



UNESCO

Issue 1

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Introduction

The impact of religion on the decline of girls' education in the Middle East is a complicated and multifaceted topic influenced by a variety of cultural, political, and economic variables. It is critical to recognize that religion is not a single cause, but rather a factor that interacts with other variables such as political regimes, socioeconomic circumstances and regional conflict.

Education for girls is frequently undervalued in conservative religious interpretations, particularly in regions with tight patriarchal institutions, in favor of conventional gender roles. These roles may prioritize women's home responsibilities over formal education, with religious justifications used to limit girls' education. In certain circumstances, extremist interpretations of religious texts advocate girls to avoid attending school, particularly mixed-gender schools, or pursuing education beyond basic literacy.

Religious policies and practices, such as the implementation of Sharia Law in some counties, can also contribute to gender segregation in schools, further restricting girls' education chances. Education for girls is frequently actively restricted in areas affected by religious extremism, such as parts of Afghanistan or Iraq under Taliban control, as part of an ideological attitude that considers female education as a danger to the established religious order. These organization may destroy girls' schools or impose stringent restrictions on women's participation in public life.

Not all religious views, nevertheless, are detrimental to girls' education. Many religious leaders and groups in the region argue for girls' access to an education, claiming the religious teaching promote the empowerment of both boys and girls via learning. In nations where religion coexists with secular administration, such as Tunisia, Lebanon, and Jordan, major efforts have been made to promote females' educational access, with religious groups playing an important role in education promotion. Finally, the reduction in females' education in the Middle East is influenced by a number of circumstances, with religion playing both an obstructive and helpful role, depending on the situation.

Key Terms

Gender Disparity

The unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on gender, often resulting in restricted access to education for girls.

Religious Conservatism

A belief system that adheres strictly to traditional religious interpretations, which may influence policies and social norms regarding girls' education.

Cultural Norms

Shared beliefs and behaviors within a society that can shape attitudes toward female education, sometimes reinforcing gender-based restrictions.

Patriarchy

A social system in which men hold primary power and authority, often leading to restrictions on women's rights, including education.

Islamic Jurisprudence (Sharia)

The legal framework derived from Islamic teachings that influences laws and policies in many Middle Eastern countries, including those affecting education.

Child Marriage

A practice where young girls are married off, often preventing them from completing their education and limiting future opportunities.

Gender-based Discrimination

Unfair treatment of individuals based on gender, which can manifest in policies that restrict girls' access to schooling.

Educational Inequality

The uneven distribution of educational resources, opportunities, and access, often disadvantaging girls in conservative societies.

Secularism

The principle of separating religion from government policies, including education, which contrasts with religiously influenced educational restrictions.

Extremism

Radical beliefs that may justify restricting girls' education based on misinterpretations of religious texts.

Honor Culture

A societal framework where family reputation is tied to women's behavior, sometimes leading to restrictions on their education.

Human Rights Violation

The denial of fundamental freedoms, such as the right to education, often occurring when religious or cultural beliefs suppress girls' schooling.

General Overview

A variety of social, cultural, political and economic issues contribute to the Middle East's drop in girls' education. While religion influences society norms and regulations, its impact on female education is complicated and multidimensional. While Islamic teachings encourage both men and women to seek knowledge, certain interpretations and applications of religious beliefs have contributed to educational barriers for girls. This section investigates how religion, along with traditional gender norms, patriarchal structures, early marriage, religious extremism, and state policy, has influenced girls' educational possibilities in the Middle East.

Religious Interpretations and Cultural Norms

Many Middle Eastern communities interpret Islamic teachings conservatively, emphasising traditional gender roles. In such communities, women are frequently encouraged to prioritise family duties over academic and professional goals. Some religious authorities and families believe that education beyond a certain degree exposes females to secular or Western influences that go against traditional Islamic norms. This impression prevents families from allowing their girls to seek higher education, especially in coeducational settings. Furthermore, due to limited resources, a preference for gender-segregated schools may result in less educational options for girls.

Patriarchal Structures and Gender Inequality

Male power still dominates decision-making when it comes to education in many Middle Eastern societies, which are still firmly patriarchal. In these communities, a girl's ability to go to school is frequently decided by her father or other male family members. Families with little funds frequently place a higher priority on boys' education because they view them as the future breadwinners, while females are expected to marry and take on caregiving responsibilities. Girls have fewer educational options as a result of this prioritization, which also raises dropout rates.

Early Marriage and Family Pressures

In the Middle East, early marriage - which is occasionally excused by religious grounds - is one of the biggest obstacles to females' education. According to some interpretations of Islamic teachings, a girl's modesty and family honor are preserved by early marriage. As a result, many girls are compelled to marry early, so terminating their formal schooling. Girls

are frequently expected to put childcare and domestic duties ahead of further education after marriage. Social norms and a lack of support networks make it challenging for girls to juggle their education and household duties, even in situation where they are permitted to continue their studies after marriage.

Religious Extremism and Conflict

Extremist organizations like the Taliban in Afghanistan and ISIS in Syria and Iraq have aggressively opposed women's education in several parts of the Middle East, citing religious justifications for their policies. There is a culture of fear that deters female education since schools for females have been targeted, teachers have been threatened, and students have been attacked. Girls' access to school has been made worse in war-torn areas by displacement, instability, and the loss of educational infrastructure.

State Policies and Religious Influence

Girls' education may be impacted by how religious organizations influence national educational policies. Conservative religious education has been supported by some Middle Eastern countries, which restricts the areas that girls can study, especially in the sciences and technology. Schools may be less accessible or inclusive for girls due to dress requirements, behavioral limitations, and stringent gender norms enforced by religious authorities. Nonetheless, some governments – like those in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Have recently enacted measures that uphold religious principles while promoting female education.

Counterarguments and Progressive Religious Views

Many Islamic academics and institutions support girls' education, notwithstanding the limited interpretations of religious beliefs in some places. Islam has long placed a high emphasis on education and knowledge, and several Hadiths and verses in the Quran stress the value of education for both sexes. Significant strides have been made in advancing female education with upholding Islamic traditions in nations like the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Tunisia. According to reformist interpretations of Islam, the advancement of society, the expansion of the economy, and the general well-being of all depend on female education.

In many regions in the Middle East, religion has contributed to the reduction in females' education, although it is not the only cause. Rather, in the difficulties girls encounter in obtaining education are a result of the confluence of theological interpretations with patriarchal customs, socioeconomic obstacles, and political instability. Reforming education, changing how society views gender, and advancing progressive religious interpretations that support gender equality in education are all necessary to address these problems. Middle Eastern nations can guarantee that girls have equal access to education and possibilities for a better future by creating an atmosphere where religion encourages rather than limits female education.

Statistics

Although there are few comprehensive statistics that directly link religious factors to the decline in girls' education in the Middle East, several data points demonstrate the wider educational difficulties that girls in the region face, which are influenced by a confluence of socioeconomic, cultural, and religious factors:

Literacy Rates: UNESCO estimates that in several Muslim-majority countries, the literacy rate among adult women is approximately 50% or less. For instance, countries like Morocco, Yemen, and Pakistan report female literacy rates below this threshold.

Gender Gap in School Enrolment: In Egypt, during the 1970s, female students constituted 38.3% of primary-level enrolments and 34.4% at the secondary level, indicating a significant gender disparity in education during that period.

Out-of-School Children: Overall, 48% of secondary school-aged children in the Middle East are not in school, with the figure rising to 58% for females, highlighting a pronounced gender gap in educational access.

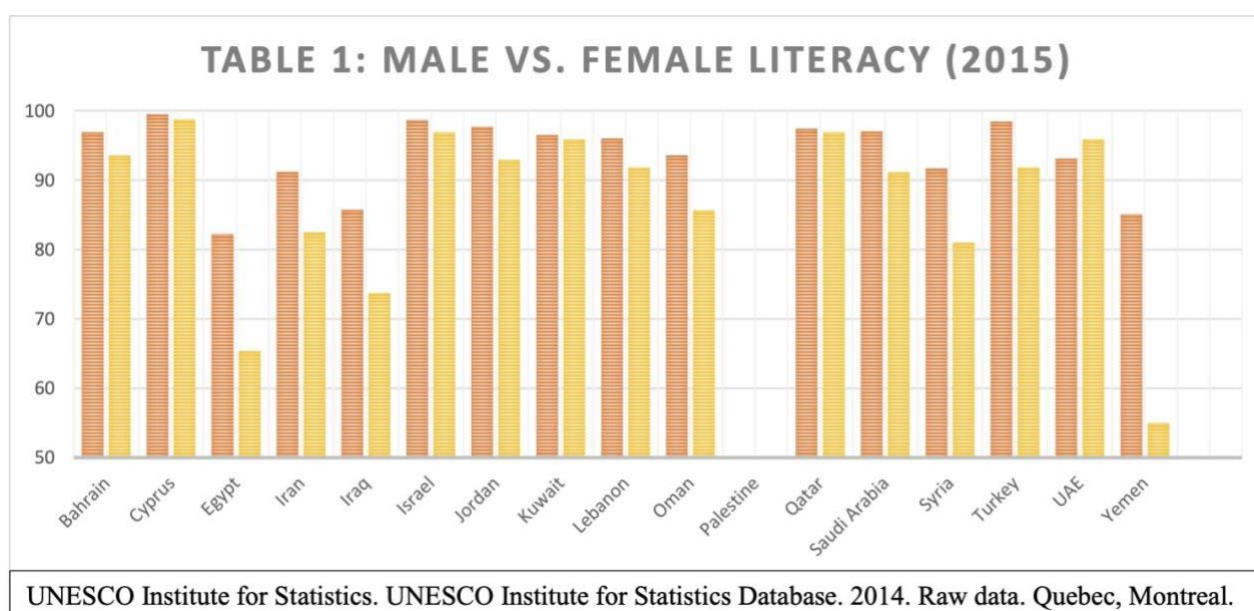
Educational Attainment: Globally, Muslim women have an average of 4.9 years of schooling, compared to 6.4 years for Muslim men, reflecting a gender gap in educational attainment.

Out-of-School Adolescents: In the Middle East and North Africa, over one-third of adolescents aged 15 to 17 are out of school, with girls accounting for just over half of this population.

Gender Disparities in Secondary Education: Adolescent girls in the region are 1.5 times more likely to be out of lower secondary school compared to boys.

Early Marriage: One in five girls in the Middle East and North Africa are married before the age of 18, a factor contributing to school dropout rates among girls. In Iraq, a significant percentage of girls marry before the age of 18, often leading to the cessation of their formal education.

These figures highlight the complex issues influencing females' education in the Middle East, where possibilities for education are influenced by the intersection of cultural standards, economic circumstances, and religious interpretations.



Global Implications

There are important global ramifications to the Middle East's declining educational rates among girls as a result of restricted religious interpretations. According to World Bank estimates, gender disparities in education cost the global economy up to \$30 trillion in lost wages and productivity. Slower economic growth, poorer labour markets, and less global competitiveness are all experienced by nations with lower levels of female education. The economic consequence of limited female participation is shown by the fact that countries with some of the lowest GDPs in the world, such as Yemen and Afghanistan, have harsh limitations on girls' access to school.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 5: Gender Equality) are compromised when girls' education is suppressed in terms of gender equality and human rights. Child marriage rates are greater in countries where religious laws prohibit women from attending school; in the Middle East, one in five girls is married before turning 18, severely restricting their access to social and economic prospects. In addition to contributing to lower literacy rates and gender-based violence, illiteracy makes it more difficult for women to fight for their rights.

While religious reform organisations aim to reinterpret Islamic teachings to favour gender equality, UNESCO, UNICEF, and NGOs are advocating for governmental changes and expanded educational access to address these challenges. Human rights, security, and global economic growth all depend on resolving this issue.

Major Parties Involved

International Organizations

United Nations (UN)

Agencies like UNESCO, UNICEF, and UN Women advocate for girls' education, fund educational programs, and push for policy changes.

World Bank

Provides funding and research on the economic impact of female education, offering financial support to initiatives that promote gender equality in education.

European Union (EU) and USAID

Offer educational grants and development aid to improve access to education in Middle Eastern countries.

Regional Governments

Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Jordan

These governments have introduced reforms to increase female participation in education while maintaining religious traditions.

Afghanistan (Under the Taliban)

Restrictive policies have limited female education, drawing international pressure and sanctions.

Religious and Cultural Institutions

Al-Azhar University (Egypt) and Islamic Scholars

Some religious leaders advocate for a progressive interpretation of Islamic teachings that support girls' education.

Conservative Religious Groups

Some fundamentalist factions oppose female education, citing traditionalist interpretations of religious texts.

NGOs and Activities

Malala Fund

Founded by Malala Yousafzai, this organization promotes girls' education and challenges extremist narratives.

CARE International, Save the Children, and Human Rights Watch

These NGOs provide advocacy, funding, and direct educational programs.

Local Women's Rights Groups

Activists in countries like Iran and Afghanistan push for education reform, often at great personal risk.

Donor Countries and Philanthropic Foundations

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Open Society Foundations

Fund initiatives supporting girls' education in conservative regions

Qatar Foundation

Supports global education programs, including initiatives aimed at increasing female participation.

Timeline of Key Events

[1923]

[Turkey's Education Reforms: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk implements secular reforms, promoting equal education for girls.]

[1950s-1970s]

[Many Middle Eastern countries expand girls' education, but rural areas still face gender disparities due to conservative cultural and religious interpretations.]

[1979]

[Iranian Revolution: The new Islamic government enforces stricter dress codes and gender segregation in schools, affecting girls' education.]

[1996]

[Taliban Ban on Girls' Education (Afghanistan): The Taliban imposes a complete ban on female education, forcing many schools to shut down.]

[2001]

[Fall of the Taliban (First Regime): Girls' education reopens in Afghanistan with international aid. Enrolment soars from zero to 2.4 million girls by 2018.]

[2012]

[Malala Yousafzai Attack (Pakistan): Taliban gunmen shoot Malala for advocating girls' education, sparking global outrage.]

[2014]

[ISIS Occupation (Iraq & Syria): ISIS enforces bans on female education in occupied territories, closing thousands of schools.]

[2015]	[Saudi Arabia Expands Women's Education: Reforms increase female university enrolment, especially in STEM fields.]
[2021]	[Taliban Regains Control (Afghanistan): Girls above grade six are again banned from attending school, despite international pressure.]
[2022]	[UNICEF Reports Middle East Gender Gaps: Data reveals 58% of secondary school-aged girls in the region are out of school.]
[2023]	[Iran's "Hijab and Chastity" Crackdown: Increased restrictions on women's rights impact university attendance for females.]
[2024]	[Global Push for Female Education: UN and NGOs increase funding and advocacy, with Saudi Arabia and UAE leading regional reforms for gender-inclusive education.]

UN Involvement and Other Treaties

- UN Security Council Resolution on Women, Peace and Security, 2000 (Reso. 1325)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 18 Sep. 1979, New York City, USA
- Fourth World Conference on Women, 4-15 Sep. 1995, Beijing, China
- Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence, 2017
- International Conference on Girls' Education in Muslim Communities, 11-13 Jan. 2025, Islamabad, Pakistan
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 2015
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 1989

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Several international treaties and UN initiatives aim to protect and promote girls' education in the Middle East, addressing barriers related to cultural and religious practices.

Key treaties include the *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989)*, which mandates free and compulsory primary education, and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979)*, which calls for equal access to education. The *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966)* also emphasizes the right to education without discrimination. Additionally, the *UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015)*, particularly Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 5 (Gender Equality), set global targets for improving girls' education.

The UN has also passed significant resolutions and hosted conferences addressing religious influences on girls' education. The *Fourth World Conference on Women (1995)* produced the *Beijing Declaration*, advocating for the removal of cultural and religious barriers to education. *UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)* highlights the role of women and girls in conflict zones, urging protections for their education. The *Plan of Action for Religious Leaders (2017)* seeks to engage religious leaders in promoting gender-inclusive education.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist due to cultural resistance, political instability, and restrictive religious interpretations. Continued advocacy, policy reforms, and international cooperation are essential to ensuring all girls in the Middle East have access to education.

Possible Solutions

Addressing the role of religion in the decline of girls' education in the Middle East requires a combination of local, national, and global efforts. Many religious interpretations support education for both genders, but restrictive cultural practices continue to limit opportunities for girls.

Local and National Solutions

Engaging Religious Leaders: Collaborate with scholars and clerics to promote interpretations of Islam that encourage female education. Faith-based organizations can help reshape narratives around gender and learning.

Legal Reforms: Enforce laws that protect girls' right to education, ban child marriage, and criminalize gender discrimination in schools.

Community Awareness: Grassroots campaigns should highlight the benefits of girls' education, and role models can inspire young girls to pursue learning.

Financial and Infrastructure Support: Governments should provide scholarships, free school supplies, and safe transportation to encourage enrolment and retention.

Global UN-Led Solutions

Strengthening International Agreements: The UN must enforce treaties like CEDAW (1979), CRC (1989), and ICESCR (1966), ensuring Middle Eastern countries uphold their commitments. UNESCO and UNICEF should expand initiatives like Education Cannot Wait to provide education in conflict-affected areas.

Religious and Cultural Dialogue: Collaborate with Al-Azhar University and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to support gender-inclusive education through faith-based advocacy.

Policy and Legal Pressure: Use UN Human Rights Council reviews and link foreign aid to education reform.

Global Advocacy: Campaigns like International Day of the Girl Child raise awareness, while partnerships with NGOs such as the Malala Fund drive change.

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