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Attitude to Gender Equality in the Arab East

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The issue of gender inequality in the Arab world has been attracting public scrutiny for many years. However, the opportunity to analyze it on the basis of a large volume of valid data appeared not long ago due to the “Arab Barometer” project conducted in seven countries of the region. The data show that the youth in the Arab East is more conservative than the older generation despite a higher level of education. At the same time more educated representatives of each age group are more tolerant to the issue of gender equality. The most liberal country is Lebanon, the most conservative one is Yemen.

Keywords: gender inequality, the youth, the Arab East, tolerance.

Introduction

The status of females in Muslim countries and in the Arab East in particular has been a significant issue both in modern discourse on human rights and in research of values. Attitude to females as humans dependent on men and incapable of running business and ruling the state leads to encroachment on their rights as well as to the economic backlog of the countries of the region as the majority of married females are not involved in the labour market. Such attitude to females is often associated with values and traditions of Islamic religion and culture. However, this point needs to be validated. In this article we analyze the interconnection of level of religiousness with values concerning gender equality. Moreover, we test the hypothesis that a more conservative attitude to females is peculiar to the older generation while the youth of the Arab world treats this issue in a more liberal

way. We also study the dependence of gender attitudes on level of education and country of residence. The article is based upon the data of the first wave of the “Arab Barometer” research conducted in 2008 by Mark Tessler, professor of the University of Michigan, and his colleagues in seven countries of the Arab East: Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, Palestinian autonomy (Gaza Strip and the West Bank), Yemen, Lebanon and Kuwait.

Theoretical Approach and Recent Researches

Theoretical schemes of this article integrally base on the revised R. Inglehart and K. Welzel’s modernization theory (Inglehart, Welzel, 2005). According to this theoretical frame, the support of gender equality (as well as other egalitarian values) is connected with age, level of education, socio-economic status and level of religiousness.

It means that younger, more educated and well-to-do, and less religious people demonstrate a strong tendency to support equality and gender equality in particular. Moreover, females are more egalitarian in their set of values than males. The theoretical explanation of the Muslim peoples' backwardness concerning gender equality can be found in Samuel Huntington's works (Huntington, 1996), in which he argues that the period after the cold war faces the conflict of civilizations between Western Christianity, on one side, and Islam and Orthodoxy, on the other side. S. Huntington believes that Muslim societies with their undeveloped individualism prefer strong leaders who are associated with liberal-and-democratic values. He also supposes that Muslim countries are the region in the world where females are in the most vulnerable position.

These assumptions were tested by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris on the quantitative data (Inglehart, Norris, 2003a). It was proved that the population of Islamic societies strives for democracy. At the same time on the basis of the World Values Survey the researchers came to the conclusion that people in Muslim countries are still conservative towards human rights, females' rights and tolerance to unpopular minorities (for example, homosexuals).

According to the modernization theory, the policy of females' equality should be important for people born in richer and more politically stable societies whereas those whose youth was spent under more dangerous circumstances, on the contrary, stick to more conservative attitudes towards many issues including the position of females in society.

Methods and Materials

The research is devoted to influence of age, gender and education on attitude to gender equality. The gender equality index is built on the

basis of the data available. The index is an effect variable in the research.

The index of 7 variables listed above was formed to define the attitude to gender equality. The index is coded on the scale from 0 to 1, where 0 means a conservative (chauvinist), 1 – a liberal. Thus, the higher the index is the more supporting the respondent is towards the idea of gender equality. The variables of the index are defined as the following ones:

(1) A married female can work out of home if she would like to

(2) Generally males are more successful in a political sphere than females

(3) Higher education is more important for boys than girls

(4) Both males and females must have equal career opportunities

(5) Males and females must be equally paid for equivalent work

(6) A female can travel abroad alone if she would like to

(7) A female can be a president or a prime-minister of a Muslim country

These variables fix the role of females both in a public sphere and in family relations. Questions two and three were reversely recoded for all the statements to have the same focus of meaning. The index is consistent; Cronbach's α (alpha) is 0.774.

General number of observations in the database was 8122. However, some questions from the index had skipped values. It should be noted that at index calculation even one skipped value leads to the loss of the whole index for this case. Thus, the number of valid observations was 6108. The use of multiple imputation function with the help of a package of MI environment for statistical computing of R made it possible to restore the skipped values to a high accuracy¹. This enabled to bring the number of valid variables to the initial number of respondents (8122).

Descriptive statistics

According to Fig. 1, the citizens of Lebanon show very liberal gender attitudes whilst the people of Algeria and Yemen are more conservative and inclined to think that females must have fewer rights and freedoms in public and private spheres than males. Such results are to some extent connected with the level of a state's economic development. For example, in Yemen, the poorest country, the level of gender equality support is the lowest. However, the highest GDP per a person is registered in Kuwait (\$ 43.8 thousand) but it is Lebanon that is the most liberal country as per

the index of gender equality though it takes the second place regarding GDP per a person (\$15.9 thousand, the amount which is thrice less than that in Kuwait). Thus, oil-producing countries of the Persian Gulf, being the richest, do not show the highest rates of liberalization but are much more liberal than other Arab societies.

Fig. 2 shows that in all Arab countries under research more males agree that females must be limited in rights whereas females are quite contrary in their opinions. This tendency is observed in all countries chosen. It should be noted that in every case the differences are statistically significant.

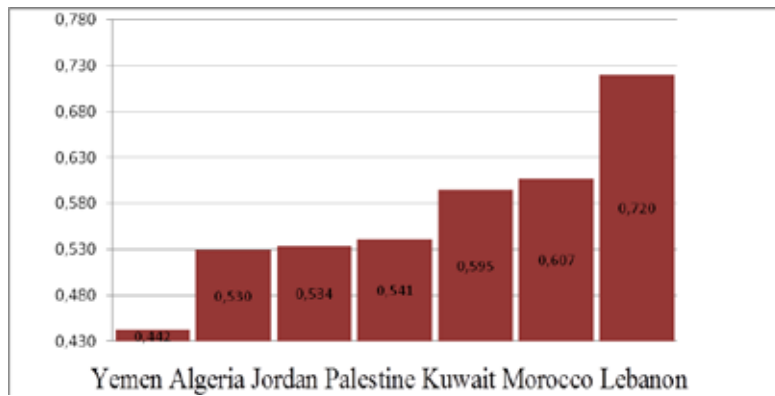


Fig 1. Average index of attitude to females in Arab countries

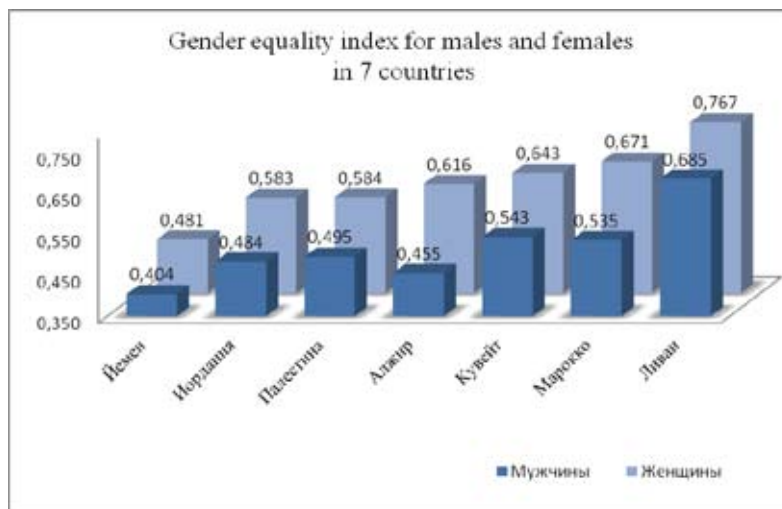


Fig 2. Values of gender equality index for males and females in Arab countries

The matter is that in some countries and namely in the most and the least conservative ones the gap between males and females as per the gender equality index is minimum. In the countries that are in the middle of the list the gap is rather big. Especially significant differences are observed in Arab Maghreb and namely in Algeria and Morocco. This observation proves that there is the need for emancipation on females' part in all the countries of the region but it is suppressed by males. The tendency of a stronger support of gender equality on females' part is observed in other countries of the world but the gap is significantly less.

Fig. 3 shows that the increase of average value of the gender equality index is age-related, that means that elderly people are a bit more liberal than the youth. Besides, the peak of a conservative attitude is observed in the age group of people of 25-34 years old. This result is extremely unusual as in other countries of the world the tendency is quite opposite and the youth demonstrate the most liberal attitudes towards all issues.

Fig. 4 shows the results of this observation on the basis of two criteria and namely level of education and age. The youngest groups turn out to be the most educated but more conservative towards females.

The general tendency is obvious: less educated people (groups 1 and 2 who finished several grades only or mastered a basic programme of secondary school) are conservative towards the issue of gender equality. However, even the lowest index is more than 0,45. The higher the level of education is, the more significant the fluctuations per groups are. The differences in group 6 (higher education) is especially great.

Fig. 4 shows a very important tendency: people of older generation (older than 65) hold more liberal opinions on females' position in the society (upper lines on the graph). The youth at the age of 18-24 and especially at the age of 25-34 are the most conservative among all age groups in the chosen countries of the Arab East. This observation is counter-intuitive for two reasons. Firstly, the youth are generally more educated and education is connected with the liberalization of opinions. Secondly, the youth all around the world are inclined to a lesser conservatism in comparison with their parents. Thus, the results of the research contradict these general tendencies.

The data can be analyzed according to linear regression (least squares method). The dependent variable is gender equality index, the independent ones are binary factors as per the countries, level of religiousness (frequency of reading the Koran), support of democracy, and such social-and-

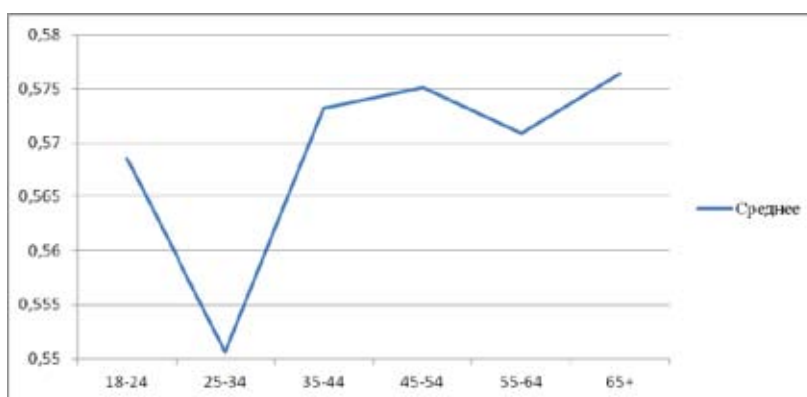


Fig. 3. Average indices of attitude to gender equality regarding age (for all the countries under research)

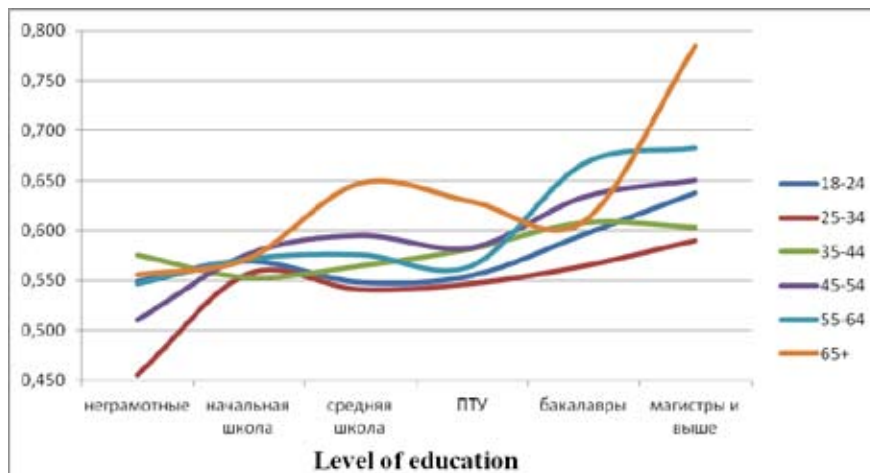


Fig. 3. Interrelation of gender attitudes with age and level of education

demographic variables as gender, age and level of education.

Gender, country and level of education have the most explanatory force in the model. On the level of the countries the most liberal society (with a significant lead) is Lebanon, the most conservative one is Yemen.

Males are more conservative than females.

The Muslims, reading the Koran daily, are more conservative in their gender attitudes. Those who do not read the Koran at all are most liberal in their attitude to females. This connection is linear.

Those who support democracy are generally inclined to support gender equality though the connection is not very strong.

The higher level of education is the more inclined the respondent is to support gender equality.

People older than 65 are the most liberal group concerning gender equality in the Arab East. Age groups of 55-65 also demonstrate a high level of support of gender equality in public and private spheres. People of 25-34 years old constitute the most conservative group even if this factor is controlled as per their level of education, age and level of religiousness.

Discussion

At the present stage of research it is quite hard to judge about the mechanisms that have influenced the archaization of young people's views on the position of females in the Arab world. However, it's possible to set forth a set of theoretically grounded statements that help to analyze the results.

- The Arab peoples' struggle for independence from colonial empires that took place in the 50s-60s of the XX century was kind of secular and modernization-like by its nature and wasn't guided by Islam. Thus, at the period of formation of the older generation's views (this period is stated to be the age of 18-22) religion was pushed to the background and relatively secular views and consequently less conservative attitude to females were characteristic of these people.
- Disintegration of the USSR led to counter-modernization processes and archaization of views and values in the countries of the Arab East, related to the Soviet alliance, and particularly in Algeria and Yemen. It was connected

Table 1. Regression model. Dependent variable – gender equality index*

Independent variables	Beta	t	Value
Gender (female)	0,12	29,97	***
Support of democracy	0,12	12,03	***
Education_primary school	0,05	7,01	***
Education_secondary school	0,08	9,51	***
Education_vocational school	0,1	10,64	***
Education_bachelor	0,12	13,64	***
Education_master & up	0,14	11,08	***
Lebanon	0,16	22,28	***
Morocco	0,06	8,2	***
Kuwait	0,07	7,89	***
Palestine	0,01	1,66	.
Algeria	-0,02	-2,3	*
Yeman	-0,09	-11,93	***
Jordan – base category	.	.	.
Age (18-24)	-0,04	-3,6	***
Age (25-34)	-0,05	-4,44	***
Age (35-44)	-0,03	-2,83	**
Age (45-54)	-0,03	-2,43	*
Age (55-64)	-0,01	-0,63	.
Age (65+) – base category	.	.	.
The Koran (often)	-0,05	-8,86	***
The Koran (sometimes)	-0,03	-5,19	***
The Koran (seldom or never)	.	.	.

$R^2 = 26.7$

*Value levels are marked the following way: 0 ‘****’ 0.001 ‘***’ 0.01 ‘**’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1

with the suspension of their financial support and intensification of poverty and, moreover, with relaxation of advocacy of secularism and equality of gender roles which were integral parts of socialist ideology.

- In the mid of the 1980s strengthening of Islamic fundamentalism took place. It was the formation period for the generation who were 25-34 years old at the moment of the research (2009). This process can be partially considered the echo of the cold war as the Arab East was one of the regions where

confrontation of superpowers unfolded. The USA counted on oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf and won in the cold war, thus having strengthened an ideological role of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. This victory together with these countries’ financial prosperity determined the vector of development of Near East for several decades to a great extent.

- Modernization processes in the region are parallel to archaization ones as educated people of each age group stick to more liberal views on gender equality.

The present research focuses on several interesting tendencies in the development of Near East. Lebanon turned out to be the most liberal society regarding the attitude to gender equality. Its indices are comparable to those of western Europe. At the same time Lebanon is not a very rich country at present (in comparison with the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf) and thus this effect can't be explained by an economic factor only. In the 60s – 70s this country was called “a Near-East Switzerland” not only due to its mountainous scenery but first and foremost due to very reliable banks that ensured the country's well-being within several decades. However, the civil war in Lebanon in 1975-1990 resulted in the outflow of the most educated and economically active population. Wars, especially long ones, are usually connected with a significant decay in postmaterialism values, growth of traditionalistic attitudes and archaization. Nonetheless, Lebanon keeps the position of the most liberal society of the Near East region. This phenomenon is worthy of separate research.

Conclusion

Following the results of the research it can be concluded that two tendencies are being simultaneously realized in the Arab world: modernization and archaization. Within the framework of the first tendency there is the growth in number of educated people that reaches its maximum for the age group of those who were 25-35 years old at the moment of the first wave of “Arab Barometer” project in 2007 and are 30-40 years old now. Conversely, the shift in values in the direction of more archaic ideas on gender roles in society takes place due to the processes of Islamization of the region. Owing to this, the least educated category of people who are over 65 years old turns out to be the most liberal in their views on equality of males and females, whilst the most well-educated and young segment of population (25-35 years old) demonstrates the most conservative, chauvinistic positions when males demand more rights in a public sphere than females. At that, educated people in each age group have more liberal views than those of their age but lacking good education.

¹ 10 imputations and 1000 iterations to mitigate the influence of reshuffling noise, R-hat = 1.1.

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Отношение к гендерному равноправию на Арабском Востоке

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Проблема гендерного неравенства в Арабском мире уже много лет привлекает общественное внимание, однако лишь недавно появилась возможность анализировать этот вопрос на большом объеме достоверных данных благодаря проекту «Арабский барометр», который был проведен в 7 странах региона. Данные показывают, что молодежь на Арабском Востоке консервативнее старшего поколения, несмотря на более высокий уровень образования. В то же время в каждой отдельно взятой возрастной группе более образованные люди относятся к вопросу гендерного равноправия толерантнее. Самой либеральной из стран, включенных в выборку, является Ливан, самой консервативной – Йемен.

Ключевые слова: гендерное неравенство, молодежь, Арабский Восток, толерантность.
