



Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa

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Key Findings

- Many MENA publics express a preference for greater female political participation, including acceptance of a female head of state and the implementation of women’s quotas for elected office. However, the belief that men are better political leaders prevails.
- Views toward women in private domain reveal a somewhat different picture: Even though more and more people accept equal rights of women in making the decision to divorce or voice a preference for equal shares of inheritance, majorities still say that husbands should be the final decision maker on family issues in most countries.
- Over the longer term, we may expect women’s rights to improve. Women are becoming more prominent actors in the political sphere, women’s quotas are already established in some countries, and with the chance to take on meaningful roles within the state, women are likely to enhance their visibility and competence in dealing with political issues. At the same time, economic hardship may force more women to work outside the house, which may lead to changing views about their own position in the family and could also lead to greater acceptance of women’s new social role among men.

Introduction

A long-standing debate centers on the role of women in society across the Middle East and North Africa. Often, from the outside, MENA societies are perceived as relatively restrictive toward women, particularly in the public space. Recently, much attention has centered on the condition of women in Saudi Arabia, which recently allowed women to apply to travel independently or obtain driver's licenses for the first time.¹

The situation in Saudi Arabia do not reflect those across the broader region, which includes broad variation on the legal protections for women. However, laws do not necessarily reflect the views or beliefs of ordinary citizens, which is a critical element to understand the condition of women across the region. Accordingly, the Arab Barometer has tracked public attitudes on a variety of issues related to women's rights and roles since 2006. The findings suggest that a majority of citizens across MENA accept that women should have equal rights in many areas. For instance, there is broad acceptance of a female head of state or women's quotas for political office. However, Arab publics are reticent about women playing an equal role in politics – majorities continue to believe that men are better political leaders.

In the private sphere, there is significant divergence. Although majorities hold that women should have equal rights in the decision to divorce, relatively few say that women should receive equal shares of inheritance. Education is already viewed as a good that women and men should have equal access to. However, most still say that husbands should be the final decision maker in family issues.

This report distinguishes between women's rights in the public and private spheres and presents trends and patterns in the perception of these rights among MENA publics.

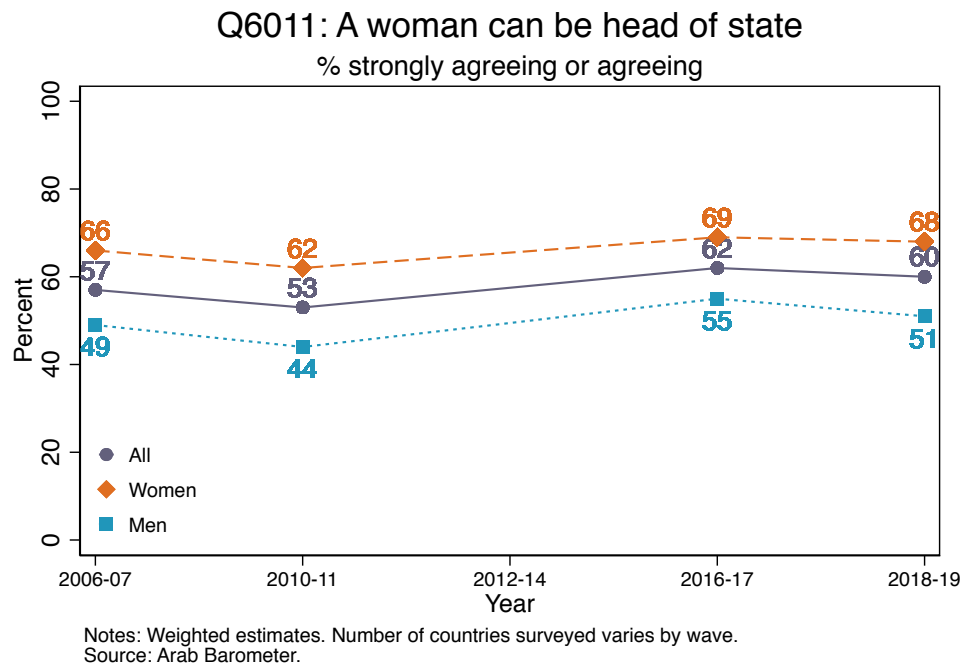
Perceptions of Women's Political Rights

High acceptance of a female head of state

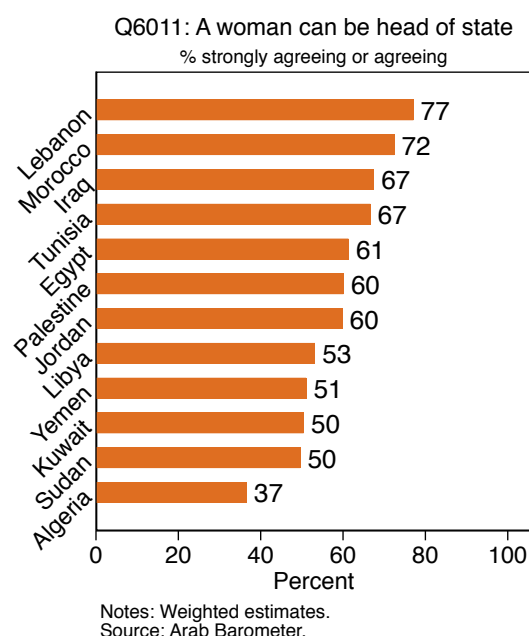
Looking at women's political rights, Arab Barometer asks whether people think that women should be able to become the head of state in a Muslim country. The regional trend across time suggests little change since the survey project started in 2006-07. Roughly 1-in-6 say that women should indeed have this right. However, there is a noteworthy difference between the perceptions of women and men. The level of acceptance of a female head of state is approxi-

¹ See for example: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-49201019> or <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-44367981>.

mately 18 points higher among women compared to men, on average. Women appear to be substantively more accepting of this right than men.



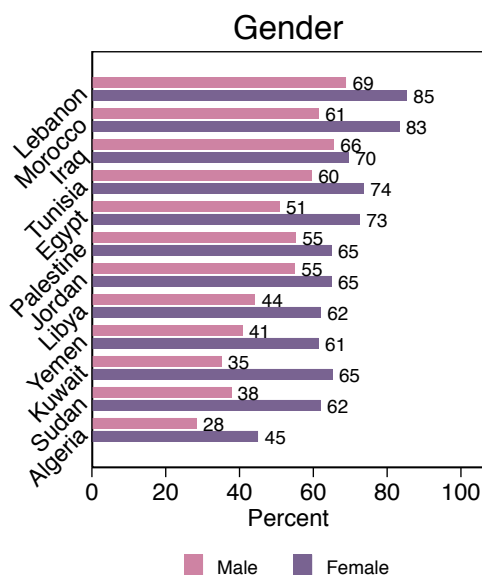
In addition, acceptance of a female head of state varies widely by country. Lebanese (77 percent), Moroccans (72 percent), Iraqis and Tunisians (each 67 percent) are most accepting of this right for women. By comparison, in Algeria only 37 percent say the same.



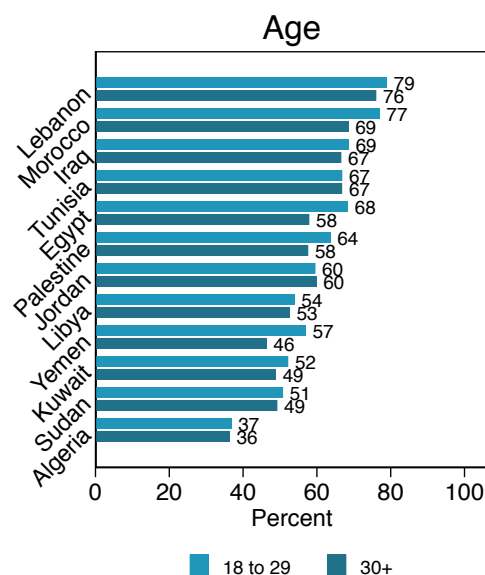
The data also allow exploring common demographic breaks, such as gender, age, urbanity and education. We may expect that women are more accepting of women’s rights compared to men. Moreover, younger and better educated people as well as urban population² may be more likely to hold more liberal views on women’s political rights.

Indeed the assumption for gender seem to be supported by the data. In all country contexts, women are substantively more likely to accept a female head of state compared to men. There is little variation across age: Only in Morocco, Egypt, Palestine, and Yemen younger Arabs seem to be somewhat more accepting of a female head of state. Mixed results are found for urban living and education. In some contexts, urban living seems to correspond with higher acceptance of a female head of state, with the exception of Lebanon, Tunisia, Palestine, Yemen, and Algeria, where the reverse relationship is found. Egypt, Jordan, and Sudan stand out as countries in which those with secondary education or less are more likely to accept a female head of state, whereas in all other countries higher education correspond with more acceptance for women in this position.

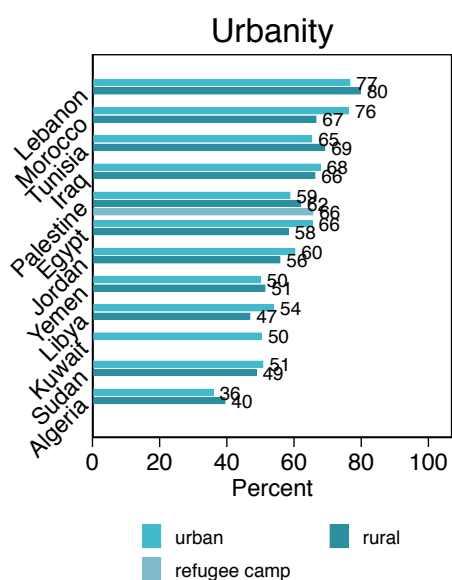
²Note population in Kuwait is classified as urban only.



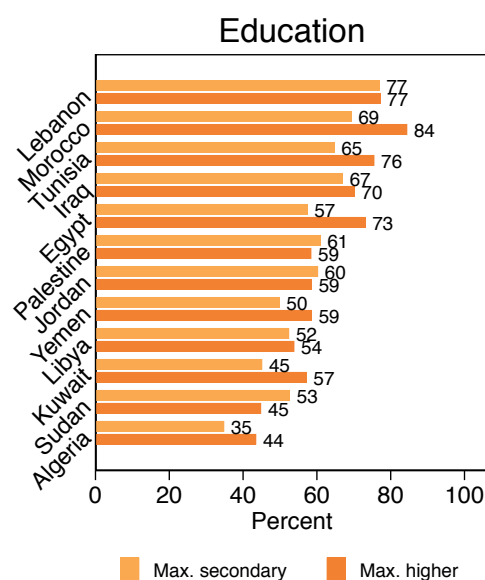
Notes: Weighted estimates.
Source: Arab Barometer.



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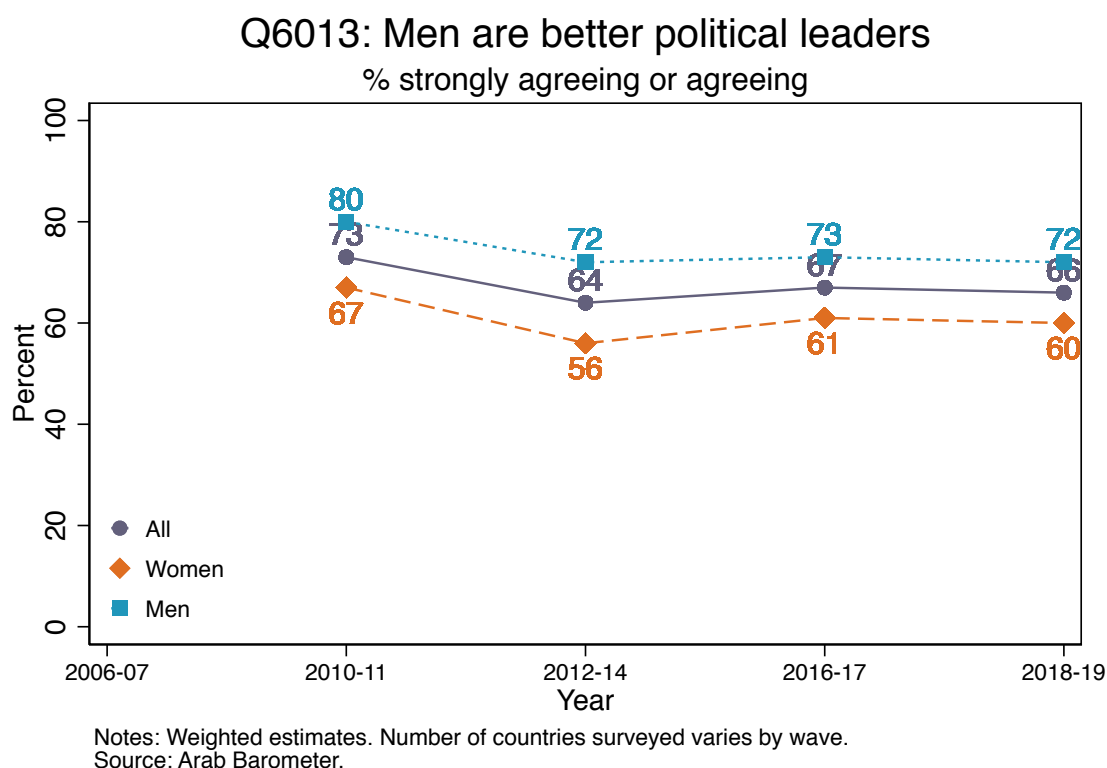


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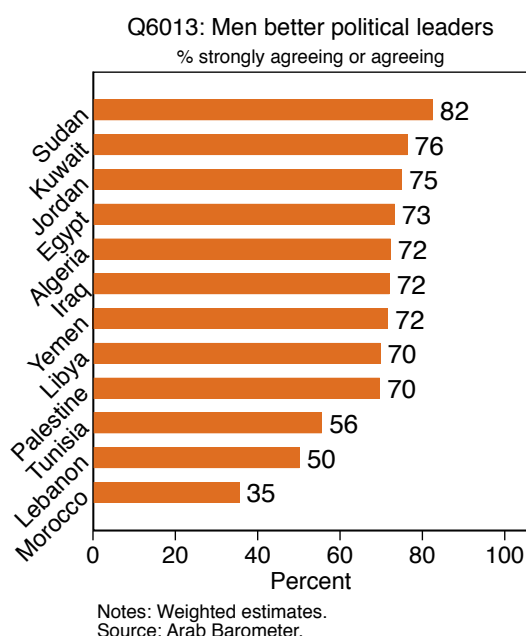
View of men as better political leaders prevails

Overall, Arab Barometer observes a 9-point drop in the belief that men are better political leaders from 2010-11 to 2012-14, but since perceptions seem to be relatively stable. Two thirds across MENA think that men are better political

leaders in 2018-19. Once again, there are important differences by gender. Unsurprisingly, the proportion of men who hold this view is higher than for women by approximately 12 points.

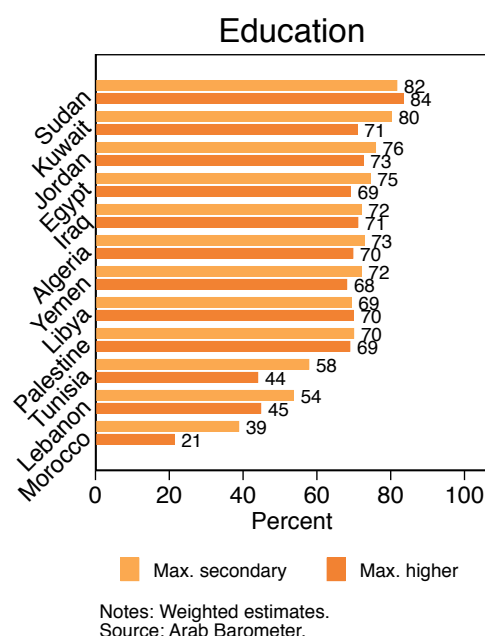
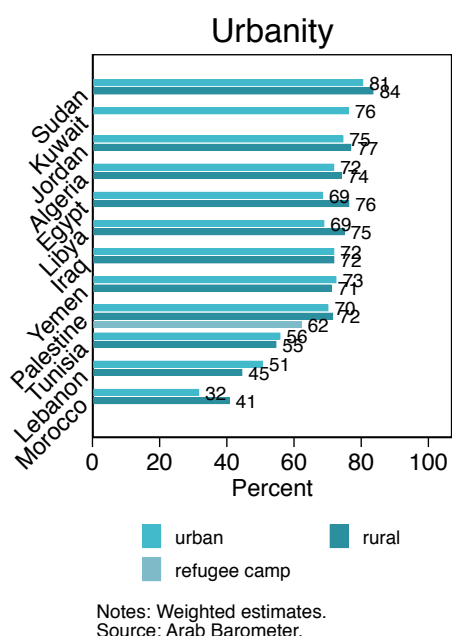
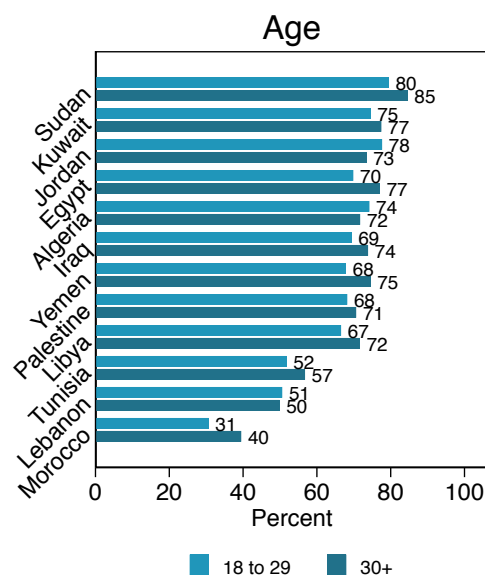
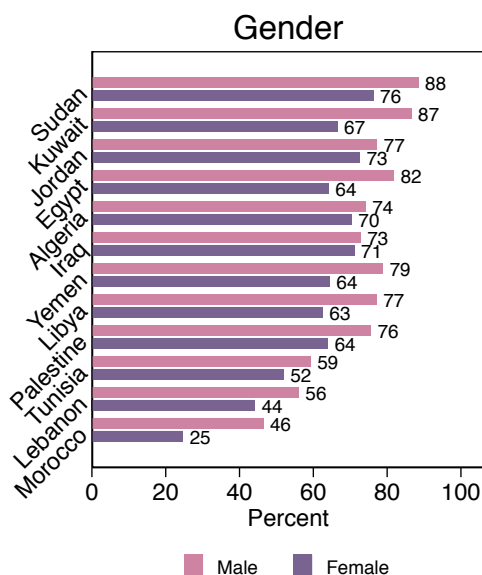


Variation can also be observed across countries. Sudan stands out as the country with the highest proportion of citizens believing that men are better political leaders (82 percent). However, roughly 7-in-10 Kuwaitis, Jordanians, Egyptians, Algerians, Iraqis, Yemenis, Libyans, and Palestinians also agree that men are better leaders. Tunisia (56 percent), Lebanon (50 percent) and Morocco (35 percent) stand out as the countries with the lowest proportion agreeing men are better political leaders.



It might be expected that men and older people to potentially be more likely to hold this view. Indeed, this is what Arab Barometer finds. Across countries, men are more likely to think that male leaders are better than female leaders. Those who are older are slightly more likely to hold this view in many countries, although Jordan stands out from the rest with younger citizens being somewhat more likely to think men are better political leaders. Little difference is found by urbanity and education.

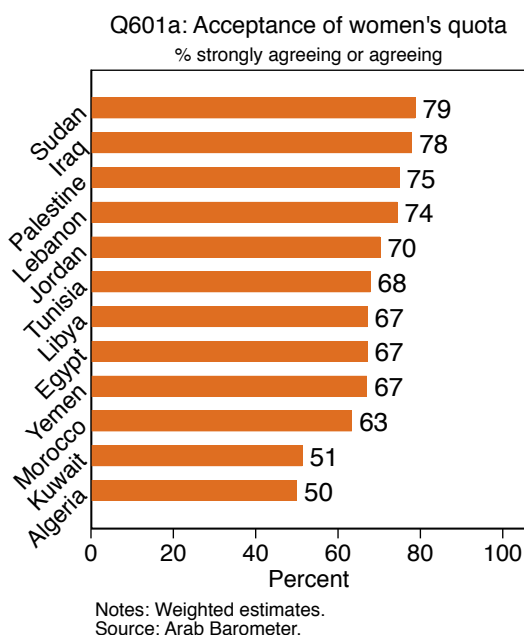
Thus, while MENA publics largely accept women as political leaders, they don’t believe women are equally good at fulfilling this role compared to men. Encouraging female participation in higher levels of government may be one way to change this perception. If women have the chance to prove themselves as strong political leaders in visible and meaningful positions, the view of female leadership may change. One instrument to potentially achieve this is the introduction of a women’s quota for political office.



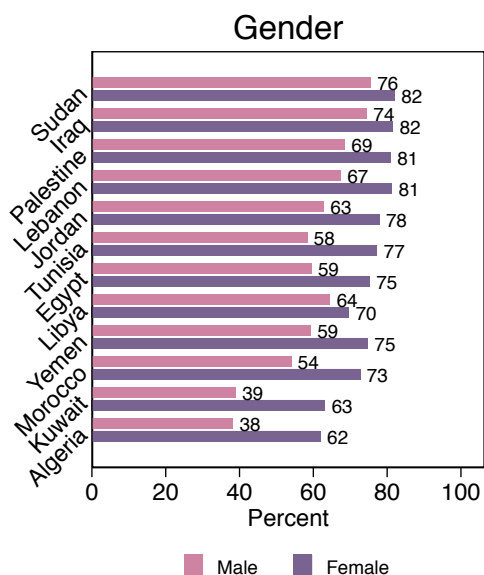
Vast support for women's quota for political office

For the first time, Arab Barometer asked whether or not people think that it would be good to set aside a certain proportion of seats for women to achieve fairer representation. Overall, more than two thirds across the region agree with

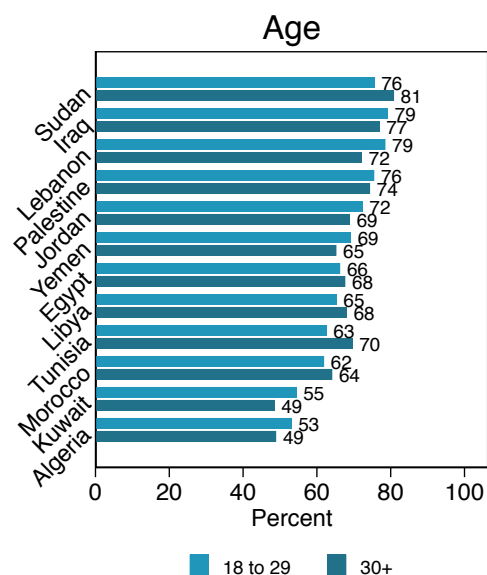
the introduction of women’s quotas. Sudanese (79 percent), Iraqis (78 percent), and Palestinians (75 percent) are the most supportive, while the least accepting are Kuwaitis (51 percent) and Algerians (50 percent). Given that some countries, such as Jordan and Morocco, already established women’s quotas, this result is not entirely unexpected.



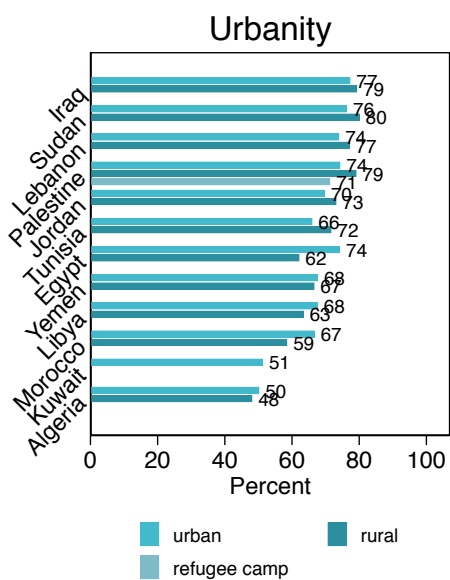
Unsurprisingly, women are more likely to support the idea of a women’s quota for political offices throughout the region. Similarly, better educated citizens tend to be more supportive women’s quotas, with the exception of Palestine and Kuwait. Mixed results are found for age and urbanity: While in some countries older citizens are more supportive of women’s quotas, in others it is younger Arabs who are more likely to be in favor. Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan stand out to be countries in which those living in rural areas are more likely to favor women’s quotas, whereas in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Morocco, and Algeria the reverse is true.



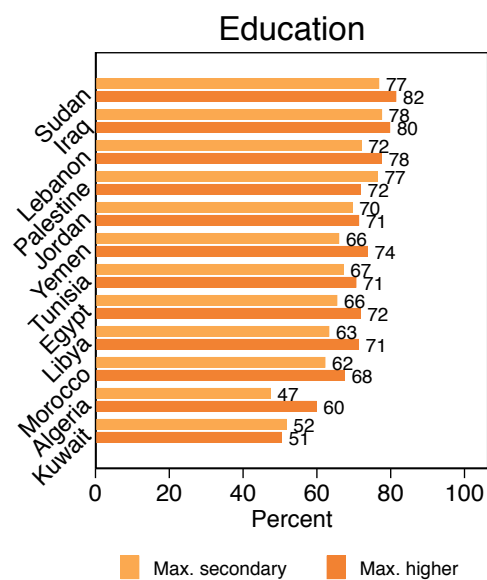
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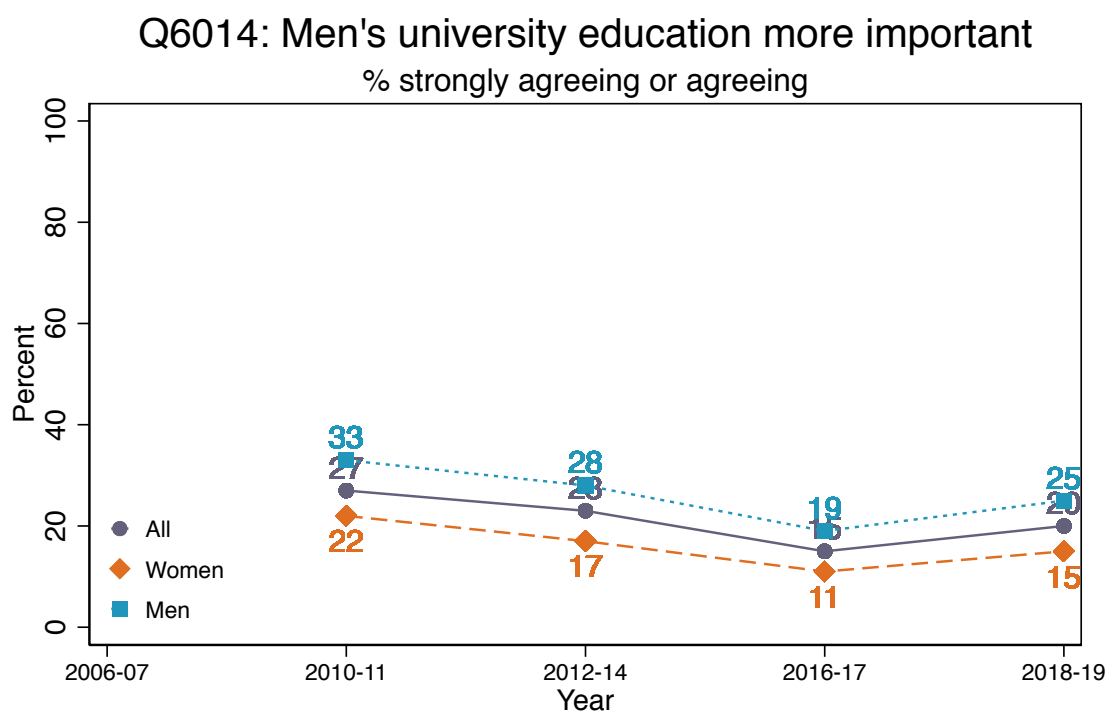


Notes: Weighted estimates.
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Perceptions of Women’s Social Rights

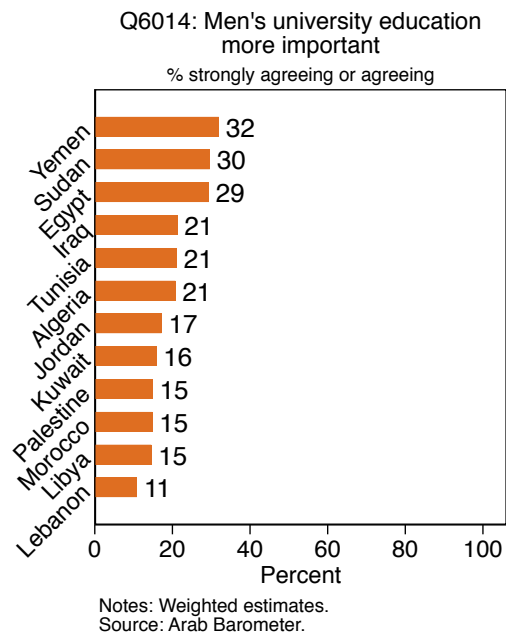
Equal access to university education (almost)

Turning to women’s social rights, few people across believe that university education is more important for men than for women across MENA. Arab Barometer observed a steady drop from 2010-11 to 2016-17, but a slight 5-point increase in the belief that university education is more important for men in the last two years. It is noteworthy that the level across males and females differs by roughly 10 points, on average. Men are more likely to hold the view that men’s university education is more important compared to women.

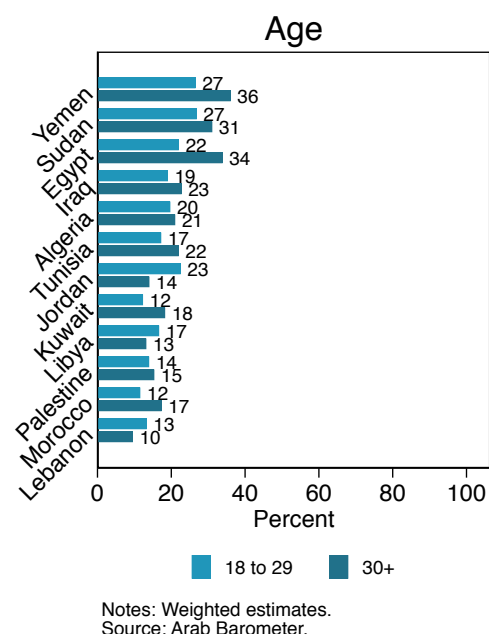
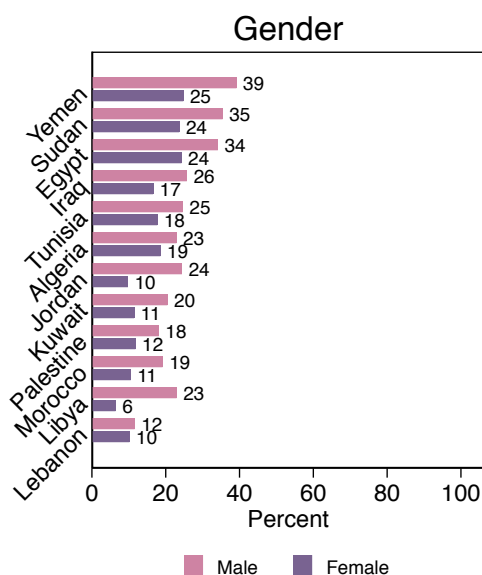


Notes: Weighted estimates. Number of countries surveyed varies by wave.
Source: Arab Barometer.

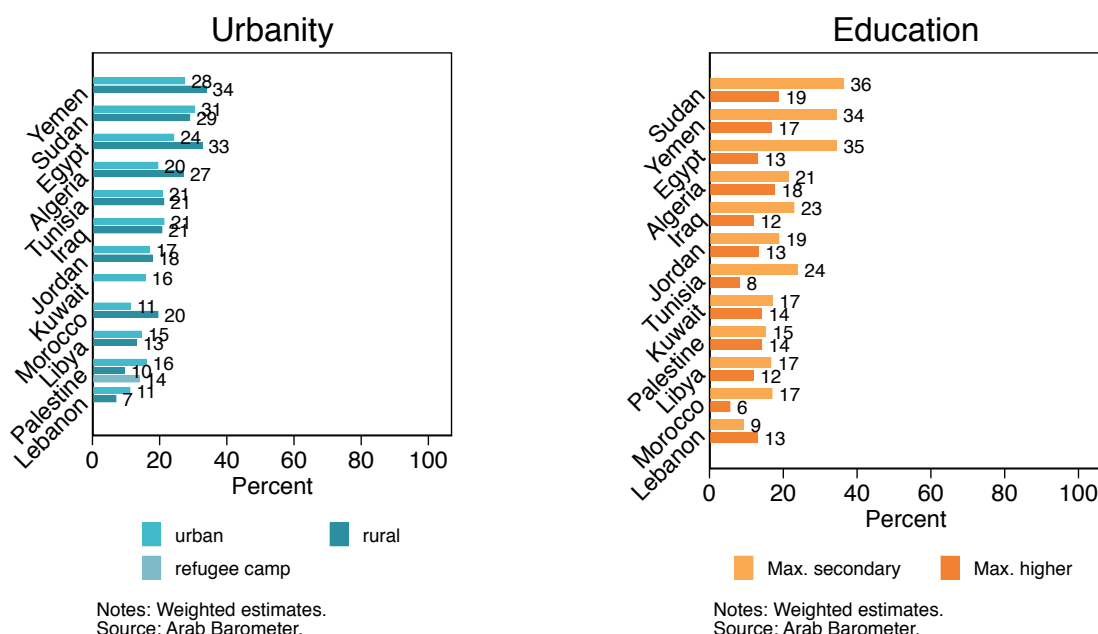
There is substantive variation across countries. Yemenis (32 percent), Sudanese (30 percent), and Egyptians (20 percent) are less likely to support equal access to education whereas Palestinians, Moroccans, Libyans (each 15 percent) and Lebanese (11 percent) are more likely to do so. However, across the region as a whole, it is clear that majorities believe that university education is important for both women and men.



It is noteworthy that men are more likely to hold the belief that university education is more important for men than for women. One exception appears to be Lebanon, in which the difference between women and men is not substantive. Older generations also appear more supportive of the statement that men’s university education is more important with the exception of Jordanians, Libyans, and Lebanese, where younger generations to be more likely to hold this view.

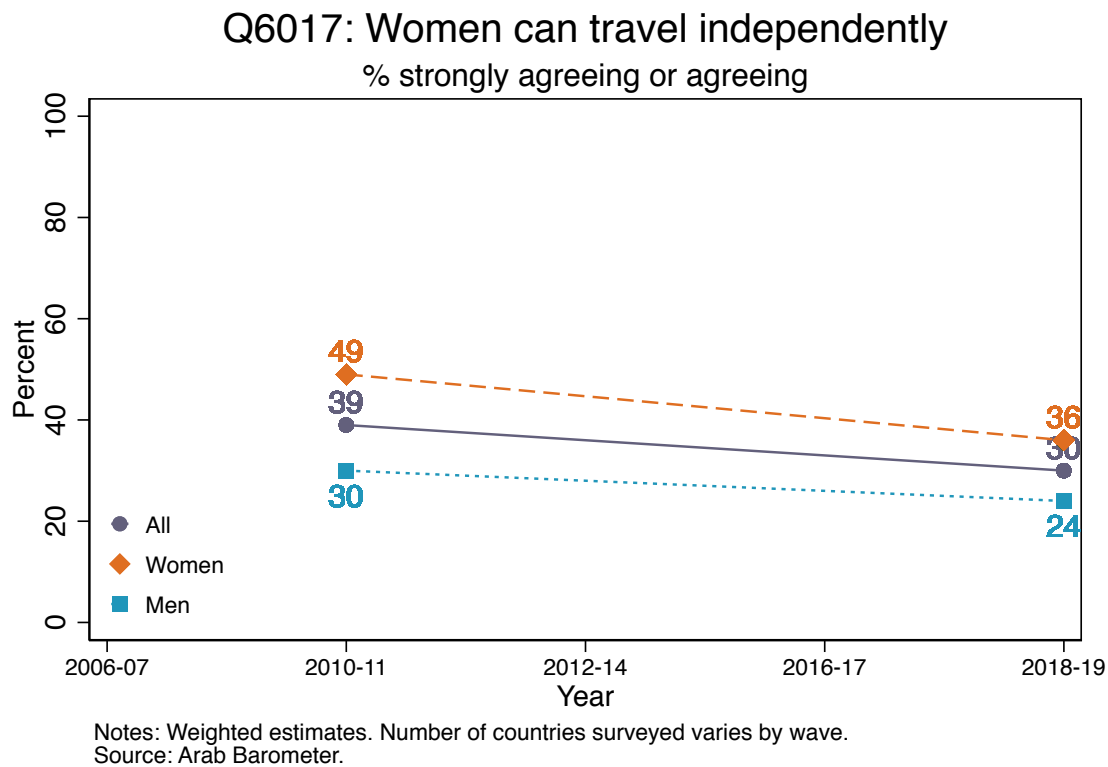


Those with lower levels education are also more likely to say that men’s university education is more important, with the exception of Morocco, where it is those with higher education who do so. The gap by level of education is largest in Sudan, Yemen, and Egypt. Little variation can be observed by urbanity.

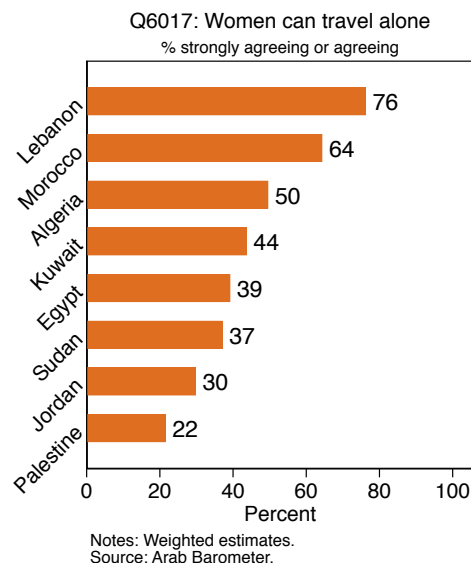


Limited approval of women’s right to travel independently

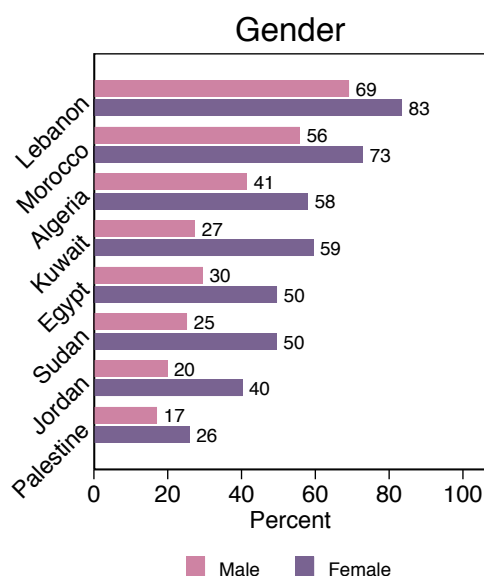
Another question of women’s social rights is whether or not women can travel alone. As of August 2, 2019 Saudi women over the age of 21 will be permitted to apply to travel outside the Kingdom independently. However, relatively few citizens across MENA are supportive of women traveling alone. Since 2010-11, Arab Barometer observes a slight 6 point drop in accepting women’s right to do so. In 2018-19, only one third say it should be permissible for a women to travel independently. The proportion of men saying that a women should be able to travel alone is substantively lower across time than the proportion of women. Notably, however, a drop over time is found for both genders.



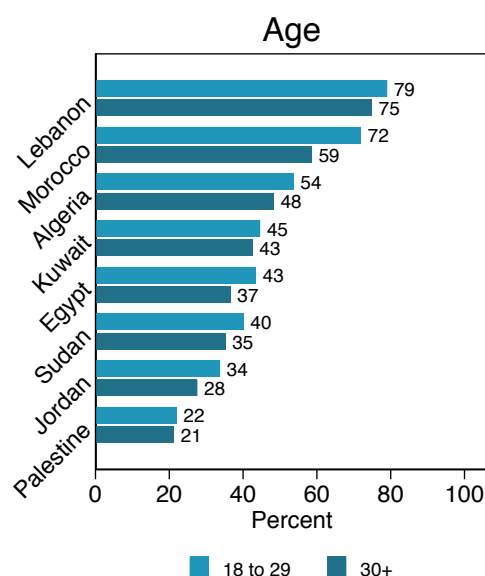
The variation across countries is vast, ranging from three quarters saying women should be able to travel independently in Lebanon compared to only 2-in-10 in Palestine. While two thirds of Moroccans say it is permissible for a women to travel alone and half of Algerians say the same, acceptance of women traveling independently falls below 50 percent in all other countries.



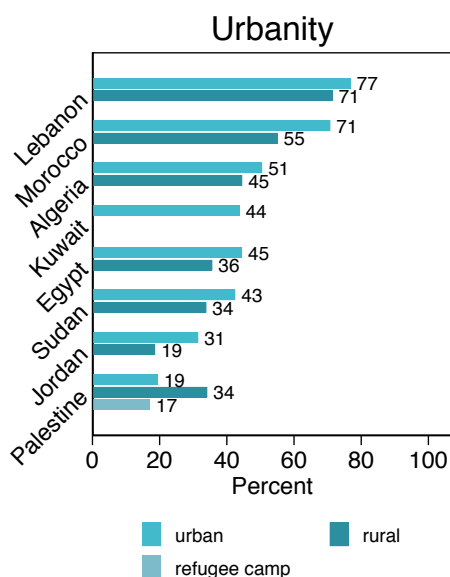
Unsurprisingly, women are more supportive of their right to travel independently. There is little variation by age, but the graphs suggests that younger generations are somewhat more likely to support independent travel for women compared to older generations.



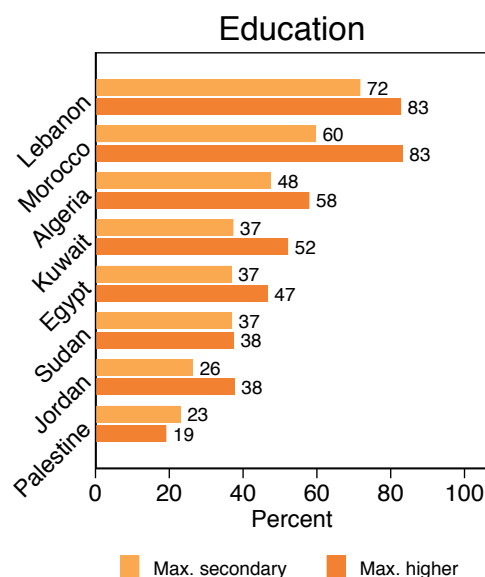
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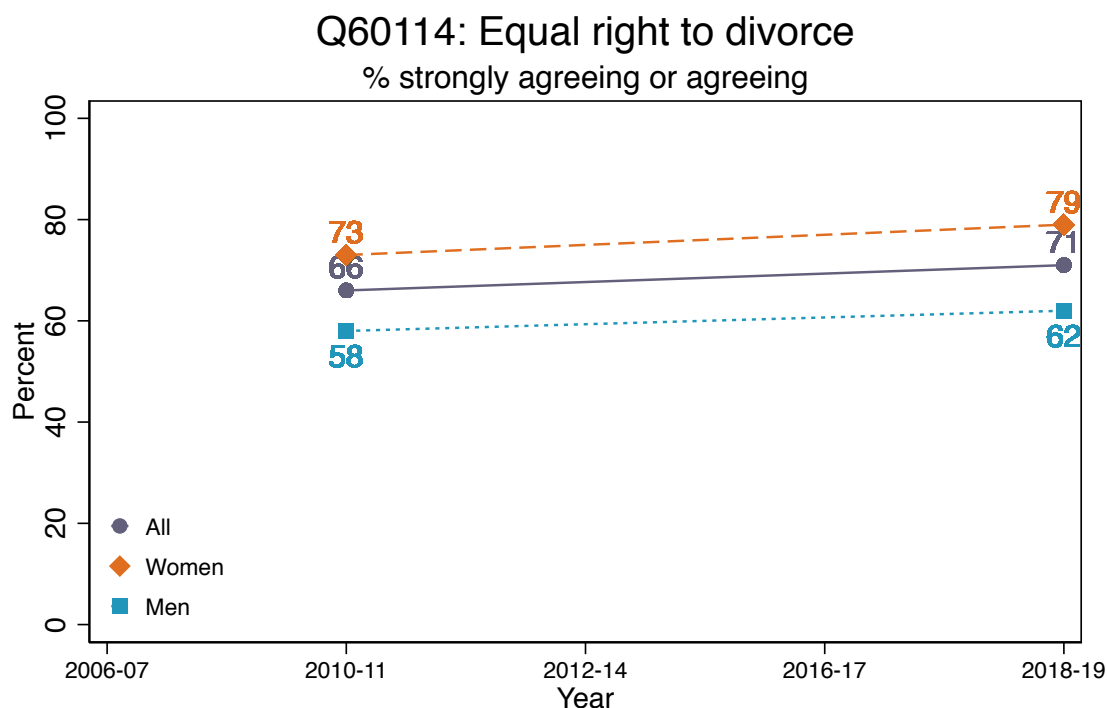


Notes: Weighted estimates.
Source: Arab Barometer.

With the exception of Palestine, where rural populations are more supportive of women’s right to travel alone, urban populations seem more likely to accept that it is permissible for women to travel independently. Turning to level of education, it is noteworthy that well-educated citizens are more likely to support women can travel alone than those with lower levels of education. One exception is Palestine where the reverse pattern applies.

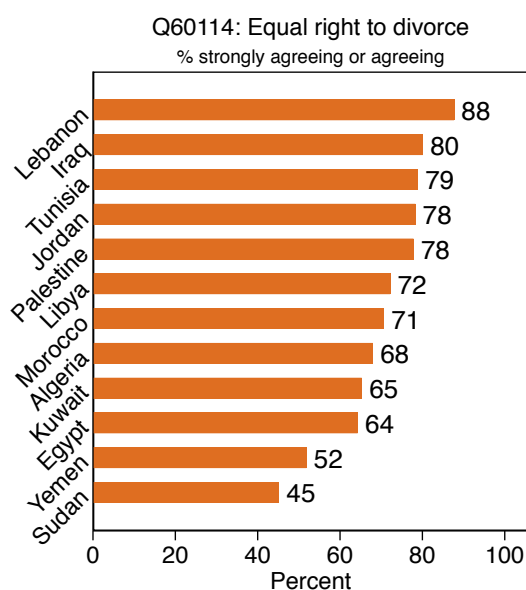
Vast support for equal rights to make the decision to divorce

Across the region, the belief that women and men have the same right to make the decision to divorce is rising. In 2010-11, two thirds stated that both should have the same right to divorce; in 2018-19 this number increased by 5 points: 7-in-10 now say that women and men should have equal rights to divorce. The proportion of men remains substantively lower when compared to women.



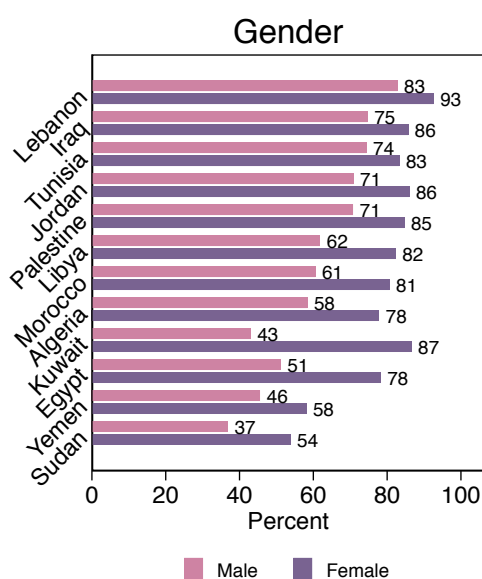
Notes: Weighted estimates. Number of countries surveyed varies by wave.
Source: Arab Barometer.

Arab Barometer also observes some cross-country variation: Lebanese are the most supportive of equal rights to divorce with roughly 9-in-10 holding this view, followed by Iraqis (80 percent) and Tunisians (79 percent). Yemenis (52 percent) and Sudanese (45 percent) are the least supportive of equal rights to divorce for women.

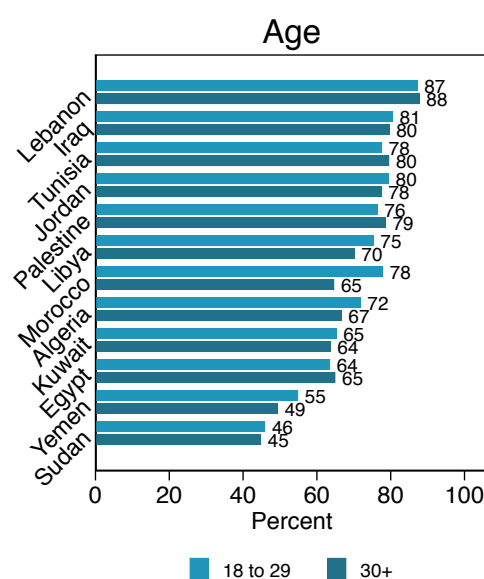


Notes: Weighted estimates.
Source: Arab Barometer.

Women are more likely to say they support equal rights to divorce in all countries. Kuwait stands out as the country with the largest gap in perceptions of equal divorce rights between women and men. Women are about twice as likely to support equal divorce rights compared to men.

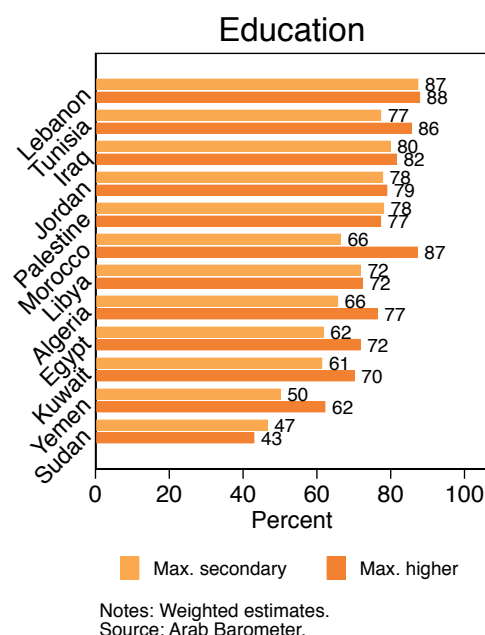
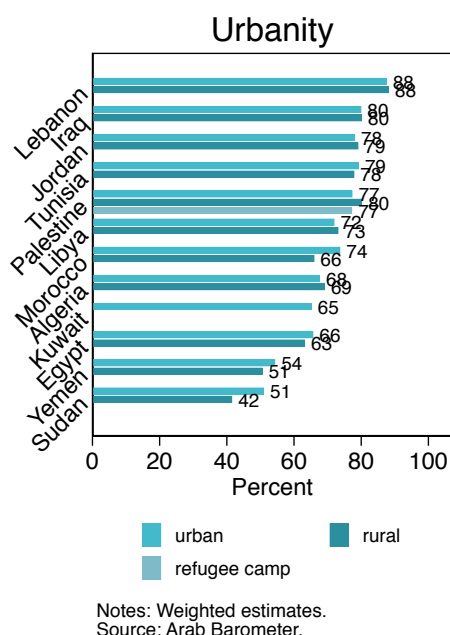


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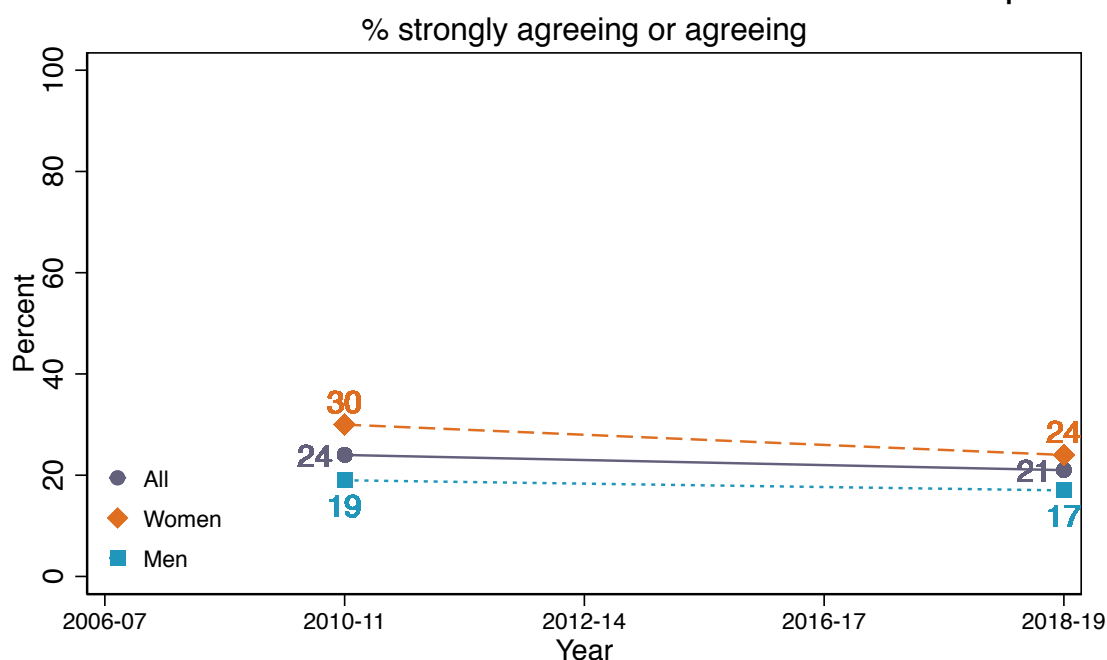
Little variation can be observed across age and urbanity. Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait, Iraq and Yemen stand out as the countries in which a substantive education difference can be observed: Those with higher levels of education are more likely to support equal rights in the decision to divorce compared to those with a lower level of education.



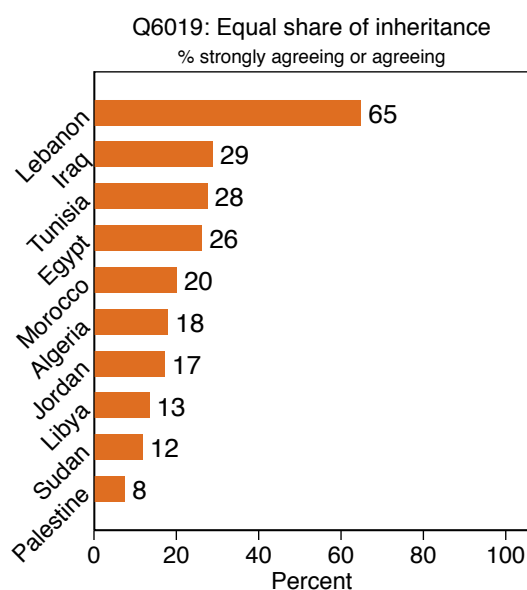
Limited approval of acceptance of an equal share of inheritance for women

Although most Arab publics support equal rights to divorce, Arab Barometer finds little approval of acceptance of an equal share of inheritance for women. Overall, less than a quarter say they agree that women’s share of inheritance should be equal to that of men in 2018-19, which is a slight drop of three points from 2010-11. Even though women are not overwhelmingly more supportive, a larger percentage in both years surveyed support this right compared to men.

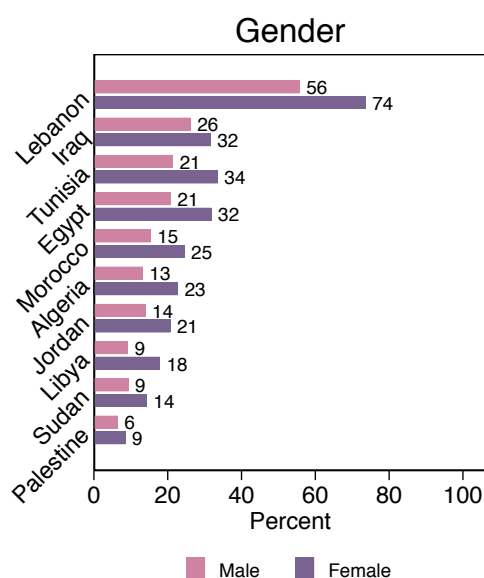
Q6019: Women's share of inheritance should be equal



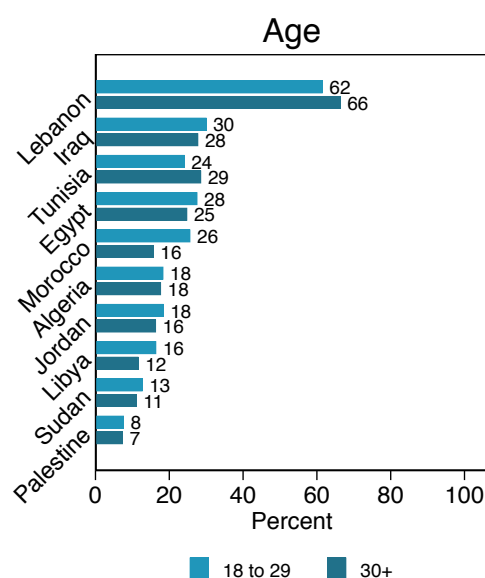
Once again Lebanese are the most supportive: almost three quarters say they are in favor of an equal share of inheritance for women. Compared to Iraqis (29 percent), Tunisians (28 percent), and Egyptians (26 percent), which are the next most supportive, Lebanese support for an equal share of inheritance is vast.



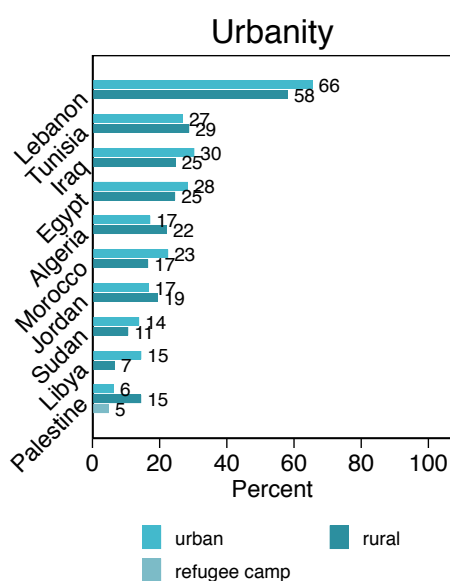
Some of the variation can sure be attributed to the higher religious diversity of Lebanon, with Christians in Lebanon being more likely to support equal inheritance for women. Meanwhile, the lowest levels of support for equal inheritance can be found in Libya (13 percent), Sudan (12 percent), and Palestine (8 percent).



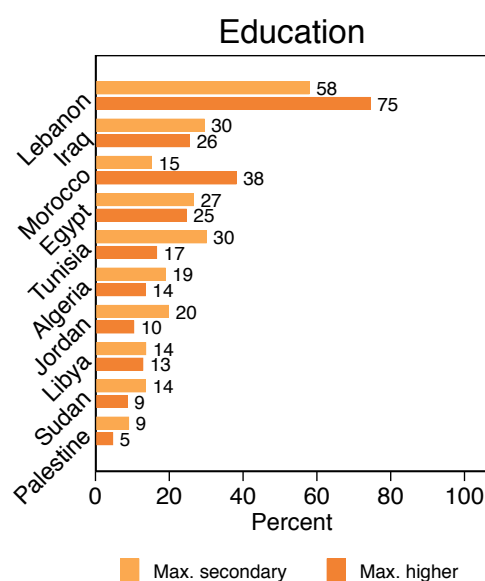
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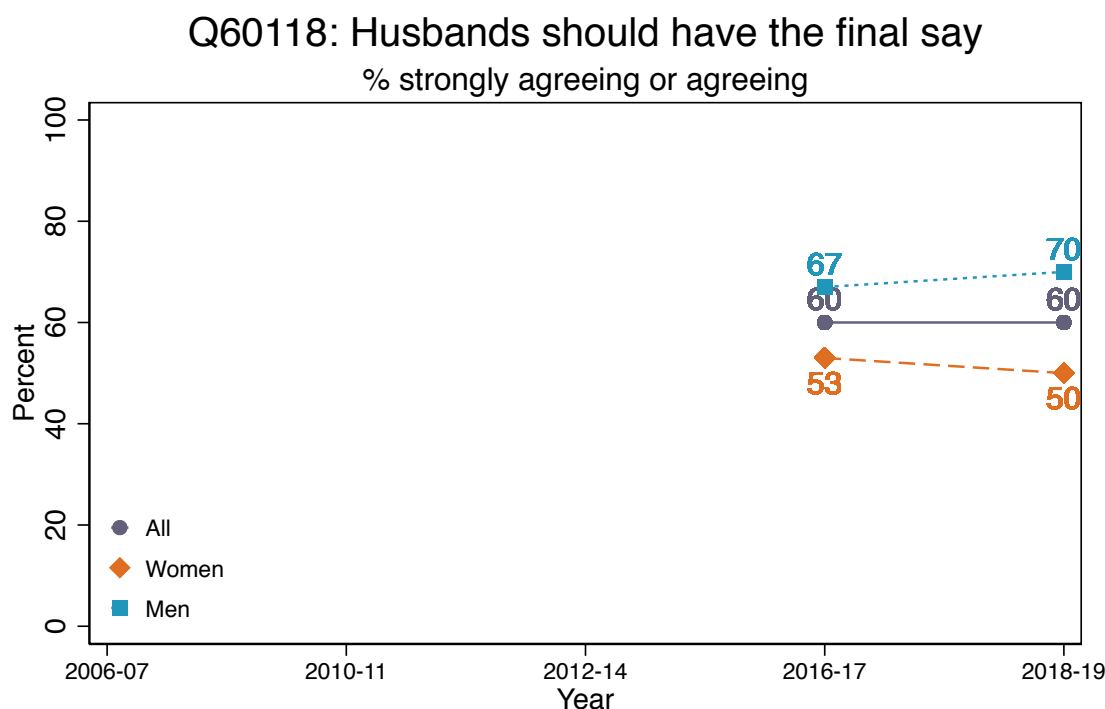


Notes: Weighted estimates.
Source: Arab Barometer.

Again, women are substantively more supportive of women’s right to an equal share of inheritance. Little variation can be observed across age and urbanity. Lebanon and Morocco stand out as the countries with the widest education gap: in both countries those with a higher level of education are substantively more supportive of the right to an equal share of inheritance. In the other countries it is the less well educated who appear to be more supportive of an equal share of inheritance for women. Jordan and Tunisia stand out as the countries with the largest gap by education, but in the reverse order: in both countries, the proportion of those with a secondary education or less holding this view is substantively greater than that of those with higher levels of education.

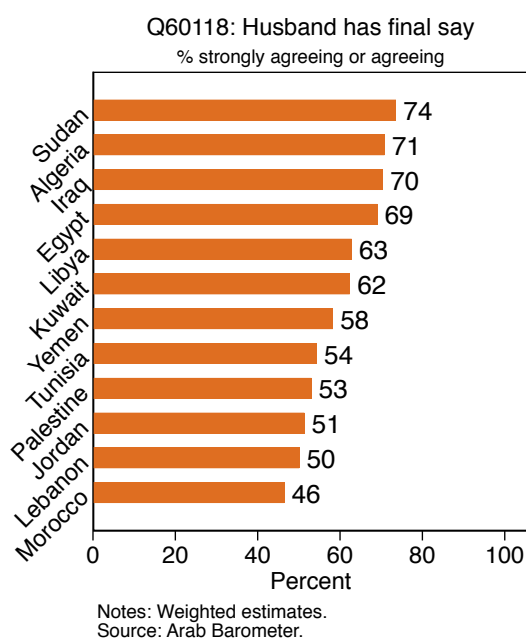
Husbands remain the main decision maker in the family

While some more liberal attitudes about the social role and rights of women in MENA can be observed, it appears that most in the region believe the primary decision maker in the family should be the husband. Overall, six-in-ten across MENA say husbands should have the final say in family decisions and no change can be observed between 2016-17 to 2018-19. Looking at the changes for women and men, however, it appears that the gap by gender is increasing. More men now say that husbands should be the decision maker: in 2018-19, 7-in-10 men can be compared to half of women who hold this belief.

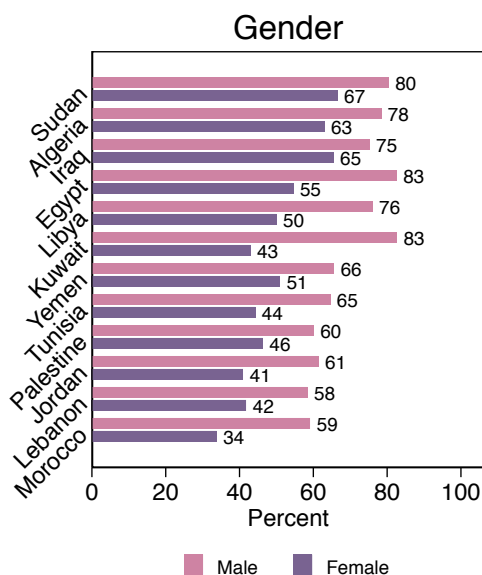


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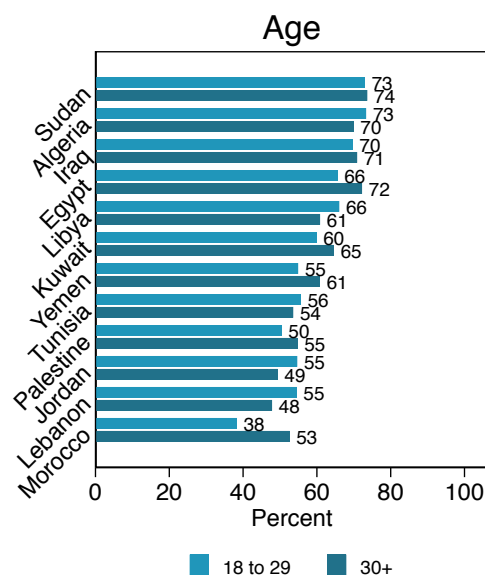
Variation can be observed across countries. Sudanese (74 percent), Algerians (71 percent), and Iraqis (70 percent) are the most likely to agree with the statement that husbands should have the final say in family decisions. Meanwhile, those in Jordan (51 percent), Lebanon (50 percent) and Morocco (46 percent) are less likely to do so. Especially, in the latter three countries, there has been a significant effort to establishing women’s rights such as through quotas in Jordan and Morocco, which may be one indicator that socio-economic and political liberation enhances women’s and men’s perception of women’s role in the family.



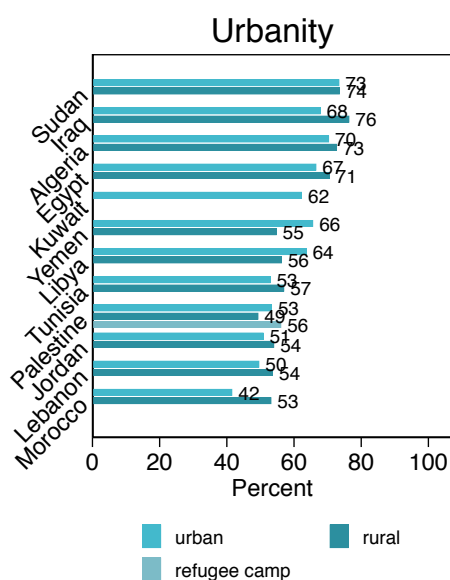
As before, men are substantively more likely to think that husbands should have the final say in family decision when compared to women in all countries. The greatest gender gap can be observed in Kuwait with a 40-point difference between women and men. Little variation can be observed across age, where Morocco stands out as the country with a large age difference (15 points): older Moroccans are more likely to agree that husbands should have the final say compared to those who are younger. This pattern is found in many other countries as well. Meanwhile, many MENA countries display a pattern by urbanity, where those living in rural areas are more likely to hold the view that husbands should be the main decision maker in family decisions. Notable exceptions to this trend are Yemen, Libya, and Palestine. The belief that husbands should have the final say in family decisions is also linked to level of education: in most countries those with lower educational levels are more likely to hold this view. The exceptions are Yemen and Palestine, where no substantive difference can be observed.



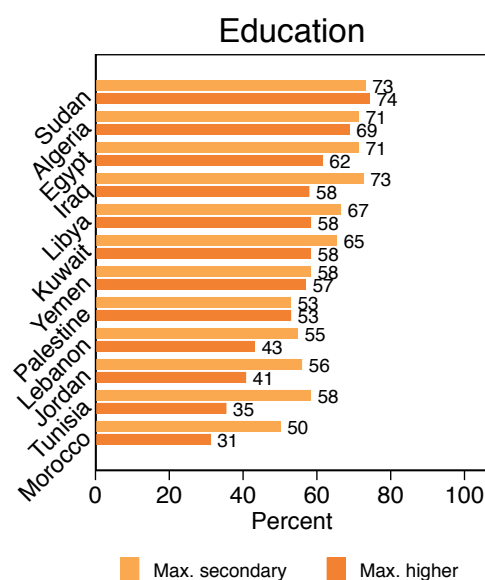
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Conclusion

In the political sphere, women's rights are fairly firmly established. Majorities support quota for women in elected office and some countries already estab-

lish a practice of setting aside seats for women. Women are largely accepted as a head of state as well. However, men are believed to be better political leaders. Possibly, this view could be changed by giving more women the opportunity to prove themselves as successful political leaders. Governments in the region could help changing this view by giving them visibility and help them to take office in relevant domains.

In the private sphere, MENA publics largely accept that women and men should have an equal right to make the decision to get divorced and that both genders should be granted equal access to university education. However, it appears that few believe women should travel independently or be entitled to an equal share of inheritance. In addition, the view that husbands are the main decision maker in the family prevails. In some countries, especially in Lebanon, but also Morocco and Jordan, it seems that greater access to opportunities for work, even if stemmed from economic pressures, has helped women and men to develop more equal views within the household.



About Arab Barometer

The Arab Barometer is a nonpartisan research network that provides insights into the social, political, and economic attitudes and values of ordinary citizens across the Arab world.

We have been conducting rigorous, and nationally representative face-to-face public opinion surveys on probability samples of the adult populations across the Arab world since 2006. The margin of error is ± 3 percent.

The Arab Barometer is the largest repository of publicly available data on the views of men and women in the MENA region. Our findings give a voice to the needs and concerns of Arab publics.



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