

# ME101 Lecture 9: The Challenge Beyond Economics | Women and Youth – A Force for Change

**Speaker: Dr Alanoud Al-Sharekh; Moderator: Ms Tettyana Jasli**

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Arab youth and women have emerged to become significant focal points for Middle Eastern governments undertaking the ambitious process of economic transformation, which entails diversifying their economies and reducing their dependence on oil and gas. Those between the ages 15 and 35 make up around 34 per cent of the region that has seen troublingly high rates of unemployment and underemployment of youths and women. The intersection of such social and economic issues with both regional and global instability is a potent one that spells the need for these governments to change their approach towards the challenges and opportunities facing the region's youth and women. While the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings serve as a clear manifestation of the issues facing the youth, we see the role of women changing as well, reflecting shifts in social attitudes towards traditional gender roles. In this ME101 lecture, Dr Alanoud Al-Sharekh, director of Ibtakar Strategic Consultancy and an associate fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, DC, and the Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme, explores these issues and their implication for the region at large.

## Women and Youth – Global Issues

Dr Al-Sharekh began her talk by highlighting that the question of youth is one that the world is grappling with at the moment. One of the main questions being asked is: "Why is the transition from youth to adulthood being delayed in many places across the world?" Besides structural, political and social reasons, Dr Al-Sharekh argued that it also has to do with the choices the youths themselves are making; and the Arab world is not immune to this global transition in terms of definitions of youth and youth expectations. She also highlighted that though the experiences of young women as part of the youth are similar to their male counterparts, they are presented with particular challenges that require their own solutions.

## Unemployment

Unemployment has been a problem in the Middle East for the past 25 years. In fact, in looking at the issues that came up during the Arab Spring, Dr Al-Sharekh noted that we can see that they had their roots in economic issues. If we look at the 2011 revolts from an economic perspective, we see the struggle of governments to remove subsidies and their failure to provide jobs and security for a lot of their population, particularly the youth, and even more acutely for young women. In this light, Dr Al-Sharekh brought up three main issues: (1) the weakness in the education system, where the education system failed to provide them with the tools necessary to enter the workforce; (2) the mismatch between labour demands and what they were being offered in terms of vocational training; and perhaps most importantly, (3) the wages that many youths feel they deserved compared to the reality of low-level entry positions they qualified for. On top of these issues, women in the region suffer from social discrimination built on set patriarchal ideas and practices, particularly (1) the idea of guardianship over women and their bodies, and (2) the idea that since

jobs are limited, the priority should go to men because of their traditional role as breadwinners compared to a women's role in the domestic sphere.

So what does this mean in terms of the proportion of people who are in a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood? We see that for the Arab states, the number is not just around 30 per cent; it could go up to almost 60 per cent, and this intensifies the pressure on Arab states to provide jobs and real solutions to find ways to integrate women into the economy. These issues are further magnified when situated in the context of political instability and revolts against authoritarian regimes.

## **Discontent on the Ground**

Dr Al-Sharekh thus argued that a new approach is needed. The top-down efforts have not been successful so far in resolving these issues, and the idea that a solution is not going to come from the top is very clear in Arab youth responses towards corruption: 77 per cent complain about corruption in their own countries. Arab youths, having trust issues and finding themselves in a confrontational position with their governments, feel that they do not have a future in their countries. This is reflected in an Arab youth survey that shows that half of Arab youths are considering emigrating from the region, with countries where there is civil unrest and prolonged economic stagnation like Lebanon leading those numbers. On the other hand, these numbers are lower in Gulf Cooperation Council countries because of the relatively higher quality of life in these richer states.

Dr Al-Sharekh explained that there are expectations of greater power sharing among the youth. The youth now have access to platforms and technologies where their opinion matters, that encourages more transparency, so they have higher expectations of the ruling establishment. This is an unprecedented attitude in a lot of parts of the Arab world marked by autocratic systems, where people were more often passive than active participants in the political process.

## **Negotiating Traditional and Modern Values**

Dr Al-Sharekh then explained that the discontent among youth can also be seen in the tensions that arise between inherited culture that places a male figurehead at the top of the pyramid of hierarchy and the youth and women near the bottom. Those at the bottom of this pyramid saw that this inherited traditional model has not led to political stability, economic opportunity or social justice. Moreover, they now have ambitions and tools to mobilise and express their discontent to challenge the status quo.

At this juncture, Dr Al-Sharekh brought up the idea that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) represents a universal model of sorts for young Arabs. They see in the UAE an Arab state which appears to have successfully bridged the divide between modernity on the one hand and traditional Arab and Muslim identity on the other. The Emirati government has a very progressive approach towards higher social mobility for women: they recently initiated a rule that guarantees equal pay for men and women in the private sector; they have a 50 per cent quota for women in their Federal National Council, the head of which is also a woman; a 30 per cent quota for women in governmental jobs; and there are nine female ministers. The UAE therefore is a model showing that Arab Muslims can be conservative in term of dress and social traditions, and yet have progressive attitudes towards women and diversity in terms of ethnicity and religion in the labour market.

However, generally across the Middle East, Arab women still face multiple layers of invisibility, marginalisation and inequality. This, for Dr Al-Sharekh, is reflected in the low percentage of women in leadership positions in the region. This, she argued, is intertwined with important cultural issues that are swept under the rug, such as domestic violence, honour killings and crimes, sexual harassment, and the fear of bringing shame upon one's family. These are issues that different Arab countries have had to grapple with, some of them very openly through protests that continue to take place today.

Some places, such as Egypt, have been attempting to address such issues, but in other places, they are not being discussed at all due to reasons of propriety, or because there is no appetite to open this can

of worms, which would lead to the need to address further issues to do with policing the way men behave towards women. In such a context, and one where there are limits on public debates offline, much of the activism and protests occurs online. Dr Al-Sharekh noted that with the onset of Covid-19, this became a universal reality as most activities, including work and politics, have to be moved online.

## **The Social Media Revolution and Debates about Women and Youth**

Zooming in on social media, Dr Al-Sharekh pointed out that it has revolutionised the way individuals perceive their identities, particularly by allowing for the juxtaposition between current and historical self-identity. She presented the participants with two pictures of Kuwaiti women side-by-side, one taken in the 1960s and the other a few years ago. In the former picture, Kuwaiti women were dressed in Western clothing, and most of them did not cover their hair. In the recent picture, however, we see Kuwaiti women wearing the head-scarf in a manner familiar to our eyes today. Dr Al-Sharekh explained that the ease of access to such archival images, and the ease of sharing them, has allowed people to challenge the narrative that the conservative way was how Arab women traditionally dressed. This, she further explained, is just one example of how social media has transformed the rules of the narrative-building game, initially controlled by states to exert a homogenous national identity. She highlighted that this effort to assert narratives in opposition to the state's and reclaim autonomy over one's history is something that is taking place in the virtual space as well as in academic writings in the Arab world, and is fuelling a lot of debates around youth and women.

Of course, Dr Al-Sharekh highlighted that there are both pros and cons to greater accessibility and use of online spaces. For the former, it has allowed civil societies to test an idea on the online space to see if it catches traction before taking it offline and attempting to implement in reality. Citizen journalism flourished rapidly in the Arab world, especially in the Gulf, because it has some of the highest mobile penetration rates and also some of the most advanced networks. Many people in the region are also early adopters of such technologies and spend many hours online.

But the flip side of all these is that it creates silos online and there is a lack of moral accountability for the naming-and-shaming that occurs. This had severe consequences for many people during the Arab Spring as it led to arrests and the loss of their livelihoods. Moreover, the benefit of the ability to hold government accountable is buffered by the development of electronic bots and propaganda machines that disseminate fake news and blow up issues to sway public opinion. This, she explained, created another trust crisis in the online sphere which used to be a safe space for protest and open discussion.

## **Implications of Online Spaces**

All these lead to a series of questions regarding the implications of online spaces. How can online spaces be made safe and inclusive? In the turbulent Arab world, the burden of ambassadorship or representation is a highly consequential one. An Arab woman, for example, does not only represent herself; she represents her family and her nation, all Arab women and perhaps all Muslim women. For Dr Al-Sharekh, these layers of expectation are the reason why there are much fewer women engaged online than men, at least with active and real accounts. How do activists negotiate between expressing themselves freely and the self-censorship they take upon themselves due to the fear that their actions might have repercussions beyond themselves? And how do young people prevent themselves from crossing electronic crime laws that are changing as new platforms emerge and new spaces for error or for revolution are created?

Then there is the issue of co-opting social media spaces, which features as a site of contestation between different actors, not least the government and the youth. For example, some social media influencers, who command large followings, have been co-opted by governments to help fulfil certain agendas they want the youth to engage with. Dr Al-Sharekh gave the example of a very famous influencer who was sent to cover the Yemen war when it first started, providing a coverage that was much more intimate than the coverage that is seen in traditional news media. These new online spaces have shaken the

foundations of inherited social structure and hierarchies as actors ranging from the elite establishment men to the disenfranchised female youth struggle to control or at least sway narratives and public opinion.

They provide an even platform for ordinary citizens to communicate with social icons, who become demystified as they share the intricacies of their lives. Lavish lifestyles and secrets are exposed and spread like wildfire. The potent example of this, Dr Al-Sharekh offered, was one of a religious scholar urging young men to participate in military jihad, while in the same breath congratulating his son for getting a prestigious degree from an Ivy League university. It exposed the very different approach he takes with the young men of his own household with what he urges other young men from other households to do. The sharing of intimate aspects of the lifestyles of ruling elites, be it of their private jets and large mansions, is generating a conversation about the real economic structural problems of this part of the world. Such conversations brought about by such heightened awareness engender renegotiations between the rulers and the ruled, between the privileged and the disenfranchised. And with the high intensity of sharing that occur transnationally across borders, states in active competition with one another have taken an interest in revealing the wrongdoings of their counterparts.

Dr Al-Sharekh ended her enlightening presentation with the highly salient question: to what extent does this online activity translate into offline mobilisation? As witnessed during the Arab Spring, it clearly showed tremendous potential. But after what Dr Al-Sharekh called corrective measures that Arab states took post-Arab Spring, offline activity has reduced a great deal, coupled with Covid-19 which threatens to keep us online for an undefined, but no doubt long, period of time.

### **Highlights from the Questions and Answer Session**

**Q: To what extent can we say that the UAE is a model for the Arab world, considering the vastly different economic and social circumstances as well as political models (the UAE being a monarchy and Lebanon a republic, for example) across the Middle East?**

A: Though each model presents its own set of implications for citizens, the monarchies in the Middle East managed to stay ahead of the curve during the Arab Spring due probably to two main reasons: first, their strong financial capabilities; and second, their swiftness and wiliness in entering into dialogue with their citizens, at a rate much faster than the republics did.

Dr Al-Sharekh then re-emphasised that the UAE represents an aspirational model for Arabs primarily in terms of their economic prosperity. It is felt that regardless of their backgrounds, individuals can apply themselves and have relatively high social and economic mobility. Though she noted that the UAE does not have much tolerance for freedom of expression, it does not seem to be a deterrent for many; this is probably due to the high quality of life it offers. Moreover, there is tolerance towards other individual freedoms (up to a certain extent), and for many Arab youths from other Arab states, it is comforting that it has an Arab and Muslim identity. It presents the double benefit of offering some of the same opportunities they feel they would have in Europe, and of being within the familiar realm of their cultural value systems.

**Q: What are the differences in terms of challenges that women face in places like Egypt and Lebanon versus the Gulf states, and how have these changed since the Arab Spring uprisings?**

A: Dr Al-Sharekh pointed out two major differences. The first is the economic component. The Gulf states offer generous subsidies to their national citizens that cover many essential services. Moreover, they are guaranteed education, jobs and housing. Thus, there are a lot of things — services and rights which are severely lacking in other Arab states — that Gulf nationals do not have to worry about. As for how these services and privileges affect female Gulf citizens, Dr Al-Sharekh gave the example of them having domestic staff to help manage the household. This enables them to join the labour market more easily than women in other Arab states who have to stay home to become the primary caregivers for their children.

She also explained that in countries like Egypt and Lebanon, political activities and engagements among civil society occurred at a much earlier stage as there was direct interaction between citizens and colonial forces. National independence movements to get rid of colonial authorities forced women out of their homes and onto the streets. The newly independent states thus had to grapple with women being outside their homes, being very politically and economically involved from the start. In this sense, they have dealt with such issues to a much greater extent than in the Gulf states. Lebanon, for example, successfully abolished honour killing Article 562 in 2011. Kuwaitis, on the other hand, are still struggling to abolish the honour killing Article 153. Therefore, though there is a patriarchal ideology that is more-or-less common across the Arab world in terms of traditional women's role and what makes a good Arab woman, individual states have had to deal with it in accordance to their own political and economic reality and their historical interactions with colonialism.

**Q: To what extent are religion and traditional values barriers for women in the Arab world, considering that many feminists have tapped onto Islam and made use of the potentialities of the Islamic tradition as a source of and inspiration for their activism?**

A: Dr Al-Sharekh explained that Islamic feminism is a large movement not only in the Arab world, but also across the Muslim world. The movement uses sources from the Islamic tradition to attack certain unjust legislations related to family law, marriage and inheritance. She brought up the case of child marriage as a contentious issue that finds itself in an uncomfortable position between Islamic and secular law. Many religious scholars argue for and justify child marriage, but this becomes difficult for legislators to square with their constitutional laws protecting children and the international child protection laws they have signed. This issue, like some others, is reflective of the tension between those who want religion as the only source of codified law, and those who prefer a secular-based law.

Some have tried to push back against child marriage through Islamic texts themselves, but Dr Al-Sharekh mentioned two ways that she said are perhaps quicker and more practical solutions. The first is to beef up enforcement and deterrents against child marriage. This includes, for example, making marriage certificates impossible to obtain online if a woman is below 18, or enforcing steep penalties for those who insist on doing it. The other method is to simply rename it: rather than calling it child marriage, call it paedophilia instead. She explained that the way it is named has strong resonance within society.