Gender Equity in the Middle East and North Africa: Integrating Men and Boys

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming Recommendations</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gender equity throughout the world has been, and remains, a key avenue of human rights work. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), while progressing in certain human rights categories, remains behind in gender equity. These have dire consequences within the societies themselves, as gender-based violent practices like honor killings and female genital cutting continue, and patriarchy remains powerful. In order for inequity in these areas to change, men and boys, as well as women and girls, need to be engaged in the process of creating gender equity. It is crucial for a new paradigm of gender equity to address both halves of society, rather than a constant framing of men perpetrating inequality and women surviving it. For cohesive and sustainable progress, men and women must see each other as necessary partners in achieving a more egalitarian society, and place their stakes in each other’s futures. Such an inclusive policy shift that focuses on men’s participation first requires understanding governance in the MENA region and identifying barriers to gender equity. These barriers reflect political, economic, religious, and cultural constructs - from a lack of equity in women’s political and economic participation, to Islam being used to further patriarchal agendas, and masculinities being informed by standards of unquestioning dominance.

As researchers and policy advisors for Freedom House, our following programming recommendations seek to address these impediments to gender equity and the engagement of men and boys. They are organized into three main categories that follow Freedom House’s approach to promoting the protection of human rights: research projects, advocacy, and trainings and conferences.

**Research projects** are important to Freedom House’s need for impactful analysis and may be undertaken as short-term projects or as components of larger relevant studies. There are a number of research areas that have been identified as important to the improvement of gender equity. First, it is necessary to research cultural equivalents of the term gender equity, as it may not translate literally or pragmatically in a variety of contexts. Understanding culturally specific terms can improve the effectiveness of gender equity programming. Second, advertising campaigns should be monitored and evaluated so as to assess the effectiveness of current media campaigns and improve upon those results. Third, Freedom House can research gender perceptions among youth, as identifying such perceptions can be beneficial in future partnerships or trainings with human rights activists. Lastly, economic participation is linked to gender equity and therefore research of favorable government policies on expanded women’s workplace involvement can help to inform later collaboration with governments in MENA.
Advocacy allows Freedom House to collaborate with governments and activists to amplify voices. In this regard, Freedom House can help to amplify the voices of both youth and pop culture groups that are working on gender-based violence. These groups are finding innovative ways to bring about a discourse on the topic. However, support and advocacy on the part of Freedom House could help to improve the discourse and increase its reach. Also, the political realm represents an excellent avenue for advocacy. Quota systems in the region begin to give women a voice in the political sphere, but changes need to be made to give women an equitable chance and to ensure that men and women work together within government.

Trainings and conferences present a useful tool for Freedom House action initiatives. To advance gender equity such trainings should focus on youth, male activists, media freedom, and religious activists. Youth comprise a huge population in the region and should be utilized in any gender equity program. Trainings on leadership, human rights, and democracy would provide opportunities for boys and girls to develop relationships through communicating and working together. Male activists should also be targeted for trainings on human rights and democracy. Such men are already involved in working for the betterment of their communities and trainings could thus give them ideas on how to incorporate gender issues into their work. Freedom House has a long history of working towards improved media freedom and freedom of expression. Therefore, the organization can provide support through forums and conferences to the burgeoning media activists in the region. Religion plays an integral role in the daily lives of people in MENA and therefore becomes a key avenue to gender equity reform. Freedom House could facilitate dialogue between secular and Islamic feminists, as well as work with local activists to provide space for the development of such dialogue.

In the larger picture, these recommendations aim to impact the arching trends of MENA gender inequity by addressing both grassroots and policy levels of potential change. Youth are a crucially important resource in all analysis, advocacy, and action initiatives; the Middle East has the largest population of youth in the world, and programming must acknowledge and account for this potential to be harnessed. Freedom House can use its strengths in convening parties and peoples by promoting dialogues not only between genders, but also between generations, for the goal of unpacking the often-unquestioned narratives and propagation of Islamic patriarchy. In addition to supporting these kinds of grassroots impacts, Freedom House can support local groups that are already active in promoting gender equity. Freedom House has great resources for providing regional and global audiences an opportunity to hear the voices and projects of local actors, and in this way can strengthen their capacity. At a policy level, Freedom House can support efforts in promoting political and economic participation; in particular, working with local actors to improve quota systems and expand involvement in the workforce. Finally, these recommendations all fulfill our purpose of engaging men and boys by allowing them to see themselves as stakeholders in gender equity as alternative narratives of masculinity are supported (versus only narratives of patriarchy). Freedom House can support this social and internal transformation by hosting leadership conferences and trainings to introduce and emphasize these values of informing masculinity within a human rights and gender equitable framework. Upon realization of these strategies, we aim to see progress in MENA gender equity in all spheres - internal, societal, religious, political, and economic - that is truly sustainable.

Executive Summary 5
Gender equity throughout the world has been and remains a key avenue of human rights work. MENA, while progressing in certain human rights categories, remains behind in gender equity, especially regarding equity within public domains including political, economic, and other areas of participation and mobility. These have dire consequences within the societies themselves, as gender-based violent practices like honor killings and female genital cutting continue, and patriarchy remains powerful. In order for inequity in these areas to change, men and boys, as well as women and girls, will need to be engaged in the process of creating gender equity. It is crucial for a new paradigm of gender equity to address both halves of society, rather than a constant framing of men perpetrating inequality and women surviving it. For cohesive and sustainable progress, men and women must see each other as necessary partners in achieving a more egalitarian society, and place their stakes in each other’s futures. Historically, men have significantly lacked participation in women’s rights advocacy - and the difficulty of finding men mentioned in the discourse is symptomatic of the larger problem. Here, we will confront the challenges of men’s participation in women’s rights movements in light of the past failures to include them.

Such an inclusive policy shift that focuses on men’s participation first requires understanding governance in the MENA region and identifying ongoing barriers to gender equity. These barriers reflect political, economic, religious, and cultural constructs. MENA is not void of its own activists and therefore any gender equity programming will need their support. Accordingly, it is also important to understand how feminists in the region have begun to articulate their concerns and have mobilized around the issue. In order to recommend solutions for engaging men and boys in gender equity in the MENA region it is necessary to understand the construction of masculinities particular to the region. Additionally, it is important to assess the link between the primary focus areas and the approaches by which much of the existing development programming on gender equity are framed in support of human rights goals. Taken together, the region’s history of governance, discourses on feminism and masculinity, and overview of development programs provide a foundation for not only explaining the complexities behind achieving gender equity, but also for highlighting the ways in which some advancements on the issue have been made.

**Governance in MENA and its Relationship to Human Rights**

The Middle East and North Africa comprises a broad range of cultures, government structures, and relations with the human rights framework. However, the region is dominated by authoritarian regimes and a general reliance on Islamic law, at least regarding family, or personal status, law. These governmental structures and influences directly impact its relationships with human rights discourse, specifically regarding issues of gender equity.
Political Structures/Governance: Many factors affect the patterns of gender inequity prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa. One such important factor is the political system, including political parties and economic systems. All of these features work simultaneously to create a system that limits the political and economic participation of women.

- **Authoritarian regimes**: The regimes in MENA vary from secular republics, such as Turkey, to theocratic monarchies as in Saudi Arabia. However, most can be labeled as authoritarian, or as Valentine Moghadam has termed them “neopatriarchal states” (Moghadam, 2013, p. 16). Authoritarian leaders have commonly cracked down on protests and have violated human rights -- including those pertaining specifically to women -- in order to keep power during popular protest. This can be seen throughout the Arab Spring as harsh responses from the ruling al-Khalifa family in Bahrain and Bashar Al-Assad in Syria led to violent clashes, arbitrary detention, and torture. Authoritarian regimes in the MENA region face resistance from a number of fronts, including Islamist parties, which can impact their relation to gender equity.

- **Islamist parties**: Throughout the region Islamist parties most often serve as opposition forces to the regime in power. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, or the Al Wefaq party in Bahrain are examples of groups that challenge the actions and policies of the ruling regime. Because of this opposition pressure, regimes must address issues of the Islamist parties. This provides one more reason for the continued use of Islamic personal status laws, which disproportionately disadvantage women, beyond a conception of Islam as the only culprit. Ruling regimes may try to display their Islamic credentials through the enactment or continued upholding of family law (Mokhtari, 2014).

- **Women’s political and economic participation**: Women in the Middle East and North Africa have made gains in terms of education and health, but gender inequity remains rampant in economic and political participation. Economically, women have traditionally been seen in the domestic sphere as caretakers. However, the economic structure, along with cultural norms, impacts this low participation. Public sector employment represents 45% of total employment in the region and generally offers better pay and working conditions (The World Bank, 2013, p. 18). Therefore women who enter the workforce primarily aim to enter the public sector, thereby narrowing their options for employment. Additionally, the economic policies in MENA have generally limited economic diversification, relying heavily on oil production (Moghadam, 2013, p. 21). Such reliance on one sector again limits the opportunities for women. Political opportunities and participation are directly related to the economic opportunities provided for women. Moghadam writes “economic citizenship is a necessary condition for their participation in any democratic polity” (2013, p. 220). Low female representation in government is a global phenomenon; although rates are lower than average in the MENA region. Quotas
have been implemented in many countries, yet quotas do not necessarily result in decision-making roles within government. Also the authoritarian, or neopatriarchal, nature of these states limits participation of women, along with men.

**Influence of Islamic Law:** Islam certainly dominates the region and is therefore a contributing factor to the issues of gender inequity. This influence can be seen in the prevalence of personal status laws based on Islamic law, as well as the push to outline human rights based on an Islamic conception. However, it is important to remember that Islam is not a static, monolithic entity and not the only reason for gender inequity in the region.

- **Gender complementarity:** Much of the basis for Islamic law regarding personal status stems from the concept of gender complementarity, rather than gender equity. Complementarity reflects differences between men and women, but with a corresponding balance of rights and duties based on those differences. Many stress that the differences should not be emphasized, but rather the mutual dependence reflected in that complementarity (Mir-Hosseini, 1999, p. 133). The duty of the man is to provide financially for his family while “women’s roles as wives, mothers, and daughters are seen as central to the spiritual well-being of the family and the maintenance of the social order” (Treacher, 2008, p. 62). This basic discourse serves as the basis for or justification of other gender discrimination. However, the recent Tunisian constitution rejected the claim of gender complementarity and adopted a clause guaranteeing gender equality (Tajine, 2014). While many steps must be taken to ensure such equality Tunisia has broken the mold typical in the MENA region.

- **Personal status laws:** The debate on women’s rights in the Middle East and North Africa usually centers on the discriminatory nature of personal status, or family, laws. These laws include such issues as age of marriage, right to divorce, inheritance laws, polygamy, permission to work and travel, and custody rights. While different laws exist in different forms throughout the region, Islamic family law is common throughout. Some religious leaders claim that these laws derive from shari’a, “the totality of God’s will as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad” (Mir-Hosseini, 2009, p. 25). However, most scholars differentiate between shari’a and Fiqh, which equates to ‘understanding.’ Fiqh represents human interpretation of the Qur’an and Sunnah and also the basis of legal rules. Therefore discriminatory family laws reflect patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts. However, such laws do not solely derive from Islam, but are a combination of fiqh, cultural traditions, as well as colonial laws and legal systems (Sonbol, 2009, p. 180). European gender philosophy of the 19th century, for example, has remained a part of family laws now common in MENA.
Islamic human rights documents - Islamic law has influenced the drafting of specific Islamic human rights documents. These documents act as a way to incorporate human rights within an Islamic framework. The 1981 Universal Islamic Declaration of Rights espouses some universalist characteristics, but also accounts for some Islamic particularities. There are explicit references to Islamic law within the document and rights can be limited in accordance with shari’a (Brems, 2001, p. 242-258). In 1990 the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (formerly the Organization of the Islamic Conference) drafted the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam. This declaration uses less Islamic discourse, but continues the “submission of all rights to the shari’a” (Brems, 2001, p. 266). The language surrounding women is one of equality, but specifically calls for equality of dignity and of obligations of men and women. The Cairo Declaration falls short of enumerating equal rights based on gender.

Contrast to/Critique of Western Rights: In 1948 when the UN drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, rights were intended to be universal. However, since the drafting many developing states have begun to see these universal rights as Western rights. The MENA region frequently adopts such language and frequently critiques what they see as Western human rights against an Islamic conception of rights.

- God vs. man-made: Many defenders of an Islamic human rights conception point to the difference between rights divined by God and those decided upon by humans. Western rights are critiqued as being products of human conception and as such are arbitrary and can be withdrawn by legislatures or dictators and violated in the same way. These man-made rights lack the power of enforcement and are flagrantly violated, even by the most ardent supporters. On the other hand human rights in Islam have been granted by God and therefore cannot be rescinded by humans, “the rights which have been sanctioned by God are permanent, perpetual, and eternal. They are not subject to any alterations or modifications, and there is no scope for any changes or abrogation” (Maududi, 1976).

- Duties vs. rights: The international human rights framework obviously gives priority to rights, while it is often believed that Islam prioritizes duties over rights. This belief stems from the idea that the Qur’an references duties, but rarely does the same for rights (Brems, 2001, p. 206). Khaled Abou El Fadl contends however that the duty over rights debate is based only on Western cultural assumptions about the non-West. Duties and rights are both well established in Islamic tradition and many jurists claim every duty has a reciprocal right (2009, p. 154-155). Either scenario should not pose a significant threat to the adoption of human rights in the Middle East and North Africa.

- Women’s rights: Exploitation vs. chastity: Many Islamic feminists in the region see “Western” women’s rights, and especially Western feminism, as disadvantageous to women generally and specifically to Muslim women. These activists argue that Western
rights have “liberated women only to the extent that they are prepared to become sex objects and market their sexuality as an advertising tool to benefit patriarchal capitalism” (Afshar, 1996, p. 123). Furthermore, they argue that Western rights do not acknowledge spaces for marriage and motherhood and women simply become second-class citizens to men. In an Islamic conception, on the other hand, women have opportunities for training and education, while still being respected as wives and mothers (Afshar, 1996, p. 124). Islam can therefore be viewed as protecting the chastity of women, something that is absent from so-called Western conceptions of rights.

**Key Conclusions:** It is extremely difficult to point to one aspect of the Middle East and North Africa as the reason for its gender inequity. Rather, it is a complex mixture of political, economic, religious, and cultural factors that leads to a lower status for women in the region. All of these factors must be taken into consideration when analyzing the region and forming strategies for improvement. One essential element of such strategies will be the current feminist responses in the region.

**Feminism in the MENA region**

Identity in the MENA region, as in all regions, is created through many facets such as political, social, familial, religious, and ethnic. As women gain a feminist conscious, tensions form throughout these different parts of their identity; their religion becomes backward or oppressed while still authentic, their feminism becomes progressive and freeing while corrupt (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 9). Debates rage within the MENA region about the modern realities women face. There are growing demands for democracy and equal civil and human rights, discussion on higher literacy rates and educational levels among women, the increasing social and political presence of women, critiques of patriarchal traditions, repression, and violence. Looking through an Islamic feminist perspective as well as a secular feminist perspective will shed light on the current approaches to these debates.

**Secular Feminism in MENA Region:** There are multiple discourses to inform the secular feminist approach, including secular nationalist, Islamic modernist, humanitarian/human rights, and democratic. Secular feminists approach gender equity as a case against Islamic feminism; they are often referred to as Muslim feminists because they are specifically secular feminists who are also identifying as Muslim.

- **Secular reconstruction of Muslim societies:** The spread of technology such as the printing press, and the increase in literacy gave rise to more women becoming active in expressing their views through writing, reading, and dialogues (Badran, 2005, p. 7). With greater access to information women could now challenge current patriarchal societies. When using a secular feminist approach, many ask, “is Islam even compatible with feminism?” (Moghadam, 2002, p. 1135). This group believes that there cannot be gender
equity or even improvements in women’s status as long as religion plays a role (Moghadam, 2002, p. 1142). In other words, secular feminists challenge the particularist nature of an Islamic framework and advocate for a standard universal human rights paradigm. They argue that the attempts of Islamic feminists to reinterpret shari’a law will not be successful because of the strength of the traditional and conservative current interpretations (Moghadam, 2002, p. 1150). Furthermore, they believe that democratization and true gender equity will only come about outside of a religious framework. They do not try and fit feminism into Islamic holy sources but rather discuss women as having certain inalienable rights.

**Islamic Approaches to Gender Issues:** The role of religious texts is an integral part of daily life for Muslims. The interpretations of these religious texts vary depending on the category of gender issue approaches that one uses (Tohidi, 2002, p. 171).

- **Inequality/Traditionalist Approach:** Insists upon complementarity between men and women, and uses patriarchal interpretations. Traditionalists strongly believe in classical fiqh interpretations and rulings on marriage and divorce. They believe that these rulings are divinely ordained and thus legitimize patriarchy.

- **Neo-Traditionalist Approach:** Tries to introduce balance to the traditionalist approach. Neo-traditionalists created a new genre of gender discourse that is not necessarily legal in arguments or authored by jurists. Instead, typically men in religious houses write about clarifying the status of women in Islamic laws. (Mir-Hosseini, 2009, p. 40). These writings are often oppositional and apologetic; they oppose the advance of ‘Western’ values and apologetic in returning to fiqh texts to explain gender bias.

- **Equality Approach:** Aims to go beyond the old fiqh understanding and create a “radical” rethinking of jurisprudential constructions of gender. Those who use the equality approach question whether there is a logical link between Islamic ideals and patriarchy. This phase of approaches to gender issues is largely made up of women.

**Islamic Feminism in MENA Region:** Islamic feminism is a popular concept in the women’s movement in the Middle East and describes a category of women working to improve women’s rights within the Islamic framework. The Islamic feminist movement emerged during the 20th century. This approach uses dialogue and a process of exchange with Islamist women’s groups and feminist movements. Islamic feminism embraces religion as a complex of references. Feminist readings of the Qur’an use three main approaches: citing verses that state male and female equality, deconstructing verses that talk about the differences in males and females, and correcting false stories that promote patriarchy (Badran, 2005).
- **Islamic reform/Islamic feminism**: There is much debate surrounding Islamic reform. There must be a distinction between shari’a in theory and rhetoric and shari’a enforced by the modern legal system. Muslim women often find Islam to be a source of comfort, not oppression (Mack, 2000, p. 197), and thus use that framework to strive to end discrimination “with regard to education, marriage, divorce, public talk, driving, access to mosques and employment, political participation and code of dressing, etc.” (Uthman, 2010, p. 66). Islamic feminists aim to preserve their complete faithfulness to the principles of Islam. They use Islamic teachings to acknowledge injustices and change their society. The realm of Islamic feminism remains incredibly diverse, it includes a variety of contributors such as pragmatists, neo-Islamists, feminist traditionalists, etc. Many Islamic feminists believe that there needs to be emancipation from political interpretations of Islam, not from Islam itself (Uthman, 2010, p. 69).

- **Religious texts**: Religious texts, the Qur’an, shari’a law, and hadith, influence the daily lives of Muslims. Historical, socio-economic, and political factors determine the interpretations of Islam’s holy sources (Tohidi, 2002, p. 171). Debates about these interpretations lead to societal change. Whoever controls the interpretations has the power and forms the ideologies (Friedl, 1999, p. 312). Islamic feminists often insist that discrimination of women comes from a social construct and understanding rather than a divine teaching (Moghadam, 2002, p. 1144). Islamic feminists believe in and advocate for a return to history, looking at religious texts and fiqh documents in a more objective manner will push the gender equity movement forward. The current interpretation of shari’a law places women in the arena of motherhood and family remains central. On the other hand, some men participate in polygamy and have a free hand in divorce, thus eroding the sanctity of family for women (Moghadam, 2002, p. 1145).

- **Case Studies**: In Tunisia, Islam enfolds even secular laws. In India, Muslim ideology has forced revisions of secular divorce laws for Muslim women. However, some earlier Islamic countries provide examples of greater tolerance in polytheistic beliefs (Hausa) and matrilineal customs (Sumatra).

- **Un-reading Patriarchy**: Establishing gender justice from an Islamic feminist approach means “unreading patriarchy” (Abugideiri, 2010, p. 134). Some scholars look to the past to show women’s dominant voice to insert the female voice within historical narratives and thus give women agency within Islam. By exposing patriarchal interpretive methodologies and their destructive lenses, feminist scholarship contests the male privilege.
● **The Veil**: Debates remain strong about the public image of the veil worn by Muslim women. In Tunisia, it is portrayed as a symbol of oppression (Mack, 2000, p. 197). Others see it as a form of liberation. Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian born American, advances the idea that the Christian West has decided the veil is backwards, thus to be western means to be unveiled, while those who veil are Muslim. According to Nawal El-Sadawi, an Egyptian activist, the veil is a symbol of sexuality and thus she opposes the wearing of the veil (Uthman, 2010, p. 67). Others, such as Fatima Mernissi, reject the veil by reinterpreting historical context. Mernissi believes that a patriarchal elite swayed the Prophet during a time of stress. (Uthman, 2010, p. 68).

● **Women’s agency**: Often, Muslim women use their socio-historical contexts to improve their own lives. For example, in Indonesia, women rely on a matrilineal social structure to create a support network. In Southeast Asia, women have strong negotiating benefits based on pre-Islamic cultural contexts (Mack, 2000, p. 197).

**Beyond Secular and Islamic feminism**

● **MENA “Gender Revolution”**: By joining both secular and Islamic feminist approaches, feminism in MENA can go beyond the two distinct trajectories. As Islamic feminists remain rooted in religious texts, secular feminists remain universal. By working together, these two paths can form the gender revolution in which secular and religious dissolve back into each other to form a holistic Islam (Badran, 2005, p. 23).

● **Conditional Interdependence**: How can gender equity be achieved on a global scale? By using “conditional interdependence” as a method of situating women within their various cultures to move gender equality forward and allow a pursuance of rights (i.e. choice and autonomy). The way we currently consider notions of autonomy in pursuit of women’s rights in affluent countries (global North and elites in global South) may not be an appropriate paradigm to frame women’s issues. The conditions in the global North are radically different from the conditions in the global South; that is, that affluent community conditions vary in comparison to poor community conditions in any country. Different societies have different resources available to them. Therefore, using a conditional interdependence approach to gender equity focuses on the interconnectedness of rights to allow a transference of resources based on what societies have available. Communitarian values that support newly democratic societies would create a platform for gender equity momentum. The conditional interdependence approach also views the role of men as critical to achieving gender equity; men provide both resources and access in this approach (Andrews, 2012 p. 18-21). It is an inclusive paradigm that asks what can be done to change the lives of women in all economic and social strata.
Key Conclusions: The MENA region remains socially, politically, culturally, and geographically diverse. While secular feminism aims at a more universal human rights paradigm, Islamic feminism aims at the amelioration of women’s status through the utilization of Islamic rights and Islamic holy sources. These two feminist movements must be taken seriously when discussing the gender equity movement within MENA; they both aim for the same ultimate goal, but are differentiated in the tools they use to discover that goal. However, in order to generate a new shift in the gender equity movement, men and boys must be engaged in dialogue with these ideas as well.

Masculinity and Male Identity in Islamic Societies

In order to effectively introduce concepts and practices of gender equity into Islamic societies, a holistic understanding of masculinity and male identity within these societies is fundamental. A culture of patriarchy, traditions of male governance, and unexamined and unquestioned male dominance characterize many Islamic societies of the Middle East and North Africa, and pose significant constraints to the achievement of gender equity.

The Culture of Islamic Patriarchy:

- Patriarchy is a familiar global phenomenon, as men’s institutional privileges characterize most contemporary societies. The notable trait of Islamic patriarchy, however, is the construction and informing of male identity within a variety of religious and social structures, although “masculinity has less to do with the visions and teaching of Islam and more to do with the pursuit of patriarchal power agendas in the name of Islam” (Ouzgane, 2006, p. 3). Durre S. Ahmed goes so far as to state “almost all Islamists tend to have repressive and brutal attitudes towards women,” justifying that this is true regardless of their socioeconomic and education status within Islamic society (2006, p. 11). Ahmed provides the example of movements to “Islamize” already Islamic societies: these often focus on the behavior and bodies of women despite the lack of women’s leadership and participation in these movements, thus showing “certain deep-rooted psychological issues within the Muslim male psyche regarding women, gender, sexuality...” (2006, p. 15). If this is true, it is necessary to examine the sources of masculinity, to analyze the manifestation of patriarchy in the prevalence of sexual and gender based violence (among other inter and intra-gender interactions), and to clarify the factors that legitimate and sustain patriarchal power (Inhorn, 2012, p. 13).

Sources that Define and Inform Masculinity:

- Islamic theology, as the defining characteristic of Islamic societies, is an undeniable foundation for contemporary Islamic masculinity. The Prophet Muhammad’s sex life, complete with multiple wives and concubines, was a historically persistent European Christian complaint against Islamic societies. The critiquing of the Prophet’s masculinity was internalized by Muslims and then countered by claims that the Prophet in actuality
lived a chaste and austere life. (Ouzgane, 2006, p. 4). Beyond attempts to bend the Prophet’s masculinity to European Christian ideals, the literal absence of acknowledging women’s experiences in Islamic communities’ social awareness translates into a symbolic absence of Allah’s feminine attributes in religious awareness, including traits such as mercy, graciousness, and compassion (Ahmed, 2006). This creates a self-perpetuating cycle in which the feminine, void in both socialization and in Allah’s character, sustain and promote each other, allowing male identities to grow violent and misogynist without any counterbalancing feminine awareness.

○ Lahoucine Ouzgane provides examples of the omission of feminine representation in Islamic communities: In Yemen, “patriarchal power structures [expressed through the gender-based violence Yemeni women suffer daily]... are founded on the repression of the feminine,” and Ba’thist Iraq in the 1980s introduced “improvements” in women’s status that were “designed to fashion them into masculinized subjects” and made it easier to “police [them in] both the public and private spheres of life” (2006, p. 5)

● Sexual relations in Islamic societies have historically had social hierarchies, with adult men on the top and women, boys, and slaves below. Western concepts of the differentiation between sexual and gender identity, and degrees of masculinity and femininity, have historically had no resonance in Islam. Bruce Dunne asserts that “both dominant/subordinate and heterosexual/homosexual categorizations are structures of power. They position social actors as powerful or powerless, ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’” (1998, p. 8). As such, the masculine and the feminine come to define not just a man and a woman, but become the “qualities within a human being” that are accordingly ranked with the masculine first (Ahmed, 2006, p.19).

**Manifestations of Patriarchy: Sexual and gender-based violence:**

● The amount of sexual and gender based violence incidences run high in Islamic Middle East and North African societies, and men are the overwhelming majority of the perpetrators of violence against women. Honor killings, female circumcision, and gay bashing are commonly accepted social practices. This is due to a significant minority of men supporting violent attitudes and beliefs, and being culturally informed that physical and sexual violence is an acceptable expression and outlet for masculine identity (Kimmel, 2005, p. 462). Because Islamic societies do not provide open avenues for discussions on sexuality, masculinity is implicitly encouraged to be demonstrated towards women in macho and sometimes horrifyingly violent ways. Ahmed warns of the nurturing of “an extreme individual pathology... symptomatic of a collective, misogynist, paranoid, religious rooted, psycho sexual syndrome,” an example of which he cites a 1994 incident of a Pakistani imam brutalizing his wife by electrocuting her with iron rods in her uterus and anus (2006, p. 28).
Islam highly values the celibacy of the religious and the unmarried, as lust is seen to be socially disruptive and very immoral (Gilmore, 1990, p. 41). Because of the resulting silence and social taboos about sexual behavior, a space is quietly opened to accommodate discrete incidents of behavior that are otherwise publicly condemned – such as homosexuality, premarital sex, and adultery – as long as they are kept unobtrusive to the maintenance of families, reproduction, and social networks. Due to the unmentionable nature of these indiscretions, the patriarchal and social structure that keeps them hidden goes unchallenged and legitimizes acts of sexual violence that also fall into this category of socially unmentionable acts (Dunne, 1998, p. 9).

Sustaining Patriarchy:

- In most Islamic societies, there is no formal ritual or recognition of a boy’s transition into manhood. Because it is “endorsed rather than ordained, manhood remains forever in doubt, requiring daily demonstration” – and because of the constant expectation to prove one’s manliness, masculinity becomes competitive and insecure (Gilmore, 1990, p. 56). This encourages men to sustain the patriarchal structures they are raised in so that they may use it to verify and inform their masculinity. Roger Horrocks (in Nagel, 2010) explains that the necessary conditions for men to commit to patriarchal structures “requires such a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self, a turning away from whole areas of life... To become the man I was supposed to be, I had to destroy my most vulnerable side, my sensitivity, my femininity, my creativity, and I had to pretend to be both more powerful and less powerful than I feel” (p. 246). Thus, the pressure to become hyper-masculine, without incorporation of feminine characteristics, enforces patriarchal societal expectations and structures and requires male identities to adhere strictly to it in order to be considered masculine.

- According to Islamic patriarchal structure, men are expected to be the guides of their women and their families, and thus often police the mobility and conduct of their sisters, mothers, wives, and female companions, often with the complicity of the feminine parties (Inhorn, 2012, p. 13). Women play their role in sustaining patriarchy as well by supporting its institutions and social expectations without challenging them. Additionally, it is not uncommon for women to pass patriarchal standards on to their children and grandchildren. Due to the deep internalization of patriarchy as a societal norm, women accordingly raise their children to these standards and pass on the expectations for men to be dominant and for women to be their subordinates. In this manner, gender discrimination is not only propagated by the behavior of patriarchal men, but also upheld by women who accept these norms as an unchanging reality.

- Alternative narratives to patriarchy are under-represented in Islamic societies, and accordingly there is a lack of resources that promote non-violence for masculine identities. Inhorn affirms that there are many Islamic men who do not want to be
patriarchs, but instead value and adore their wives as equals, attributing this to the fact that they have learned sexuality together due to the encouraged mutual premarital virginity (2012, p. 2). It is also reasonable to assume that men can and are motivated by interests other than the privileges patriarchy affords them. Their natural concerns for children and their relationships with women and each other, as well as their personal ethical and political commitments, can be important resources for constructing non-violent masculinities. For example, Kimmel cites Islamic feminist men who oppose the spread of shari’a for the reason that it restricts the civil rights of women (Kimmel, 2005, p. 459). However, these alternative views to sustaining patriarchy and informing nonviolent masculinity remain less heard than the main narrative of sustaining patriarchy itself.

● Ethnographies and deconstructions of Islamic masculinity are an unknown discourse within Islamic societies, and are very limited outside of these societies. The under-examination and unquestioned patriarchal link to masculine identities sustains patriarchal structure, because it “secures its power by refusing to identify itself” (Ouzgane, 2006, p. 1). The implicit acceptance and lack of discourse in uncovering the sources and manifestations of Islamic masculinities is important to overcome should the structure of patriarchy ever change into structures of gender equity.

Governance and State-Centered Perspectives: The imbalance of privileges in the gender structures of Islamic societies are clearly reflected in their structures of governance as well as in their political movements and history. These are of particular concern as an impediment to gender equity, as true transformation would require not just social conversion, but political and legislative reformatting.

● Masculinity in Nationalism and State Conservatism: Cynthia Enloe asserts in Bananas, Beaches, and Bases that nationalism has typically stemmed from “masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope” (Nagel, 2010, p. 254). Enloe’s claims are supported by the historical trend of Islamic societies’ nationalism tending to be conservative and patriarchal, due to the tendency of nationalists to embrace tradition as a legitimate ground for nation building and cultural renewal. Whether or not these traditions were real or created for nationalism’s sake, they often incorporate masculine privilege and connect the image of masculinity to the image of nationalism, relegating the feminine to a subordinate position. For example, Nagel cites the 1962 Algerian independence from French colonial rule. The struggle for Algerian independence was notable for the participation of Algerian women: “11,000 women were active participants in the national resistance movement... [Yet] despite this extensive involvement... once independence was won, Algerian women found themselves ‘back in the kitchen’” (p. 255). This trend continues in contemporary Islamic societies, with governance structures often restricting the rights and movements of women, such as Saudi Arabia’s prohibitions
against women’s driving and unaccompanied public appearances. These result in far less freedoms for women than for men, and are justified by the weak feminine nature needing protection and guidance by the masculine.

- **Women’s Sexuality:** Women, and in particular women’s sexuality, is significant to nationalists and political officials because Islamic culture assigns women to bear masculine honor due to their positions as wives and daughters of men; thus when women are shameful or shamed, the man, the family, and by extension, the nation is shamed. This concept is institutionalized in state laws – for example, Afghani nationalists’ conception of resource control, labor, land, and women is seen primarily as a matter of honor (Nagel, 2010, p. 256). These institutionalizations often position men with the ability to gain honor, while attempting to protect women from losing it because “honor is seen as actively achieved while shame is seen as passively defended” (p. 255).

- **Modernity Equated to Masculinity:** Due to the recession and disappearance of feminine characteristics from social and religious consciousness, the progression of Islamic societies results in a view of modernization as a form of masculinization (Ouzgane, 2006, p. 3). Islamic modernists developed a response to an often Western-influenced modernization process, some by creating a discourse of Islamic orthodoxy, others by welcoming Western modernization ideals and adopting Western masculinity’s ideals of men protecting the honor of women to become symbols of modernity and national honor (Adibi, 2006, p. 4). These Islamic associations with a state of modernization further entrench masculine identity in patriarchal structures, so that even in progression, the female identity is still subject to protection and control.

- **Men as Stakeholders in Gender Equity Promotion:** In order for the concept of modernity to be removed from the upholding of masculinity, it is critical for men to see their stakes in a future of gender equity. Kimmel suggests, “antisexist men invite men to see beyond prevailing patriarchal constructions of men’s interests and articulate nonpatriarchal notions of... men’s ‘long-term’ enlightened self-interest” (2005, p. 459). However, this would be a challenging development, due to the unavoidable fact that it requires the privileged group of masculinity to undermine that same privilege in order to separate it from modernization.

**Key Conclusions:** Although Islamic culture is a shifting and complex result from many nuanced political, economic, and social factors, an overwhelming trend of patriarchy in both cultural norms and state governance stand out as the most significant issues of masculinity that prevent gender equity. The equation of masculine identity with patriarchy stems from it being sustained by both men and women, and the under-representation of alternative narratives of sourcing male identity other than in patriarchal structures. This not only impedes the progression of gender equity, but also manifests itself in harmful and violent practices that compromise women’s health.
and safety. The examination of Islamic masculinities is severely underdeveloped. However, the current understanding of it is enough to emphasize the crucial importance of nurturing perspectives that place masculine stakeholders in a more egalitarian future between male and female, and this can be done through various programs that engage men and boys in gender equity.

**Programs Engaging Men and Boys in Gender Equity:** The importance of engaging men and boys in gender equity simply cannot be overstated, as gender equity continues to be obstructed unless all members of society - male and female - are partners in its progression. Muslim men especially need to understand the undiscussed constructs of inequity between the masculine and the feminine in their societies, so that they may be better able to negotiate rapid social change and acknowledge their own privilege and power. This principle was recognized by the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 with the statement “men’s groups mobilizing against gender violence are necessary allies for change” (Kimmel, 2005, p. 462). Equipping women to advocate for their own rights is a standard discourse, but it is stunted in reality without the inclusivity of men and boys seeing their own stake in a more equal future. With the gravity of this inclusion in mind, several efforts have been made towards the goal of progressing towards gender equity with men and boys in mind.

- **Afghanistan National Solidarity Program:** The National Solidarity Program, created in 2003, empowers local communities to engage in the planning and management of their own development projects. The program focuses on rural communities and aims to build capacity of both male and female community members. The Community Development Councils are gender-balanced, allowing for increased participation of women, as well as increased acceptance by men of women in local governance (The World Bank, 2013, p. 145).

- **Democracy training for Sanaa imams and women preachers (Yemen):** With a grant from the Middle East Partnership Initiative, the National Organization for Developing Society launched a training program for male and female religious leaders in Yemen. Religious leaders in Sanaa have participated in 14 training programs focused on democracy and human rights. The sessions make use of presentations, dialogue, and role play scenarios to address issues of rule of law, women’s political participation, and transparency (MEPI-funded). The goal is that the religious leaders will then continue to discuss these concepts in their sermons.

- **Women’s Rights Awareness Week for high school boys:** The Arab Human Rights Foundation planned a women’s rights awareness week to take place in 20 boys high schools in Yemen. School principals will be trained on women’s equity issues and then principals will lead training for Social Studies teachers in their respective schools. Teachers in turn would provide classroom lessons to students and students would finish
by participating in an essay contest on women’s rights. MEPI partnered with the Arab Human Rights Foundation to provide this program (MEPI-funded). The monitors of success of this program are not yet clear.

Overview of International Development Programs Addressing Gender Equity in MENA

While there are a number of international development organizations addressing gender equity in the Middle East and North Africa, the World Bank, USAID, UNICEF and UNDP are the central leaders supporting programs to expand equal opportunities for women and girls in the region. Of the programs available, most are concentrated in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Bahrain. Though smaller scale programs in other MENA countries have begun to emerge, there is limited information that details their scope and impact on improving livelihoods for women. Through partnerships with local government, NGOs and civil society groups, each organization primarily provides training and funding to implement programs in the following four focus areas:

Education: The main objectives of programs addressing gender equity through education are to increase girls’ enrollment in schools and reduce social, cultural and costs barriers to education.

- **Rights-based awareness included in some education programs**: Egypt’s Girls’ Education Initiative (EGEI) is one reputable program that has gradually worked towards meeting these objectives by creating policies promoting girls’ education, institutionalizing best practices, and establishing effective national and local level partnerships. As a result, the initiative has not only increased female enrollment rates, but has also contributed to the adoption of gender-sensitive education and greater awareness among girls and their families about “children’s rights such as the right to education and health, freedom of expression and the drawbacks of FGM/C, early marriage and child labor.” (UNICEF, 2011, p. 11). In Iraq, the one-year basic literacy and numeracy-training program also contributed to creating rights-based awareness in similar areas including topics on democracy and governance (USAID, 2013).

- **MDGs are typically given greater priority**: Given Millennium Development Goals 2 and 3 in relation to achieving universal primary education and gender equality by 2015, increasing girls’ enrollment in schools has been given greater priority in programming. Also, with the exception of EGEI and the Iraqi one-year training program, efforts to expand girls’ access to education have primarily focused on assessing gender parity in enrollment, literacy and numeracy rates, rather than measuring human rights learning priorities and outcomes.

Economic Empowerment: Programming initiatives focusing on women’s economic empowerment seek to create income-generating opportunities, expand their access to financial services, and foster entrepreneurship.
• **The popularity of micro-finance:** Micro-finance is one of the most common approaches to enhancing women’s economic empowerment. In Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Bahrain, Iraq, Palestine, and West Bank, current programs provide loans to youth and women to facilitate the expansion of micro enterprises (World Bank, 2013; USAID, 2013). According to the results of a 2009 micro-finance market research study, some of the major achievements that female participants of the Citizens of Bahrain Project were that they could “decide on their futures, provide for their children’s nutrition, health and education” (UNDP Bahrain, 2012, p. 2). Also, NGOs offering micro-credit to the women were able to achieve operational self-sufficiency and establish a sustainable market image.

• **Emphasis on employability and other skills:** Other economic empowerment programs include supporting women on finding employment by training them in basic employability skills including computer knowledge, small business development, problem solving, agricultural and handicraft skills. In Egypt, the Ministry of Communication & IT partnered with local NGOs to implement activities emphasizing these training areas.

• **Reporting numbers rather than gains on respect for rights:** The connection between women’s economic empowerment and respect for their right to employment is not explicitly referenced in program overviews, goals, activities, and outcomes of the leading international development organizations addressing economic development. Instead, the language is primarily aimed at demonstrating the number of beneficiaries reached and how program participants have gained greater skills sets. While these facts are impressive, they are limited in portraying how their skills application has been embraced and accepted by males. Information about these trends is critical to understanding whether or not women are being viewed as equals in advancing economic development at household and national levels as a result of participating in a program.

**Health Promotion & Family Support:** The main objectives of programs addressing gender equity in this focus area are to standardize family planning best practices, provide maternal, child and nutrition services, reduce and respond to gender-based violence, and provide support to war victims.

• **USAID leads health programming:** In achieving these objectives, USAID has active health-related programs operating in Egypt and Iraq. By working with local NGOs and Ministries of Health, the agency has supported efforts to train nurses, women preachers, and other community leaders on improving mechanisms for disseminating health messages to women (USAID Egypt, 2013). Also, the agency partners with National Councils for Women to revise penal code articles related to violence against women and
to conduct studies on trafficking and forced marriage. Furthermore, in war-torn Iraq, USAID established the Marla Ruzicka War Victims Fund to help women cover the costs of recovering from injuries and repairing structural damages to their homes (USAID Iraq, 2014).

- **Awareness-raised without measures for knowledge application**: To some degree, these interventions generate awareness about health promotion, gender-based violence, and post-conflict livelihood reconstruction. However, the available literature does not particularly specify the extent by which women are applying their knowledge to proactively and independently make decisions about their health and family planning. Also, there is a lack of findings which detail how the studies on trafficking and forced marriage are being used to reduce gender-based violence.

**Civil & Political Participation**: Of the four key gender equality focus areas, programs that foster women’s civil and political participation are the most robust and comprehensive in directly advocating for women’s rights. The main objectives of programming in this area are to increase the availability of legal assistance to women, expand opportunities for women to vote, enforce policies requiring women to assume positions in parliament, and raise public discourse on gender issues.

- **Fostering Access to Justice**: In Iraq, the USAID-sponsored Access to Justice Program has helped increase the availability of legal assistance to women by engaging religious leaders, legal associations, law schools and the Iraqi government on protecting women’s rights (USAID Iraq, 2013). At the grassroots-level, the program’s Community Action Groups (CAGs) consist of men and women who meet separately but coordinate with each other on making community decisions. Over the next three years, the groups are expected to reach a 30% quota for female participation (CHF International, 2006). The program also has also enhanced family protection systems by training law enforcement officers on dealing with gender-based violence cases.

- **Women serving as peacemakers**: The UNDP-sponsored Access to Justice Program in Gaza is creating opportunities for women to participate in providing legal advice to families. Mukhtaras, or female peacemakers, receive training on conflict resolution, negotiation techniques and on laws related to dealing with engagement, marriage, and divorce issues. Upon graduating the program, the Mukhtaras work with legal clinic teams on assisting clients. One former participant who now works with families on resolving legal matters says she uses her training, religious knowledge and “mastery of traditional sayings to help her fulfill her role as a broker of social peace” (UNDP, 2013).
● **Women as elected officials:** In Egypt, Bahrain and Qatar civil and political participation programs have encouraged women to vote and have supported advocacy campaigns for women’s participation in parliament and other government institutions (Dye, 2007; Supreme Council for Women, 2013).

● **Demanding legal action through media:** Raising public discourse on gender issues is a major focus of the Iraqi Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The ministry trains journalists on covering women’s issues and supports national media campaigns to foster demand for legal actions. As a result of these efforts, the country has seen an increase in the volume of legal consultations and cases in defense of women’s rights (USAID Iraq, 2013).

● **Gender mainstreaming at the policy level:** Other broader international development initiatives include working with governments to create gender assessment plans focusing on social development policies and service delivery to women. In order to establish gender equitable laws, some programs are also collaborating with governments on identifying gender discrimination in social security, civil service employment, and fiscal policies (USAID, 2013).

● **Women’s meaningful participation remains a challenge:** At a glance, programs promoting women’s civil and political participation seem to have had a broad impact on advancing respect for women’s rights. Of such programs, Iraq’s Community Action Groups and Gaza’s Makhtaras are unique in that they represent examples of women serving as leaders in making decisions to address community concerns and resolve disputes. On the other hand, while programs and policies have expanded opportunities for women to serve in parliament, their meaningful participation in decision-making remains a challenge (USIP, 2013). According to the United States Institute of Peace, women in parliament are often “pressured to vote against their own rights in order to maintain party values” (p. 2).

**Framing & Linking MENA Gender Equity Programming with CEDAW Goals**

**MDG-Based Framing:** Much of the rhetoric regarding gender equity programming has been framed around supporting the MENA countries on achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Although each of the goals are meant to improve the livelihoods of both men and women, two explicitly target challenges facing women and girls in relation to eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education (MDG 3) and improving maternal health (MDG 5). Arguably, both goals are linked to the education and health rights articulated in the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women. However, references to CEDAW in education and health programs are seldom emphasized in the language of the work of international development organizations in these focus areas.
Rights-Based Framing: The objectives of programs promoting women’s civil and political participation more closely support the majority of CEDAW goals. In particular, they extensively focus on women’s political and public life, law enforcement, legal assistance, and matters of marriage and family life. In developing and implementing activities in these areas, international development organizations more openly use rights-based approaches to partner with local NGOs, government and civil society organizations interested in advancing gender equity.

Economic Development Framing: Many achievements in gender equity are attributed to women’s growing participation in the workforce. As a result of the expansion of microfinance and educational opportunities emphasizing literacy, numeracy, small business development, and other employability skills, women have made remarkable contributions to household and national level economic development. Given these positive trends, a larger number of international development programs continue to frame gender equity programming citing economic rationale and motivations for including women in the job market. As their participation increases, the expectation is that greater respect for women’s rights will follow. However, studies show that gender gaps continue to exist in wage earnings and certain fields of work.

Criticisms of International Development Programs on Respecting Human Rights

- Program facts tend to demonstrate impressive figures on the number of beneficiaries served, the number of trainings conducted, the amount of funding provided, education enrollment rates and other human development measures but they lack facts portraying progress towards upholding specific human rights. Furthermore, they do not “demonstrate issues of corruption, repression, inequality and powerlessness” that occur during program design and implementation phases. (Mepham, 2014).

- As the World Bank and other leading international development organizations “shy away from the more complex and politicized approach to development implied by an explicit emphasis on rights,” programs often fail to benefit marginalized groups, especially women (Mepham, 2014, p. 2).

Key Conclusions & Literature Gaps on Programming: Existing international development programs generally have had a positive but modest impact on gender equity in the MENA region. However, in order to more thoroughly assess the depth and breadth of accomplishments in this area, it would be necessary to consider the work of other leading organizations and stakeholders involved in improving the livelihoods of women and girls. Yet, much of the available literature primarily refers to the work of USAID, the World Bank, UNDP and UNICEF. Although their programs are meant to be holistic, they are heavily MDG and economically based. Also, program activities do not detail the extent by which male voices and reactions are incorporated and evaluated.
In our literature review, we confronted the multi-faceted challenge of enabling men to see themselves as stakeholders of gender equity in the Middle East and North Africa. The inclusive policy shift that this would entail requires a holistic understanding of governance in the region and identifying the barriers to gender equity; while correspondingly understanding how feminists in the region have begun to articulate their concern provides key insights on gaining local involvement. In order to truly address the root issues preventing men and boys from engaging in gender equity, we analyzed the cultural constructs of the Islamic masculinities particular to the region in order to effectively inform strategic interventions for men and boys. In addition, it was important to assess the link between these primary focus areas and the approaches by which much of the existing development programming on gender equity are framed in human rights discourse.

Uncovering these multitudes of contributing factors led to the identification of numerous constraints to gender equity in the MENA region. These impediments can be broadly grouped into political, economic, religious, and cultural concerns, each of which have an impact on the human rights condition within a given country. Therefore, it is essential that Freedom House’s programming responses touch upon all of these issues in order to provide a comprehensive solution to gender inequities. Freedom House is a leader in the field of human rights and democracy and our resulting recommendations focus on using the strengths of the organization in conducting research projects, implementing advocacy platforms, and holding trainings and conferences towards the promotion of gender equity in the region. These steps aim for a holistic effect, which is the most sustainable way to address the myriad of factors perpetuating gender inequity, and to support the possibility of an increasingly egalitarian future upheld by both men and women.

Research Studies

The following strategies are in line with Freedom House’s capacity of conducting research and impactful analysis. These are framed as research studies to be undertaken either as short-term research projects, or as components of larger relevant studies that may be ongoing or that may encompass various aspects of the following recommendations as Freedom House sees fit.

Research Culturally Relevant Equivalents of “Gender Equity”:

Even within the Western discourses of its origin, the terminology of “gender equity” has proven problematic in universal acceptance and understanding since its coining in the 1980s. The issue in its construct is in its connotation of woman-specific emphasis – despite the neutrality of the denotation, “gender equity” immediately hearkens to women’s empowerment, opposing women’s oppression, and generally other framings that do not include men as an equal
stakeholder. With these existing problems in Western discourse, it grows into a problem of greater complexity when attempting to speak to MENA societies about gender equity. Conceptually, the term may not translate; pragmatically, there may not be an existing reality of gender equity to inform implementation of the term. Furthermore, the term “gender equity” can be alienating because of its heavy Western connotations. Therefore, a culturally relevant equivalent is crucial in order to allow for successful discussion and programming to occur in the MENA region.

Freedom House can utilize its resources and reputation as an effective human rights advocate to research the cultural equivalent MENA terminology of “gender equity.” Suggestions from regional officials such as former Iranian Parliament member Ali Akbar Mousavi include utilizing plainly direct language such as “men and women” in place of gender (A.A.Mousavi personal interview, 11 April, 2014). As a short research study, or as part of a larger study, Freedom House can collect the advice of native officials and laypeople of individual MENA societies as part of national and local dialogues in order to determine a culturally relevant and conceptually translatable definition of gender equity. The new term would need to be anchored in the realities of the MENA region. The importance of the research is twofold: first, that a culturally relevant equivalent of gender equity is needed in order to resonate well with the target population, and second, that terminology must be sound before programming begins, or it is set up for failure. The results of this research can also be used strategically. While “gender equity” may still be the terminology used to attract and justify funding, on the ground it would be important to utilize the findings that research reveals as the MENA equivalent of “gender equity.”

Monitor and Evaluate the Effectiveness of Advertising Campaigns:

Media is undeniably influential, thus it is important to harness the opportunity of reaching the wide demographic that tune into some form of media and use it to employ a narrative of mutual respect and equality between men and women. Local on-the-ground human rights groups have been leading advertising campaigns, which is appropriate given their essential local knowledge and ability to utilize resources for maximum positive reception among their communities. Freedom House can reach out as a supporter to these local groups and offer capacity strengthening in media, both through fulfilling any media consultation needs and through offering a global platform through Freedom House’s endorsement and ability to draw attention to the work of local campaigns.

As a research supplement to the international platforms that Freedom House is able to offer local advertising campaigns, the organization can conduct monitoring and evaluation activities on two fronts: a) the effectiveness of local advertising campaigns on the local perception of gender equity and b) the effectiveness of Freedom House’s partnership with these local groups that lead the advertising campaigns. Assessing the effectiveness of local advertising
campaigns could pragmatically take the form of a survey of best practices, whereby Freedom House would first identify and reach out to groups that publicly advocate and advertise gender equity. Following identification of these groups, Freedom House would release a questionnaire to assess how much impact the groups feel that they have had. Examples of questions could include:

- What was the perception of gender equity in your target community before your advocacy campaign?
- What were your advocacy strategies and goals, and what actions did you take according to your strategy?
- What indicators did you rely on to assess your campaign’s effectiveness in reaching your goals?
- How did you see your target community’s perception change over the course of your advocacy campaign?

Assessing the effectiveness of Freedom House’s partnership with these local groups can be completed using indicators such as increased references to the groups in question in international media, or greater regional and international collaboration with these groups. These would indicate a rising awareness and support of these local groups as a result of Freedom House’s ability to provide global platforms.

Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of local advertising campaigns on the local perception of gender equity would provide valuable data to Freedom House of advertising strategies that seem to have the most impact, which would further reveal strategies that are needed to resonate with MENA audiences. Also, monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of Freedom House’s partnerships by comparing the number of audiences able to be reached before and after partnership with the organization will allow the benefits of strategic advocacy to be analyzed. Should there be any avenues for improvement, the data collected will be able to highlight these as well.

**Research Strategies for Education:**

Given that the MENA population is one of the youngest in the world, with 30% of the population between 15 and 29 (Brookings Institution, 2014), youth are an indispensable and highly precious resource that cannot be ignored in strategies of promoting gender equity. Rather than developing and implementing curriculums and grassroots programs for young boys and girls in particular, Freedom House can contribute to these efforts by conducting focus group research and hosting dialogues among youth in order to uncover their existing conceptions of gender equity, or lack thereof. Facilitating these dialogues and recording their results will allow Freedom House to develop rich analyses of perception among youth of gender equity. This information can be published at Freedom House’s discretion to promote accurate understandings.
of the mentality of MENA youth, and will be helpful in future partnerships or trainings with local human rights and education organizations.

*Identify government policies favoring women’s expanded involvement in the workforce:*

Freedom House can also carry out a research study on how some MENA governments have been working to expand women’s involvement in the workforce. The UAE’s approach in this area is unique in that the government not only allows women to fulfill public roles, but it also aims to adhere to culturally prescribed norms for females (Goby & Erogul, 2011). Since much of the debate around women’s rights in the region concerns women’s cultural responsibility to maintain her domestic image, the UAE’s efforts in upholding these two goals serves as a promising model for developing strategies that fulfill the right to employment, while at the same time respect cultural norms. Given the country’s success in implementing its workforce model for women and its leading reputation for upholding human rights in the region, it would be valuable for Freedom House to partner with government officials to identify how they support university initiatives to train women and how they have implemented policies to allow women to become active in the engineering, science, healthcare, medical, computer technology, law, commerce, education, oil industries and other non-traditional sectors (Goby & Erogul, 2011). Furthermore, Freedom House might examine how those policies embrace women’s employment and family status rights while also respecting cultural norms. While these policies exist, it is likely that a small but very vital percentage of husbands, fathers, and brothers support the women in their families as they pursue these professions. Therefore, a second component of Freedom House’s research on UAE’s workforce model might explore the attitudes and opinions of men who actively support women’s participation in non-traditional sectors of the workforce. The findings gathered within this research could be used to collaborate with other progressive governments in the region to take the lead on adopting similar models. Understanding the reasons some men support gender equity could also be used to inform strategies for men who do not currently support such ideas.

**Advocacy**

Advocacy is an important part of the work of Freedom House and involves collaboration with governments and local bodies to impact human rights and democracy. The following strategies look to media and politics as avenues of advocacy for gender equity.

*Support youth in their efforts to generate public discourse on gender-based violence via social media:*

One way in which youth are addressing gender issues is through the use of online and offline activism to expose how political and patriarchal forces play a role in producing and condoning sexual harassment (Skalli, 2013). Their documentation of gender-based violence has
sparked debates in homes, radio stations, television programs, and in public gatherings that until a few years ago were unspoken of. Today, the increase in the use of online discourse is challenging readers to define the meanings and implications of sexual harassment and to take action against it as a human rights violation. Given the rise in this trend, Freedom House should monitor, review, and ultimately join in on the exchange of dialogue between youth who are voicing their stance on sexual harassment, domestic violence, and other gender-related topics. By doing so, the organization will not only be able to examine the patterns of expressions shared by cyber activists, but will also be able to offer support to an emerging generation of youth who are boldly engaging in provocative and honest discourse about gender equity on their own terms by using social media as their platform.

**Support pop culture groups on raising awareness about gender-based violence:**

Most everyone engages in pop culture in some form; the Internet has become a tool for human connection, while television, social media, live performances and the radio are all forms of pop culture that help to define and express perspectives and attitudes within a culture. Freedom House can engage with local groups to raise awareness on gender equity. For example, DAM, a Palestinian male rap trio is known for their songs discussing poverty and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, in 2012, they released a song and music video in cooperation with UN Women entitled, “If I Could Go Back in Time.” The song focuses on crimes against women, namely domestic violence and honor killings. These three male voices created a public space for women’s issues to be acknowledged and discussed. Thus, Freedom House can help fund local groups in creating pop culture projects that inform ideas of masculinity, femininity, and gender equity can be extremely beneficial to the movement.

**Provide regional audience for local activism that utilizes underused alternative resources to inform masculinity:**

Successful transformation of MENA societies into societies that value gender equity as part of a larger human rights framework necessitates internalization of human rights values and validating them with personal values and experiences. Local groups have sparked this process by introducing alternative narratives to inform masculinity, instead of propagating the standard association of masculinity with dominance. The ingrained patriarchy of many MENA societies is partially caused by a lack of resources to promote non-violent expressions of masculine identities, and a lack of focus on alternative masculine narratives. These alternative narratives can include the natural concern of men for the well-being of their daughters, wives, and other female loved ones, as well as their personal ethical and political commitments. Local gender equity and human rights activists need to cultivate these alternative resources to inform masculinity. Freedom House could then use their regional audience to highlight this activism. For example, Freedom House can promote advertising firms designing gender equity campaigns to include narratives of fathers’ love for their daughters, and husbands’ love for their wives,
using this as a basis to explain the importance of gender equity for the improvement of their loved one’s lives. Freedom House can effectively create conversation space and awareness-raising of these issues in order to amplify these local voices.

*Work with local organizations to influence current quota systems:*

The implementation of quota systems has become commonplace around the world and the Middle East and North Africa are no exception. Quotas are an important avenue for change because they are already an existing part of political society and can have a direct impact on political participation. Through advocating for quota systems, Freedom House would then be advocating for improved effectiveness of existing structures, rather than attempting to implement an unknown program. Quotas usually take the form of political party quotas, legislative quotas, and reserved seats. In MENA and other developing countries the most common forms are legislative and reserved seats, which are both mandated by law. Quotas are a positive step towards women’s increased political participation, however quite often women in such positions are simply token candidates. In order for quotas to be more successful Freedom House, in conjunction with local activists, should advocate for a number of changes.

Legislative quotas are mandated at the candidate level, therefore placement of candidates on party lists or ballots is important. Placing women at the bottom of such lists guarantees they will be overlooked during voting. Therefore, Freedom House should advocate for the alternation of male and female candidates on any party list or ballot, as Tunisia has done recently. Reserved seat quotas reserve a minimum number of seats in the legislature for women. Freedom House should push for a required 30% of seats reserved for women. This 30% mark is viewed as a “critical mass” through which women can actually begin to assert their voices and make change (Hoodfar and Tajali, 2011, p. 45). Currently, there are no countries in the Middle East and North Africa that meet this critical mass percentage.

Lastly, quotas would be more effective if implemented at all levels of government. Women are more likely to enter the political arena at the local level, rather than the national level. Rwanda, which has the highest percentage of females in parliament in the world, gained this success by implementing quotas at all levels (Hoodfar and Tajali, 2011, p. 171). Ideally Freedom House would advocate for more consistent local elections, as well as quotas for those local elections. Quotas do not go far enough in providing leadership opportunities for women. As the USIP Center for Gender and Peacebuilding found “women candidates who gained power through quotas remain subject to the overarching and dominant views of their political parties” (Angarola, Steiner & Zimmerman, 2013, p. 2). Freedom House could provide leadership training to these women to begin to help them see their independence from the party system and the importance of that independence. Quotas are most effective when they are clearly worded and have consequences for non-compliance, when they fit the electoral and political structures of the country, and when they are advocated for and adopted by committed people. Freedom House

*Programming Recommendations 30*
could have a role in advocating for all three of these conditions in any legislation regarding quotas.

Conference and Training Opportunities

Freedom House has a wealth of expertise in providing training to local activists and civil society members. Therefore, the organization should use this knowledge to focus trainings on youth, male civil society actors, media activists, and religious activists in the Middle East and North Africa.

Target youth in leadership, democracy, and rights training:

As mentioned previously, the Middle East and North Africa have one of the largest youth populations in the world. Therefore, youth are an important force for affecting gender equity changes in the region. Youth are often an untapped and underutilized resource in democracy and human rights work. Therefore Freedom House should target these groups through trainings on topics such as leadership, democracy, and gender rights. Given the MENA context, such trainings might begin as segregated groups of boys and girls to allow for ease and openness of discussion. These discussions might begin with perceptions of each gender and an attempt to alleviate misperceptions. It is important to remember that gender equity is not about men or women, but about the relationships between them. Ideally these segregated groups would then be combined so that girls and boys are building relationships through learning together, communicating together, and working together, reflecting the importance of gender parity to the previous and future work of Freedom House. As a result of these interactions, boys might begin to see girls as leaders and girls can see that boys will be integral to the fulfillment of their human rights. By targeting youth, Freedom House can help interrupt the cycle of patriarchy that negatively impacts both men, women, girls and boys. As youth learn about important gender issues, they can begin to change the existing social, political, and institutional factors that inhibit equity.

Engage male civil society activists through democracy and rights training:

Similar to the trainings for youth, Freedom House could also provide trainings to male civil society actors that focus on democracy and human rights. Such trainings could help provide men with the language and tools necessary to begin addressing issues of gender equity and to teach activists how to incorporate gender issues into their work. This platform would also allow men to think about and discuss how hegemonic conceptions of masculinity serve to disempower men who do not fit such a conception. It would be important to tailor such trainings in a different manner than those for youth, as older men are more steeped in the patriarchal structures of their societies. It might also be useful for the trainings to be intergenerational, so that children and
adults are sharing ideas and discussions across generational boundaries. Additionally, they would provide a platform for dialogue, dialogue that is integral to changing perceptions.

Initiate Religious Dialogue:

In the MENA region, more than half the countries have populations that are about ninety-five percent Muslim or greater (Pew Research, 2009). The Islamic faith plays an all-encompassing role in the daily lives of Muslims; it affects the culture, the government, and the society. In that vein, Islamic law is central to both the Islamic society and Islamic state. The role of religion, therefore, must be addressed to solve issues within the region. So how then should a conflict between Islamic law and human rights be addressed? Without discussing religion, a true structural change in gender equity will not occur. Islamic law contains “internal reform mechanisms, constitutive narratives, key scholars, schools of thought, and thus major schisms…” (Modirzadeh, 2006, p. 223). Islamic law should therefore be seen as “real” law. When faced with such decisions, most Muslims will choose Islamic law and their faith in God (Modizradeh, 2006, p. 231). Relationships must be developed with Islamic scholars who interpret law, or with groups who work with them, in order to authenticate new gender equity. We must acknowledge that changing the views of more conservative members will be difficult. However, as other religious leaders lend their male voices to gender equity, it will help to change communal values and attitudes. Additionally, these voices will counter those who preach anti-equity messaging. Shaming is often an ineffective and antagonizing tool because it is Islamic law, or God’s divinity, that is being shamed. Instead, reinterpreting textual bases should be the focus. It is important to note that carrying out meaningful reform of Islamic law is extremely difficult. However, without addressing Islamic law, or at least the actors who typically interpret the law, it leaves the judgments and interpretations to those who have always done it. The patriarchal structures will remain in place.

Instead, Freedom House should work with grassroots groups and on the ground movements working to reform Islamic law and gender equity. Freedom House can use their strong connections with decisions makers, media, resources, donors, and other actors to support local activists and reformers. Creating a space for a conference, crafting reports that discuss the different interpretations of Islam, hiring sharia experts, and developing a permanent and local presence in the MENA region are all ways to legitimize Freedom House in the gender equity and religion arena. Without engaging in religion, other actors are left to define what is and what is not. Mosques are central to Islam and could therefore be used as a space for outreach. They have a multitude of roles, including a center for learning and training, a place for social gatherings, place of worship and others. The network of a mosque is often both local and national. The messaging from mosques guides the Muslim community. Mosques are seen as a place of guidance and led by the Imam who plays the role of advisor, judge and leader. By promoting local groups who host educational discussions in mosques, Freedom House can help in building capacity. By hosting a dialogue in a mosque, it allows the group to come together and promote

Programming Recommendations 32
understanding and work toward a common good in a space that is ripe for listening and respect. As a secular, American organization Freedom House would be providing capacity strengthening and support to local activists leading such dialogues.

Engage both secular and Islamic feminists in dialogue:

Community dialogue helps establish and maintain relationships. Dialogue involves a quality of listening with intent to learn and understand; it is not a debate where one group wins. By engaging both secular and Islamic feminists in dialogue, they could then find core commonalities between the two groups and help to strengthen a united front and create a louder voice. Although the two feminisms reach their goals differently, they both work towards a similar objective: gender equity. This would mean that both groups would need to come to the table with open minds - examining the religious and secular traditions and applying contextual approaches in order to expand the methodologies of interpretations, rather than undermining or discrediting each other’s work. In order to create this dialogue, it is important to bring to the table men and women, as well as boys and girls, that believe in this cause. This intergenerational and cross gender dialogue would help foster understanding as well as create ideas for greater advocacy and change.

Support media freedom initiatives for gender equity activists:

Since the 1980s, women in the MENA region have played a significant role in media. Despite ongoing patriarchal exclusion that prohibits their mobility and visibility, in the past three decades, women have expanded their presence in the public sphere by contributing to the “emergence of ideas, identities, and discourses that are breaking down and challenging the hegemony of authoritarian political and religious centers” through print, visual, and online media (Skalli, 2006, p. 36). Throughout this process, they actively exercise their right to freedom of expression while at the same time enable and uphold one’s right to access information. As a result, women media activists have not only brought attention to women’s issues but they have constructed a body of knowledge that serves as a “key index of the democratization and development of society” (p. 36).

Given this reality, Freedom House can empower and support seasoned and emerging journalists, filmmakers, bloggers, authors, poets and other communications professionals in the region as they utilize new forms of information technology to further transform public discourse on gender-based issues. One way in which the organization could fulfill this goal would be to identify active networks of solidarity and alliances among male and female activists, media professionals, academic researchers and gender-based advocacy groups. Iran’s Roshangaran Publishing, Morocco’s Le Fennec, Egypt/Lebanon’s Nour, and Jordan’s Arab Women Media Center among other MENA communications leaders have active networks that continue to pave the way for women to “give a voice to the marginalized by articulating in public what society

Programming Recommendations 33
seeks to overlook, silence, or forget” and to encourage legal reforms (p. 40). Yet, these leaders face threats of censorship and other constraints by opposing groups. Therefore, in supporting MENA’s gender-equity media activists, Freedom House could offer opportunities to further promote media freedoms by hosting forums, conferences, and summits, which help protect their universal rights to document and publish information about gender-based issues. At these gatherings, the organization could also support efforts to publicize their works.

**Conclusions**

The above programming recommendations provide a first step towards improving gender equity in the Middle East and North Africa. These strategies represent a pragmatic approach that aligns with Freedom House capacities and the MENA context.

While consistently framing these strategies towards the goal of integrating men and boys in gender equity movements, we also considered at every step the strengths and capabilities of Freedom House so as to highlight the most beneficial actions available for both Freedom House and for gender equity progression in the MENA region. We will conclude with five key takeaway ideas that are important to frame actions going forward.

**I. Youth: An Important Resource**

The MENA region has the largest percentage of youth under the age of 29 in all the world. It is vitally important to consider this key population in order to speak effectively to the MENA audience, which means that all conferences, trainings, and analysis must take youth into account and in some instances, must be designed for youth. This is also an incredible resource that represents hope for the future of gender equity in the MENA region. Youth are often more teachable and can be more easily introduced to progressive ideas, versus the older generations of their parents and grandparents who have often internalized societal status quos to a greater extent. By targeting youth as a key point of gender equity strategy, Freedom House can increase programmatic success by adapting to the realities of the MENA region, as well as by taking advantage of a rich resource.

**II. The Importance of Dialogue**

Encouraging, designing, or facilitating dialogues is a strategy that plays to Freedom House’s great strengths in convening people and allowing information and ideas to spread. Promoting dialogues between genders and generations, and at all levels of MENA society, can achieve greater public consciousness of gender equity, and at least allow conversations of what gender equity would mean for MENA to begin at local levels.
III. Supporting Local Groups

In all advocacy and action strategies, Freedom House can serve best as an informational resource (by contributing the results of the suggested research projects), and a source of support for local groups that are already in the lead of promoting gender equity within their communities. Local groups intimately know the cultural contexts required for gender equity progression to succeed, and they have at their disposal cultural resources that Freedom House would not have access to as an international actor. Therefore, it is important for Freedom House to allow the voices of these groups to remain genuine and in the lead, but Freedom House can certainly support their work by highlighting these groups on the Freedom House website, inviting them to conferences to be heard by international activists, and otherwise amplifying their voices on a global scale. These actions can allow local groups to attract the support, funding, and reputation they need in order to improve their local impact.

IV. Supporting Political and Economic Participation

Although dialogues, trainings, and conferences are critical steps in progressing gender equity in MENA, gender equity is ultimately requires holistic phenomena to take place. In this regard, Freedom House can offer capacity strengthening to local groups already engaged in supporting gender equity in political and economic participation. In particular, Freedom House can identify groups that work to influence policy in order to improve local quota systems and expand women’s involvement in the economic workforce. Capacity strengthening can include providing global platforms to these groups, or arming them with research and information for best strategies going forward. This would allow Freedom House opportunities to engage gender equity in social, political, and economic spheres.

V. Men as Stakeholders of Gender Equity

Most importantly, all of these key takeaways fulfill the goal of engaging men and boys in gender equity progress. It is vital for men to be able to see themselves as stakeholders of gender equity and to internalize the idea that gender discrimination not only harms their female loved ones, but also creates suffering for men who do not fit the standard expectations of masculinity. We find that the most effective way to combat this is to highlight underutilized narratives of masculinity - that is, allowing men to base their masculine identification upon actions that support gender equity, rather than upon actions that dominate women and perpetuate patriarchy. Freedom House can support this social and internal transformation by hosting leadership conferences and trainings to introduce and emphasize these values of informing masculinity within a human rights and gender equitable framework. Upon realization of these strategies, we aim to see progress in MENA gender equity in all spheres - internal, societal, religious, political, and economic - that is truly sustainable.


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