

*International  
Bodies*

UN Women



**CHAIR:** Maeve Hanrahan

*GWCI XXIX*

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# GWCIA XXIX

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## **Letter from the Chair**

Hello Delegates,

My name is Maeve Hanrahan and I will be serving at the chair of UN Women for GW CIA this year. I am currently a junior majoring in international affairs with a concentration in security policy and a minor in French language, literature, and culture. I have been a member of GW's Model United Nations team for three years now, and have formerly chaired a GW CIA committee and served as a member of the secretariat! External to GW and Model UN, I love to travel abroad, ski, read, and explore all that D.C has to offer. As an international affairs student, I have frequently learned about the multitude of issues facing the international community as a result of a lack of women's education and participation in numerous spheres of employment. I am looking forward to witnessing delegates learn about gender equality in education and the workforce, and women's issues in general, while engaging in fruitful debate on the subject. If you have any questions on the background guide and material, do not hesitate to email me at [maevehanrahan@gwu.edu](mailto:maevehanrahan@gwu.edu) (just make sure to cc your advisor).

Best,

Maeve Hanrahan

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## **Committee Description**

UN Women, established in 2010, is a United Nations entity dedicated to women's issues on a global scale. This branch is dedicated to advancing the cause of gender equality and empowering women and girls. UN Women has a number of focus areas such as peace and security, humanitarian action, economic empowerment, leadership and technology, and many more. This committee in specific will deal with economic empowerment for women within the Middle East and North Africa, or more specifically women's education and women's workforce participation within this region.

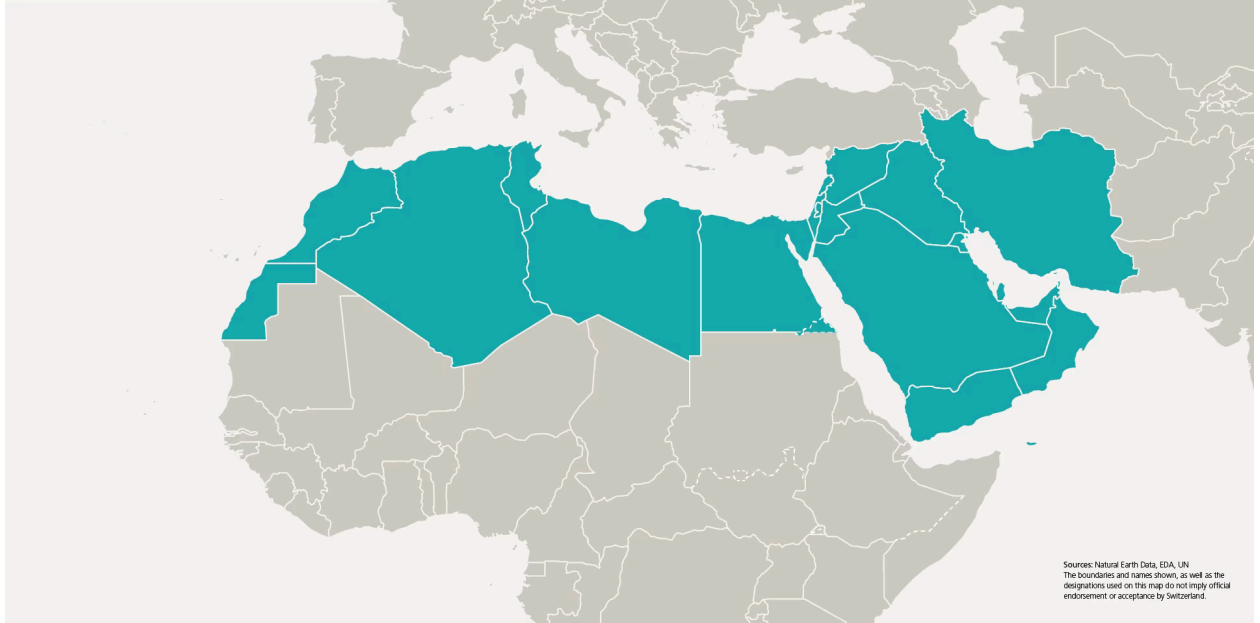
Delegates will be tasked with finding innovative solutions to the lack of women's education and workforce participation within the region. Simultaneously, they must approach this subject with a sense of cultural awareness and sensitivity, thus developing resolutions which are tailored to the region's social, cultural, and political dynamics.

Delegates are encouraged to be creative and inventive in debating and crafting solutions to this pressing issue, but should also remember to be conscious of the region of focus.

The goal of this committee is to foster an environment of collaboration, innovation, and fruitful debate in order to produce one or more resolutions effectively addressing the subject.

Delegates should expect a flow of debate which leads to the creation of working papers and final resolutions, with a plethora of moderated and unmoderated caucuses in between. Essentially, this committee will follow the typical general assembly style. The dias asks that throughout the committee sessions, delegates remember to be curious and engaged, but remain respectful of other delegates and the content as a whole.

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The Middle East and North African States

## **Topic 1: Women's Education in the Middle East and North Africa**

In the Middle East and North Africa, women's education has historically and currently been a complicated subject. Women in Middle Eastern states are twice as likely to be illiterate than their male counterparts, which stems from structural barriers which prevent women and girls from accessing the same educational opportunities as men<sup>1</sup>. This issue starts with a lack of access to primary education when compared to the rest of the world. As a whole, the primary school completion rate for young girls is 74%, while the global average is 77%<sup>2</sup>. As females age, the issue of access to education and the gap between women and men has been shown to continue to grow.

UNESCO's Bureau of Statistics claims that the reasoning behind this educational gender gap can be divided into two categories - the first being socioeconomic and cultural factors and the second being political and institutional<sup>3</sup>. The first group includes the education level of the child's parents, attitudes towards women, religious beliefs, and conceptions of gender roles. The second includes budgets and financial factors, adequacy of facilities, distance to educational institutions, and more<sup>4</sup>. Any combination of these factors can have an influence on women's access to education throughout their lives. Some of these factors can be solved politically, for example by allocating more resources to building schools and providing programming targeted towards young women. Cultural attitudes and stereotypes, such as the belief that women and girls should stay in the home, are often more difficult to address. Combatting both factors which prevent educational equality between women and men is essential to holistically solving the problem.

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<sup>1</sup> "Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa." *PRB*

<sup>2</sup> "Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa." *PRB*

<sup>3</sup> Ennaji, Moha. "Closing the Middle East's Education Gender Gap." *Project Syndicate*, 11 Sept. 2018

<sup>4</sup> Ennaji, Moha. "Closing the Middle East's Education Gender Gap." *Project Syndicate*, 11 Sept. 2018

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It is important to understand that while the region as a whole has struggled with educational equality between women and men, there is also great variation between countries. This is a product of differing cultural norms and economic factors within the Middle East and North Africa. Within the region women and girls have the highest literacy rates and access to educational opportunities in Jordan, a relatively prosperous country which is more progressive compared to its peers<sup>5</sup>. Countries which have been stricken by war, poverty, insurgency, and other crises in recent years are far less likely to have strong women's education and literacy rates. For example, when the Islamic State controlled territory in Iraq and Syria, women and girls within these areas were largely confined to the home and had very limited educational opportunities. When assessing the status of women's education in the region, it is vital to understand that there is strong variance; simultaneously, it is important to recognize which factors inhibit women's education in certain areas.

Not only does a lack of education inhibit professional opportunities for women, but it also limits their ability to conduct daily activities independently. This most often occurs when women are illiterate, meaning they are not able to read and write to some extent. Within the Middle East and North Africa, women are twice as likely to be illiterate than men, which leads to two-thirds of the region's illiterate adults being women<sup>6</sup>. In Yemen over half of women and girls are illiterate, while only 17% of men and boys face this issue. However, in countries which invest more heavily in education and value a literate society, such as Tunisia and Jordan, the gender gap in illiteracy shrinks significantly<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Statista. "Female Literacy Rate MENA 2020, by Country." *Statista*, 25 Nov. 2021

<sup>6</sup> "Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa." *PRB*

<sup>7</sup> "Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa." *PRB*

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Equal access to education between males and females is a glaring issue within this region, but so is the quality of education which girls and women receive. In the Middle East and North Africa, private educational systems have significantly more resources and opportunities available to their students, making these institutions expensive and only available to a small minority of people. In contrast, public school systems in the region are often lacking in quality when held in comparison with private schools, creating a base level of inequality regardless of gender<sup>8</sup>. However, oftentimes a family may choose to send their son to a strong performing private school, while a daughter may attend a weaker public school<sup>9</sup>. The Population Reference Bureau claims that gender sensitivity is an additional critical aspect of educational quality, meaning that both public and private educational systems should be able to meet the needs of women and men equally. Unfortunately, oftentimes in the region both private and public educational systems adapt curricula and teaching materials which reinforce traditional gender roles; thus, even when women and girls have the opportunity to obtain an education, they are taught that educational and professional opportunities come second to traditional female roles<sup>10</sup>. This not only greatly diminishes the confidence of young women and girls seeking to obtain an education, but perpetuates stereotypes and ideas which limit the advancement of women educationally and professionally.

Ensuring that women and girls have full access to a proper education is in the best interest of all residents of the Middle East and North Africa. When women and girls are educated there are fewer child marriages, poverty is reduced, GDP growth accelerates,

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<sup>8</sup> “Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa.” *PRB*

<sup>9</sup> Ennaji, Moha. “Closing the Middle East’s Education Gender Gap.” *Project Syndicate*, 11 Sept. 2018

<sup>10</sup> “Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa.” *PRB*



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and the overall health of the youth population increases<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, despite the fact that women are less likely to be able to access educational opportunities than their male counterparts, numerous studies have shown that when they do, they often outperform men, are more likely to complete a university degree, and are less likely to repeat a grade. With this in mind, the committee will seek to find solutions as to how they can ensure all young women have access to educational opportunities, with respect to culture and social systems. When women are empowered and educated, it is in the best interest of all.

## **Questions to Consider**

1. Is it more difficult for states to address cultural or political barriers to educational equality between men and women? Should the committee focus its efforts on one factor more than the other?
2. How can the committee customize its approach culturally to ensure educational advancement for women and girls in the Middle East and North Africa?
3. How can the committee ensure that women and girls across the entire region, in both rural and urban areas, have proper access to education?
4. What programs can the committee curate to ensure that gender sensitivity is present in the classroom? What programs can be put in place to support young women in educational environments?
5. How can the committee frame women's educational equality to be in the best interest of all countries despite domestic beliefs, practices, and norms?

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<sup>11</sup> Ennaji, Moha. "Closing the Middle East's Education Gender Gap." *Project Syndicate*, 11 Sept. 2018

## **Topic 2: Women’s Workforce Participation in the Middle East and North Africa**

According to the latest estimates from the World Bank, only 19% of women above the age of 15 in the Middle East and North Africa participate in their country’s workforce<sup>12</sup>. Globally, this metric sits at about 50%, indicating that the region is severely lagging behind the rest of the world. Similarly to the issue of education, there is significant variance within the region, as states such as Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar sit closer to the 50% mark<sup>13</sup>. In contrast, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Palestine, and Syria all sit far below the mean. Another interesting aspect of the lack of women’s participation is that it often does not correlate with literacy rates; for example, while Jordan has a female literacy rate of roughly 98%, only 15% of women participate in the workforce<sup>14</sup>.

There are a number of economic and social barriers which have long prevented women from greater participation and opportunities within the workforce in this region. The Wilson Center remarks that specifically within the private sector, the greatest barriers are “mismatched education and skill-building, difficult legal environments and the persistence of discriminatory laws in practice, unsafe and inaccessible transportation, the uneven transition to the digital economy, and socio-cultural mindsets about the roles and capabilities of women”<sup>15</sup>. Not only do unequal opportunities to access education and job training play a role in this issue, but even when women have equal qualifications they are still subject to discrimination within the hiring process. This has created an additional problem known as brain drain, where educated women leave their

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<sup>12</sup> “A Year in Review for Women in the MENA Region: Leaps and Stumbles.” *Wilson Center*

<sup>13</sup> “A Year in Review for Women in the MENA Region: Leaps and Stumbles.” *Wilson Center*

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<sup>15</sup> “A Year in Review for Women in the MENA Region: Leaps and Stumbles.” *Wilson Center*

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home country in search of better opportunities, pay, and conditions abroad. Brain drain negatively affects the entire economy of certain states, as it leads to significant loss in some professional sectors.

Some of the most pronounced factors which limit women's participation in the workforce are societal conceptions about traditional gender roles and how these should appear within modern society. For centuries, across continents and cultures, the value of women as mothers and homemakers has been impressed upon society. Over time progress has been made and the status of women has greatly improved on a global scale; however, many of these changes have struggled to reach communities which place an emphasis on traditional values. It is for this reason that in many areas of the Middle East, where there is a strong resistance to westernization and the erasure of traditional ideas, that the status of women has been a continuous issue. Within the region, female gender roles are often reinforced in educational, cultural, and religious settings, which applies behavioral pressure to women from a young age. Additionally, this has led to a lack of women's participation in the workforce and discrimination against women who are actively seeking employment. A 2018 survey conducted by the World Bank found that within Jordan more than 60% of participants stated that it was inappropriate for women to work in the same place as a man, and 70% thought those who do work should not work past 5:00pm<sup>16</sup>. Because of conceptions like this, young women entering the workforce in the Middle East and North Africa are put at a strong disadvantage in finding and maintaining employment, as 43.9% of female youth actively seeking jobs are unemployed.

Growing women's participation in the workforce would benefit the entire region economically, socially, and politically. A 2022 PriceWaterhouseCooper (PwC) study

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<sup>16</sup> "Women's Labor-Force Participation in the Middle East | Think Global Health." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 Sept. 2023

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found that improving the female employment rate to meet the current male employment rate could increase the region's GDP by up to 57 percent, which translates to \$2 trillion<sup>17</sup>. Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon are expected to benefit the most from improving female employment rates. In the more impoverished areas of the region, this would truly change the quality of life for many. Additionally, women often fill roles which are traditionally lacking in the region, such as in healthcare and education. Heightening opportunities available to women within the region would not just create better circumstances for women, but for all the people of the region.

Today, the efforts of UN Women in the region are largely focused on expanding political rights to women and encouraging political participation<sup>18</sup>. In terms of economic empowerment, UN Women has collaborated with civil society organizations and other national partners; however, little progress has come from these initiatives. UN Women believes that economic empowerment contributes to the repositioning of women in their households and societies; simultaneously, the repositioning of women in their households and societies is required for women to gain status economically<sup>19</sup>. This paradox has made the execution of current programs quite difficult.

This topic will explore barriers to women's involvement in the workforce in the Middle East and North Africa, but also potential opportunities for advancement. Given that the question of women's employment is both a matter of equality and economic growth, this is a highly pertinent issue which will determine the future of the Middle East and North Africa. Delegates will be tasked with creating innovative solutions to engaging women in the workforce, while simultaneously adapting to cultural standards.

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<sup>17</sup> "Women's Labor-Force Participation in the Middle East | Think Global Health." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 19 Sept. 2023

<sup>18</sup> "Arab States/North Africa." *UN Women – Headquarters*

<sup>19</sup> "Arab States/North Africa." *UN Women – Headquarters*

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## **Questions to Consider**

1. What are some of the major programs in place to engage women in the workforce? What are some of the successes and pitfalls of these programs?
2. Why is low women's workforce participation a greater problem within the Middle East and North Africa? How can understanding the roots of this issue inform the creation of new programs, initiatives, and efforts?
3. How can UN Women promote women's participation in the workforce in the Middle East and North Africa while maintaining cultural sensitivity and awareness?
4. What factors explain the variance in rates of women's participation in the workforce between Middle East and North African states? How can these factors be addressed to create change throughout the region?
5. What sectors of the workforce are women the least represented in? How can women become more involved in these sectors?

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