



A social system at stake

*Inequalities and multiple discrimination:
a perspective from Arabic-speaking countries*

By Susanne Shomali



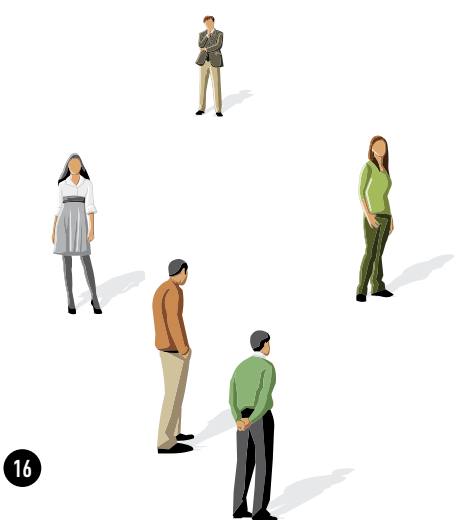
HOW DIVERSE ARE ARABIC-SPEAKING COUNTRIES?

Cultural diversity is not new to Arabic-speaking countries. These populations have always been characterised by diverse cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, faiths, languages, nationalities, social circles and identities. This diversity is attributed partly to people's mobility from early history and largely in recent years due to internal and external migration in search of a better life and employment or because of conflicts. Having said this, the title "Arab", given to 22 countries in the region,¹ does not necessarily reflect the demographic characteristics or the linguistic and ethnic references of Arab societies. Native communities like Berber, Kurds, Nubians and Assyrians have their own language, culture, traditions, and lifestyle as do localised communities, such as the Circassians, Chechens, Turkmen, Armenians and the Dom (Gypsies), just to name a few.

Given this diversity, it is not possible to generalise when addressing realities in these countries or about their populations. Diversity exists in the social, economic and political contexts and dynamics of each country. This, of course, includes inequality and discrimination. For example, what might be accepted socially or by law in Syria may not be accepted in neighbouring Iraq or Libya. Also, what might be a common custom in Saudi Arabia may not be shared in Bahrain or Sudan.



We are children of nine logo



Discrimination

The prejudicial treatment or consideration of a person, racial group, minority, based on category rather than individuality, excluding or restricting members of on the grounds of race, sex, or age



Photos depicting various youth work activities from planting trees to participating in a social inclusion fair, courtesy of the author

WHAT LEGAL DISCRIMINATIONS AND SOCIAL BIAS EXIST?

Constitutions of Arabic-speaking countries focus on collective and majority rights and give less attention to individual freedoms and liberties.² However, the gap between countries is wide. Tunisia is considered to have the most liberal constitution with strong protection of gender equity and citizens' rights to thwart prejudice and discrimination. On the other hand, despite the fact that it guarantees rights, particularly provision of services to citizens, Saudi Arabia's constitution stresses collective rights and the influence of the majority by including legislative restrictions, such as on women's right to drive.³ Status laws⁴ and religious practices remain serious issues⁵ to address when talking about discrimination in Arab countries.

Legal reform in these countries is ongoing; it has been accelerated in the past few years by the public uprisings across the region. People in the streets are calling for more freedoms and rights, equality, better living standards and democratic, accountable, transparent and responsive governments. Some reforms have already taken place (though not in all countries) but still do not have the desired impact on the attainment of rights and delivery of services to people.

Legal discrimination and social bias coexist. It is important to acknowledge that laws influence local culture as much as local culture influences laws. This relationship affects a society's dynamics and development, creating new forms, values and principles. Social bias, in the forms of prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination, has its roots in this experience and manifests itself in relationships between genders, ethnicities, religions, citizenship status and social circles.



1. The countries of the League of Arab States, and where Arabic is spoken: Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

2. Feel free to view and compare constitutions, available in English: <http://confinder.richmond.edu/>

3. Most Arabic-speaking countries have ratified international human rights conventions with reservations made to reflect the national laws. Countries such as Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco amended their national laws in relation to the nationality of children to meet with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, for instance.

4. Status laws govern issues related to family and marriage, maintenance and inheritance.

5. YouthPolicy.Org provides up-to-date details of young people's legal realities around the world: www.youthpolicy.org/

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IS MULTIPLE DISCRIMINATION A CONCERN?

The answer is yes! And, it is the duty of the community, community and youth activists, civil society representatives, public officials and decision makers to act against it. Discrimination is intersectional (multi-layered). Challenges due to poverty (or wealth!), unemployment, belonging to a minority group, age, sex, sexual orientation, disability, identity, and military conflict and occupation do create, sadly, stronger forms of discrimination, which are prevalent in most of our societies nowadays. For example, a young member of a refugee group in Jordan or Lebanon with poor education will have challenges integrating in the society and finding opportunities to improve his or her situation. This person for instance is subject to social and legal bias to the multi-layered circumstances in which they live.

In highly diverse populations, there are many circumstances for discrimination. Social bias against women and LGBT people is possibly the most controversial in the Arabic-speaking countries. Minority and religious groups are also subject, at different degrees, to discrimination (though it is mostly legal), so are young or disabled people for many social considerations (the role given to young people, the regard given to disabled people, etc.) and because of the political realities and public administration capacities of each country.

When speaking about bias in the region, in my opinion it is not possible to neglect the ongoing occupation of Palestine and the consequences of Israel's violence and discriminatory laws and practices on the Arab population inside Israel and in the West Bank and Gaza. Moreover, the aggravation of the security situation in many of these countries, including the most recent domination of extremist military groups over almost all aspects of people's lives in Syria and Iraq, can lead to a drastic escalation in discrimination. Thousands of people are currently suffering because of their cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds.



Out & About

© Mohammed Dajani - An excursion day with orphans across Jordan (Out&About)

DO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS, PARTICULARLY YOUTH ORGANISATIONS, RESPOND TO (MULTIPLE) DISCRIMINATION? IF SO, HOW?

There is an active civil society across Arabic-speaking countries that addresses bias in all forms. Civil society work targets constitutional and policy changes, various societal values, behaviours and people's empowerment. Most of the work takes a holistic approach to targeting members of society with a focus on protection of vulnerable groups. Organisations work towards legislation for women's rights, protection of juveniles and refugees, early marriages, honour crimes, nationality and citizenship, civil marriage, etc. Some successful examples of such work are in Jordan.

Social Support Centre for Working Children

This centre helps drop-out and working children and adolescents to escape from working and helps them access vocational institutions and formal education.

Questscope – Putting the last first

This organisation runs a non-formal education programme designed in collaboration with Jordan's Ministry of Education to help the estimated 100 000 young people who have dropped out of school to re-enrol in the formal education system and benefit from a college education or vocational opportunities.

While civil society gives attention to the legal aspects of discrimination and dialogue with the government, informal community and, particularly, youth groups are effectively responding to the grassroots challenges. The following are examples of recent campaigns that are finding strong support in their countries.

"We are All Children of Nine" (Yemen)

A public campaign against racism and discrimination. The campaign addresses bias on the basis of race, tribe, faith, sex, colour, geography, social circle, job and wealth and promotes equality and equal opportunities among all members of society.

"I am Iraqi, I am Christian" (Iraq)

A public campaign that reaches out in solidarity to threatened and tortured Christians in the north of Iraq and encourages action that aids people in distress.

Out&About (Jordan) A community initiative that has been promoting values of love, peace, acceptance, forgiveness and benevolence among members of the society for the last four years and organises a wide range of voluntary-based activities on a weekly basis that bring people together to interact, learn and serve each other and their communities.

"No Honour in Crime" (Jordan)

This is a movement of community members for "the elicitation of justice". The movement seeks to shift the debate about honour crimes against women to conceive of such murders as unjustifiable crimes.

These are only a few examples but they show us various approaches to addressing (multiple) discrimination of young people by society. The civil society and community groups took developmental and rights approaches – both are powerful methods of reaching out to people and institutions and engaging with them responsibly. There is a lot happening, but for transformation to occur much more work is required and many more people need to be engaged.