See "The Internet in the Middle East and North Africa: Free Expression and Censorship", Human Rights Watch, June 1999 at: <http://hrw.org/advocacy/Internet/mena/index.htm> for further discussion.

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