

# Gender and IR in the MENA Region: The Role of Arab Women's Diplomacy in Peacebuilding, Decision Making, and Conflict Resolution

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## ABSTRACT

This research studies gender and international relations in the MENA region. It scrutinises the Arab women's role and representation in diplomacy and foreign affairs. The study aims to examine the status of women diplomats in the region and identify the necessary strategies and recommendations to promote their role in IR. It provides an overview of Arab women's diplomacy, the progress made, and the challenges women continue to face in international relations. It highlights why and how women are underrepresented in MENA diplomacy, how women's engagement enhances diplomacy in the region, and strategies for future gender diplomacy. The study develops a new application of the Feminist IR theory to the Arab IR and demonstrates the relevance of this approach to new diplomatic and political contexts. Exploring gendered institutional practises and hierarchies in MENA foreign policy, the survey offers insights into perspectives previously marginalised in core concepts of MENA IR, beyond traditional courtesy diplomacy. It focuses primarily on women in IR positions and their contributions to peacebuilding, decision making and conflict resolution. The research uses a mixed-method-approach consisting of a quantitative data analysis of IR international documents and policy reports, and a qualitative survey of Arab women diplomats, both official and unofficial. The objective of the qualitative survey is to explore women diplomats' perceptions of their status, the challenges they face, and their recommendations for better female diplomacy. The study found that MENA IR is gendered and women are underrepresented in Arab diplomacy, that the underrepresentation of women is due to social and ideo-cultural factors, that the few women diplomats promote diplomacy in the region, and that future strategies should be implemented to bridge the gap in gendered IR.

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## **1. Introduction**

International relations (IR) and diplomacy are considered an inherently gendered field of politics. Foreign affairs have been dominated by men (Tickner, 1992), and the history of international relations is indeed the history of men in international relations. (Neumann, 2008). The United Nations resolution on the “International Day of Women in Diplomacy,” which is celebrated annually on June 24, affirms that sustainable development, democracy, and peace cannot be achieved unless women participate equally with men in decision making. Recent reports from UN show that gender representation in international relations is uneven, with Australia at the top, and Africa and the Middle East at the bottom.

Thus, a study of women in diplomatic relations in MENA countries may seem inappropriate. There are so few women in the history of the region’s foreign policy, and so few works illuminate their role in international relations. In fact, it has been assumed that women’s contributions to the development and maintenance of international politics are self-evident and unremarkable. (Hutchings, 1999; True, 2001; Tickner, 1992). Not much has been documented on the diplomacy and international relations of MENA countries, and the limited scholarly literature available has overlooked women’s representation in Arab international affairs. Women are underrepresented in Arab diplomacy, and research on women in MENA IR remains a gap.

This study is an attempt to fill this gap. The paper provides an overview of Arab women’s diplomacy, reflecting on the progress that has been made, and trying to identify the challenges that women continue to face in contributing to MENA IR. It seeks to identify the role women play not only in social policy, environmental diplomacy, and humanitarian efforts, but also in peace-building negotiations, decision making, and conflict resolution.

## **2. Research Questions**

The goal of this paper is to answer the following questions:

1. What is the current situation of gender in MENA countries international relations? Do women occupy leadership positions? Do they participate in peacebuilding, decision making and conflict resolution?
2. What difference do women make in MENA diplomacy and foreign policy decision-making? Does their representation of the region as ambassadors, senior foreign service negotiators, and policymakers enhance diplomacy?
3. If so, what strategies and actions should be taken to increase women’s representation in foreign policy and promote the role of women diplomats in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and conflict resolution?

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is the perspective of Feminist International Relations Theory. This approach emphasises gendered power hierarchies in IR and argues that IR is gendered, that traditional IR exclude women and that the inclusion of women would create new important perspectives in IR.

Feminist analysts believe that the absence of feminist concepts in international politics and the underrepresentation of female foreign policy actors and decision makers are due to the long-held belief that only men can address complex international policy challenges.

FIR theory has helped us analyse the representation of women in MENA diplomacy and its impact on the region's international relations and identify relevant policies to promote the status of women, which will in turn promote the sphere of international relations, as confirmed by Enloe (1993).

#### **4. Methodology**

To study the role of women in diplomacy as well as their perception of their status, we used a mixed-method-approach: a quantitative data analysis, and a qualitative survey.

Thus, there are two basic data collection tools:

We obtained data through a survey of Arab official and unofficial female diplomats. It provided information about women diplomacy practises and women diplomats' perception of their role and status. The survey aimed to explore the impact of women's empowerment in leadership and governance on diplomacy and peacekeeping in the region, the challenges women face, and recommendations for better diplomacy.

The target population of the survey consisted of forty (40) female respondents from the field of diplomacy. Participants included current and former Arab female diplomats (ambassadors, heads of departments in foreign affairs ministries, heads of training units, spouses of diplomats, MPs, peacebuilding and mediation activists, and researchers on gender and peace issues). The survey included eight (8) questions, four (4) close-ended and four (4) open-ended questions on the perception of the status and role of Arab women in diplomacy and peacebuilding, achievements, challenges, and recommendations, if any.

A basic tool of data collection was also the analysis and review of national and international reports, institutional and policy documents, diplomatic journals, IR books and journals, constitutions and constitutional laws of parliaments, and media and online resources. This has provided important information on gender in Arab IR and women's deployment in diplomacy and peacekeeping organisations.

#### **5. Findings' Summary**

The study's findings can be summarised as follows:

##### **1. MENA IR is gendered, and women are underrepresented in Arab diplomacy. Women's underrepresentation is most evident in leading positions, peacebuilding, and formal conflict resolution services.**

Women in the MENA region are underrepresented in political positions in general. (Chesser,2022). We focused on ambassadorship to determine the extent to which women hold leadership positions in international relations. The findings confirmed that despite the early deployment of female diplomats in some countries and recent progress in some others, Arab diplomacy still lags the world when it comes to gender balance, especially in ambassadorship and senior negotiation positions.

Arab women diplomats are still a minority in a male-dominated field and face challenges in their profession. In recent reports from UN on gender representation in international relations, the Middle East ranks last, with women making up 6% of the total. The first female Arab ambassador was appointed in 1979. She was from Egypt and was posted to Denmark. In 2022, the percentage of women in Egypt has increased to about 30% of diplomats, but only 7.5% of ambassadorships. (Chiheb, 2022).

In 2021 and 2022, women made up more than one third of the UN Security Council's permanent members for the second time in history (the first time was in 2014). For the first time, there was a female Arab ambassador, from Saudi Arabia. Between 2018 and 2022, Saudi Arabia recorded a + 4.0% progress in female diplomacy. However, because Saudi Arabia did not appoint the first female Saudi ambassador in history to be posted to USA until 2019, Saudi Arabia recorded only 4.5 % female diplomacy in 2023. (Chiheb, 2022).

In February 2023, the United Arab Emirates recorded the highest percentage of Arab women in diplomacy and politics in general, with 10.9 % female diplomats (Chiheb, 2022), and 50 % MPs (UNDP, UN Women, UNFPA, and ESCWA, 2018), showing that diplomacy lags the other political sectors when it comes to women's representation, as claimed by Feminist IR theorists.

Progress has indeed been made in the areas of peacekeeping and security. Nevertheless, the official peace process needs to become more gender inclusive.

By early 2022, seven countries in the region had implemented national action plans on WPS, including Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. A regional action plan has also been produced by the League of Arab States through the establishment of the Arab Women Mediators Network in collaboration with UN Women's Regional Office for Arab States (ROAS).

Some governments have also stepped-up efforts to increase women's formal participation in politics and peace efforts. In Libya, for example, women's participation in peace processes has improved significantly. In 2020, 23% of the members of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum were women. ([Libya | CFR Interactives](#)). In March 2021 a female peace and conflict resolution expert, Najla Mangouch, was appointed a minister of foreign affairs. Mangouch was previously the Libya representative for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and worked as a program officer for peacebuilding and traditional law at the Centre for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution in Arlington, Virginia. She is Libya's first female Foreign Minister and the fifth in the Arab world after Al-Naha bint Hamdi (2009) and Fatima bint Aswaina (2015) from Mauritania, Fawzia Yusuf H. Adam (2012) from Somalia, and Asma Muhammad Abdullah (2019) from Sudan.

Yet, in most Arab countries, women remain underrepresented in official peace and security agencies. Even when women do head government agencies, they are four times more likely to be appointed to social and cultural departments than to sectors of security, defence, justice, or energy, as confirmed by the Wilson Centre's 2020 Index (Merissa, 2020, p.20).

In order to study the representation of women in parliamentary diplomacy and security issues, we attempted to interview female MPs who are members of the Foreign, Political, and Security Affairs Committee in the Arab Parliament. However, we found that there are no female deputies in the Committee for Foreign Political and Security Affairs, while there are seven (7) women in the Social, Educational, Cultural, Women and Youth Committee.

The survey of the diplomats' perceptions of the status of Arab women in diplomacy and peacebuilding confirms the literature and official reports.

Most respondents believe that the status of women in diplomacy has significantly improved over the years, and that Arab women are breaking barriers in diplomacy. Several responses highlight the improvement in multilateral diplomacy, emphasizing that women diplomats have recently been appointed to high-level positions in international organisations and have played a crucial role in multilateral negotiations. The appointment of the first Emirati woman to head a delegation to the UN General Assembly and the first Saudi women to serve in the UN Security Council, for instance, is a significant achievement for Arab women's diplomacy.

However, all respondents point out that women are still underrepresented in diplomacy and peacebuilding even though they make up half of the population in the region. 72.5% of the participants confirm the exclusion of women from decision-making processes, particularly in peace, security, and armed conflict. Even in agencies with an equal gender representation, women often prepare the agenda and the negotiation table for decision-makers, rather than participating in negotiations and decision-making processes themselves. One of the participants, a manager in a ministry of foreign affairs, states, "I work in a department where women outnumber men, but relatively few of them have positions of authority or decision-making. Most of women work as secretaries and clerks".

## **2. The research found that a variety of factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in international relations and diplomacy, primarily, social, and ideo-cultural factors.**

Among the challenges to women's representation is the patriarchal nature of society. Most respondents emphasise that the patriarchal culture prevalent in the region often limits women's access to leadership positions and decision-making processes. Examples cited include being excluded from important meetings and hearing derogatory remarks. Stereotypes of weak and emotional women and the "feminised" social and familial roles ascribed to women hinder women's recruitment and advancement to higher positions in diplomacy. However, this is not typical of the MENA region and Oriental societies. Jean Racine (1639-1699) once said, "She wavers, she hesitates. In a word, she is a woman" (Ratcliffe, 2016).

Diplomacy in the region is influenced by cultural beliefs and traditional assumptions about women in politics. A 2016 Arab Barometer opinion poll found that respondents in Arab countries believe that men make better political leaders than women. (Arab Barometer, 2019). This shows the extent to which beliefs and assumptions about gender shape the world of politics. This is even more evident in the realm of international relations, as the UAE case mentioned above confirms. Historically, such assumptions have reinforced notions of the masculinity of governance and foreign policy and led to the exclusion of women from state defence and armed conflict resolution. Zalewski (1995) points out that this exclusion was ostensibly to protect women, when in fact it was to protect the privileges of men. Tickner (1992, p. 408) argues that behind these beliefs lies the traditional restriction of international relations to concepts of war, weapons, and military defence, which has made international politics a hegemonic masculinity and "such a thoroughly masculinized sphere of activity that women's voices are considered inauthentic". This explains the less negative cultural attitude towards the role of a diplomat's wife in diplomacy. The role of the wife is 'authentic' because it is part of the unofficial gatherings and hosting at home and helps the male ambassadors carry out their political duties (Enloe, 1990, p.98). Women are seen as suited for social and human tasks while men are suited for official decision making, ruling, and defending the state.

In the same vein, most diplomats responding to the survey emphasize that their biggest challenge is juggling a busy diplomatic career with family obligations, especially when they have young children. They point out that a male diplomat whose wife runs the home and looks after the children never faces this difficulty. All the interviewed female ambassadors share this opinion, pointing out that their husbands are less willing to care for the family and do unofficial diplomatic obligations than the wives of their male colleagues. According to a former female ambassador, "In most cases, it is the female ambassador who hosts people and organizes unofficial gatherings, rather than her Oriental husband".

According to diplomats involved in peacebuilding and mediation, extremist religious and political narratives also discourage women from participating actively in peace processes, particularly those led by the United Nations and other foreign civil society organizations. A

proponent of UN peace initiatives in the area who works in mediation and conflict resolution said, “I was accused of being a covert agent and serving foreign colonial goals”.

It is worth noting that none of the interviewees affirms experiencing sexual harassment or receiving unequal pay. Participants confirm that their compensation is equal to that of their male colleagues. This is not always the case with their female colleagues in some western agencies. The U.S. State Department, for instance, came under fire in 2019 for paying female Foreign Service officers less than their counterparts.

However, unlike their female counterparts from the west, Oriental women diplomats are frequently portrayed as being oppressed and in need of rescue, which might undermine their credibility in important diplomatic negotiations. For instance, Saudi Arabia's appointment to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in 2017, drew harsh criticism because of the country's history with women's rights.

### **3. The few, underrepresented women diplomats, promote diplomacy in the region, and women's representation is essential to building lasting peace.**

Official reports and survey's results have highlighted women diplomats' contributions to diplomacy in the MENA region, their advocacy for peacebuilding, and their support for United Nations' efforts to bring stability to the region. The findings emphasize that women's participation in mediation brings alternative perspectives to the negotiation process and helps to engage diverse members of the community in peacebuilding efforts. Some survey respondents believe that women's perspectives are a better fit for current “soft” security diplomacy than men's, citing the case of the global Corona virus pandemic as an example. Traditionally, international relations have been limited to “hard” security issues. This, as the FIR analysts argue, was because the classification of what international security should be depended on men's experience and ignored “a large body of human experiences that has potential for increasing the range of options and opening up new ways of thinking about interstate practices” (Tickner, 1992, pp. 17-18).

Women's commitment to the Women Mediators Network and the regional WPS projects implemented by UN women since 2021 demonstrates their commitment to peacebuilding. Ambassador Haifa Abu Ghazaleh, the Deputy Secretary General of the Arab League, is a leader in this regard and a vocal supporter of the United Nations' peace effort in the region. She played an important role in institutionalizing the Women Mediators Network and has been a strong advocate for women, peace, and security in the area. Abu-Ghazaleh emphasized that the initiative for the network came in response to the underrepresented participation of women in mediation and conflict resolution in the Arab region. She stressed that the presence of women at the negotiating table should not be merely for show and expressed her displeasure with limiting the role of women to women's issues and concerns. (United Nations, UN N News Arabic Version, 2021).

Women are involved in informal unofficial mediation in conflict areas as well. During the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the increase of militarism in Iraq, the lack of a functioning government in Libya, the occupation of Palestine, and the war in Syria, women were survivors and service providers. In Syria, for instance, women negotiated the release of prisoners and the removal of barriers to access between cities and were able to come to terms with armed actors and establish a civilian security zone.

Reports show that women's participation makes mediation agreements more likely to last. This opinion is supported by the response of a researcher working on gender and mediation in region. According to her, “women are more closely connected to the community and their participation is vital to successful mediation and permanent agreements. They have greater

influence in social relations issues than men and are more adept to consensus and conflict resolution”. This proves that women are also very powerful in oriental states when it comes to consensus and reconciliation. Regarding Western women in diplomacy, Kofman & Youngs (2008) and Tickner (1992) point out that women in leadership positions in Western countries tend to oppose armed conflict and support humanitarian intervention. An acting ambassador admits in the survey that “diplomatic strategies may differ depending on the ambassador’s skills and expertise and the particulars of the negotiation. Men and women approach negotiations differently, though. Men are more prone to be assertive and competitive, whilst women are more inclined to be collaborative. As a diplomat I frequently employ win-win negotiation strategies to find long-term solutions”.

As important as women’s role in conflict resolution is, it remains marginalized and unrecognized, and women’s representation in official ceasefire mediation is still minimal. The field of security remains the most gendered area of international relations. The findings confirm Grant & Newland’s (1991) finding that security structures are the most gender biased sector in international relations. According to Grant & Newland (1991), women are attributed the role of domestic concerns, while men were attributed a military role of defence and national security. Gendered security thus makes the notion of citizenship and national interest the exclusive preserve of men. (Grant & Newland, 1991).

#### **4. Future solutions and strategies to bridge the gender gap in IR should be implemented to improve the status of women in IR and promote foreign policy conduct in MENA countries.**

The participants propose various solutions and strategies to overcome the challenges and promote women’s diplomacy. They recommend that Arab countries should adopt policies that foster gender equality and women’s empowerment. These policies can be summarized in three basic strategies:

- a communicative strategy consisting of boosting networking and sharing expertise among women in the field of ambassadorship and peacebuilding at the local and international levels. Governments should create a support system for women diplomats that includes mentoring programs, networking opportunities, and platforms for sharing best practices,
- an education strategy that can be achieved by investing in women’s education and training, and increasing women’s skills and capacity in mediation strategies through hands-on workshops,

And

- a legislative strategy by advocating for the safety and protection of women mediators through legislation and introducing a job guide that supports women’s career development.

These measures will help women diplomats overcome the challenges they face and reach their full potential in the field of diplomacy and peacebuilding.

#### **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Arab women diplomats have made significant progress in the field of diplomacy and peacebuilding, but they still have a long way to go. The inclusion of women enhances diplomacy in the region. Therefore, Arab countries should take concrete steps to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment, which will ultimately lead to better diplomacy in the region.

The application of the Feminist IR theory to the Arab IR has demonstrated the relevance of this approach to new diplomatic and political contexts and explored the gendered institutional hierarchies in the foreign relations of MENA countries. It has provided insights in terms of perspectives that have been marginalised in core concepts and consideration of MENA IR, beyond traditional courtesy diplomacy.

In sum, the globe is changing, and what were once the only foreign policy roles in traditional politics are now being replaced by new crucial roles in relation to security and preventive diplomacy. This paper therefore addresses the call for action to best equip diplomats to meet the new demands and to bridge the gap in the representation of women in leadership positions in MENA IR.

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