Middle East Conflicts & Peacebuilding through a Gendered Lens

Adina Friedman, George Mason University

Social dynamics in the Middle East, including forms of conflict and peacebuilding, cannot be fully understood without viewing them through a gendered lens. This means, of course, looking at the different roles men and women play in social, political, legal, and economic processes; equally important, however, is understanding the gender hierarchy of beliefs, symbols, actions, and traits that comprise Middle Eastern societies’ ethos, and the extent to which this affects conflict and peacebuilding.

Power and privilege of various sorts exist and affect relations within and between societies, and include among others class, race, religion, and ethnicity, with gender being a category that cuts across all others. Patriarchy – one manifestation of gender power and privilege - is the overarching structure in today’s world, and is clearly a major feature of Middle Eastern and North African societies. Whereas in some societies patriarchy is more “finessed” and less obvious, in the Middle East it is manifested quite visibly; for this reason and others (such as general negative feelings toward Muslims and Arabs, and global relations of power and privilege) it often tends to be highly scrutinized by “outsiders” (e.g. “westerners”).

Within a patriarchal framework, men enjoy more power and privilege than do women, and gender hierarchies order various traits and actions according to the degrees of “femininity” and “masculinity” ascribed to them – with masculinities ranking higher in the hierarchy. While both men and women can have “masculine” and/or “feminine” attributes, men are posed as epitomizing masculinity and women as epitomizing femininity. Often, those traits and actions valued more highly (and viewed as more “masculine”) are in fact more conducive to conflict than the less valued, “feminine” traits. Still, men and women alike continue to sustain the existing gender hierarchies, often not seeing them for what they are.

Certain points in history, such as the waves of protests in the Middle East in recent years, may allow for a reshuffling of categories and a re-negotiation of power and privilege relations. Thus, women, including those often confined to the “private” sphere of the home, occupied more of the public sphere and were at the forefront of many of the protests.

These changes have tended to be only partially sustainable. To understand why, we must better recognize the relationship between existing gender hierarchies and conflict. We must examine more closely the extent to which social structures conducive
to conflict – such as patriarchy – actually changed as a result of the protests (and whether this was even “on the table” as one of the goals…).

Importantly, for those who seek positive change, fairer representation, and increased social justice in the Middle East, it is imperative make gender visible, to understand how men and women enable the structures, cultural norms, symbolic repertoires, and belief systems conducive to conflict, and to determine how we may be able to jointly alter them.

This paper will examine conflicts and conflict dynamics in the Middle East through a gender lens, and provide examples of peacebuilding endeavors that defy existing gender hierarchies.