

Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

# WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



## ON THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH IN THE ARAB WORLD: THE CASE OF ABAAD

### *Research Summary*

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“On the Intersection of Gender and Public Policy Research in the Arab World: The Case of ABAAD,” a research summary.

## Introduction

What obstacles do regional policy research institutes (PRIs) working on gender issues across the MENA region currently face? How can Arab PRIs and think tanks promote gender equality, especially amid times of transition and turmoil? In spite of the proliferation of PRIs, civil society organizations, and think tanks in the region over the past two decades, efforts to address women's issues and achieve tangible policy outcomes have fallen short. This report analyzes the effectiveness of existing gender-focused civil society and policy organizations in Lebanon by using the advocacy coalition theoretical framework (ACF). The analysis centers on the diverse obstacles these organizations face, with a particular focus on the post-Arab Spring period in which these organizations sought to introduce gender-related policy reforms, build capacity, and communicate with policy and decision-makers across the region.

To achieve these goals, this study utilizes a mixed method approach to data collection and analysis. Qualitative data based on personal interviews conducted in Lebanon during the summer of 2015 and a detailed case study of ABAAD—a resource center for gender equality—are combined with survey data to offer a better understanding of the dynamics of these gender-focused organizations. While the qualitative data offers in-depth analysis at the institutional and organizational levels, survey data is specifically valuable for shedding light on mass perceptions and attitudes at the societal and grassroots levels. The paper concludes by offering policy prescriptions PRIs and civil society organizations across the Middle East can employ to inform wider policy debates on the topic, promote women's issues, and achieve a strong policy impact.

Lebanon offers an excellent setting for this study for a number of reasons. On the one hand, Lebanon has a unique demographic composition. Given that Lebanon has 18 different sects and ethnic groups, there is remarkable diversity among state institutions and grassroots organizations in comparison to other countries in the region. By and large, Lebanon enjoys high levels of freedom of speech and civil liberties, as well as ostensibly progressive gender roles at the societal level. On the other hand, however, the state's inability to perform its role over the past few decades (Lehman 2007) has led to service and grassroots organizations that have mushroomed with little or no control from the central government, via the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA). Finally, this past decade has witnessed a dramatic shift in the scope of work by policy and civil society organizations across Lebanon. Efforts are now geared toward promoting, and even transforming, perceptions on women's roles in the private sphere while pushing for legal guarantees to ensure full gender parity at different levels. Gender equality is no longer viewed as the final product of a development process and political stability; instead, gender parity is now deemed a pre-condition for social and political welfare and prosperity.

## Challenges facing PRIs in the Middle East

Several challenges limit PRIs and think tanks from working effectively in the region. First, given the novelty of regional PRIs and think tanks, the dividing lines between these institutions and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), research-based NGOs, and state-affiliated institutions are grossly blurred. Considerable confusion remains regarding the scope of the work undertaken by NGOs, research-oriented NGOs, think tanks, and PRIs in the Arab world. Second, the overwhelming skepticism (i.e., from the public and the state) toward these organizations and the role of external/foreign funding sources in shaping their policy analyses pose significant obstacles for policy research in the region. Finally, and perhaps most importantly at this moment in time, Arab think tanks and PRIs are facing tremendous challenges due to the volatility of the political and social landscape across the region since the onset of the Arab Spring. This dilemma raises concerns about the nature and value of their work during these critical times, especially with the substantive lack of institutionalized mechanisms and legal guarantees protecting freedom of speech and the dissemination of research and information.

PRIs that work directly with gender-related issues face further obstacles and challenges. To begin with, within these resilient, patriarchal structures, family and women are commonly treated as interchangeable entities; this framing has negatively impacted women's rights (Haghighat 2013) and the relevant policy outcomes for decades. Furthermore, gender issues rarely were included in wider, mainstream policy deliberations and debates across the region (Foundation for the Future 2013). Policy discussions associated with gender issues often have been regarded as independent research cases and irrelevant to the broader policy realm. National and security issues always take precedence over issues related to gender and promoting women's status in society—especially during times of political instability and conflict. As a result of this lack of political and financial attention, many PRIs must rely on foreign funding sources and Western approaches to studying and promoting women's rights in the region, which ignore the region's cultural and social complexities (CAPRI 2015).

In addition, a substantial lack of cooperation and coordination among women's organizations and policy institutions at the regional and national levels has significantly limited their work and ability to shape policy outcomes. Deep ideological differences among these organizations continue to negatively impact collaboration. This lack of cooperation between organizations is further exacerbated by the considerable gap between women's organizations and political actors that continue to work against the formulation of women-friendly policies.

## Competing Strategies Through the lens of the Advocacy Coalition Framework

This analysis builds on the advocacy coalition framework (ACF), with its focus not only on the top levels of the decision-making process, but also on the different policy subsystems (i.e., researchers, interest groups, policy analysts, etc.) and their belief structures, which play an integral role in the policy formulation process across different domains (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier and Pelkey 1987).

The ACF framework was originally designed to deal with highly complicated and contentious policy issues, such as “those involving substantial goal conflicts, important technical disputes, and multiple actors from several levels of government,” (Sabatier and Weible 2007, 189) to better understand the determinants of policy change (Weible et al. 2011). The ACF assumes that actors with similar core policy beliefs would join efforts to translate their beliefs into tangible policy outcomes. In order to achieve this goal, they would form coalitions with like-minded allies to share resources and develop strategies to achieve their goals while alienating themselves from opponents (i.e., advocacy coalitions). This study pays special attention to policy subsystems as being the basic units of analysis for policy-related research and formulation.

In Lebanon, women’s organizations can be mainly divided along state and non-state supported demarcations. On the one hand, state-affiliated (formally or informally) organizations are predominantly structured along sectarian lines and work closely with the government within the parameters of the existing patriarchal culture and sectarian divisions. These organizations will be conceptualized as **Advocacy Coalition A**. The proximity of these organizations to the sectarian ruling elites and sustainable governmental sources of funding have provided them with many exclusive benefits, such as the ability to represent the country in international events and conventions and access to decision-makers and their extensive clientelistic networks (Khattab 2010), in addition to increased media attention and added legitimacy to their work.

At the other end of the continuum, another group of organizations that has emerged over the past decade employs a secular/universal approach to gender-related issues, such as violence against women. These organizations, referred to as **Advocacy Coalition B**, hold the belief that it is the responsibility of the state to provide the necessary legal mechanisms to protect its citizens—regardless of their sex or religious affiliation.

**Advocacy Coalition C** can be situated at the center of this ideological continuum. Its emphasis is on women's rights and gender equality as a universal right—as explained in full detail in the following section—but it also emphasizes the importance of the inclusion of all stakeholders in the change process, including

males and religious leaders of all sects. ABAAD, the chosen case study for this report, is an example of Advocacy Coalition C.

## The Case Study of ABAAD

It is remarkable that many of the organizations interviewed for the purpose of this study have their own research units and legal teams who are assisting with raising awareness and providing services for target populations. Most importantly, most of these teams also are working at the policy level, coordinating with government officials and policymakers toward achieving tangible policy outcomes. Some prominent examples are KAFA, the Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Women (LECORVAW), and ABAAD.

ABAAD (The Resource Center for Gender Equality) is a nonprofit, nonpolitical, nonreligious NGO that was established in Beirut in June 2011. The mission of the organization—as stated in their publications and outreach materials—is “to achieve gender equality as an essential condition to sustainable social and economic development in MENA. ABAAD seeks to promote women’s equality and participation through policy development, legal reform, gender mainstreaming, engaging men, eliminating discrimination, and advancing and empowering women to participate effectively and fully in their communities.” ABAAD’s *core policy beliefs* are closely aligned with the post-developmental approach to female empowerment, which emphasizes promoting women’s roles in both the private and public spheres as preconditions for sustainable development.

In regard to the organization’s *resources*, given the scarcity of the governmental funding sources for NGOs in Lebanon, ABAAD is a project-based organization that depends mainly on diverse external funding sources to ensure the sustainability of its projects. The organization seeks to build partnerships with funding organizations rather than creating a purely financial relationship.

ABAAD’s *approaches and strategies* can be summarized in four main areas: innovative use of social media tools for knowledge dissemination and raising awareness; providing primary and secondary prevention programs and interventions for combating gender-based violence; gender mainstreaming and engaging males at different levels in their initiatives by providing male education programs; and seeking endorsements for their campaigns from local community and religious leaders from different sects. ABAAD stands out in its direct involvement of males in their programs in contrast to other NGOs—such as KAFA.

Unrelenting pressure from religious authorities has continued to shape the state’s policymaking process in regard to women’s rights over the past decades, despite increased public disapproval of such interference. For instance, public opinion data from the second wave of the Arab Barometer conducted in 2011 showed that about 86 percent of Lebanese citizens agree that religious leaders should not influence

government decisions. This hegemony is clearly evident in the way family laws, nationality laws, guardianship laws, and laws related to violence against women are created and implemented. Despite the fact that the majority of Lebanese respondents expressed their strong preference for a separation of religion and policymaking in the country, the survey also revealed that 85 percent of all respondents in Lebanon identified themselves as either very religious or religious.

To date, there is no unified civil law that regulates personal status issues; family matters are relegated to religious courts based on religious/sectarian affiliation. The fact that most decisions on women's issues take place in religious circles, rather than civil/policy circles, has further complicated the work of most PRIs and NGOs focused on promoting women's issues. Furthermore, women's advocates, policy practitioners, and scholars have repeatedly emphasized that women in Lebanon—particularly those in rural areas and with lower levels of education—are not fully aware of their rights and, subsequently, do not fight for them.

Given the social and cultural complexities of the region, scholars across the Arab world have repeatedly emphasized that promoting gender equality would only be possible if religious leaders and scholars join efforts to revisit discriminatory texts and challenge them on religious grounds. ABAAD has essentially put this argument into action, which makes it a very interesting case for the purpose of this study.

### **Building Stronger Gender-Focused PRIs**

It is imperative to have an in-depth understanding of the effective strategies and good practices of these organizations to better inform the work of the PRIs—not only in Lebanon, but also across the Arab world—so they can play a more substantial role in the policy arena. Policy transfer (i.e., good practices and effective strategies) from the women's grassroots organizations under study should play a more integral role in informing the work of the gender-focused policy research institutes to impact policies relating to sensitive gender issues, especially given the fact that these organizations share similar policy goals—the advancement of equitable gender policies at the top level.

Securing sustainable funding has become one of the key challenges facing PRIs across the region due to the lack of financial support from the government for the organizations' work. As depicted in the case of ABAAD, one successful model to partially overcome this issue is to build long-term partnerships with external and international donors. The findings of this study also stress the importance of establishing national and transnational networks among gender-focused NGOs and PRIs regardless of ideological or policy/strategy disagreements. Policy transfer and sharing good practices would immensely benefit the work of both entities, especially given the novelty of PRIs across the region and the intensified atmosphere of uncertainty and instability under which they operate.

The contentious relationship between culture, religion, sectarianism, and policymaking is another barrier facing both grassroots organizations and PRIs working on the promotion of gender-related issues in the Lebanese context. Although the Lebanese population may express high levels of support for less interference from religious authorities in the government's decisions, religion continues to play a critical role in shaping individuals' decisions and preferences. This makes it impossible for decision and policymakers to ignore or exclude religious views, particularly with regard to family and women's issues, since they are currently under the jurisdiction of religious courts. In fact, a study conducted by ABAAD confirmed this specific caveat, revealing that citizens, especially those of lower socioeconomic status, still believe religion should play a major role in shaping laws related to women and family issues and that they still need "the umbrella of religion." It is impossible to overlook the role religious beliefs play in shaping citizens' choices and policy preferences not only in Lebanon, but also in most parts of the MENA region.

Recommendations include:

- Focus on innovative and effective ways to mainstream gender issues in the policy and legislative realms.
- Promote the presence of women in leadership positions to support gender-focused organizations that advocate for women's issues and advance women's rights.
- Build long-term partnerships with international and local donors to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of the organizations' projects.
- Facilitate collaboration between regional and international organizations that work on gender issues. Policy transfer and sharing good practices would immensely benefit the work of both NGOs and PRIs.

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