

## Gender Discrimination in Africa and the Middle East

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No matter where one looks at today's world, it is inherently unfair to many groups, and one such group that the world is unequal to is women. Even in first world countries such as the United States and the European Union women are not always treated fairly, but this inequality is seen very clearly in both Africa and the Middle East.

In Africa, the gender inequity is different in different places, and these differences manifest themselves in different ways. In Kenya, the big inequality of women to men is their representation in government. In Kenya, only 22% of the government officials in parliament are women, whereas it is about 61% in Rwanda<sup>i</sup>. In 2016, the Sultan of Sokoto (the spiritual leader of Muslims in Nigeria) rejected a bill that would allow men and women to inherit equal shares<sup>ii</sup>.

In Kenya, there are four main reasons for men not wanting to elect female MPs<sup>iii</sup>, these four reasons being fear, there is no whip, distraction by other bills, and grassroots apathy. The fear is caused by the men not wanting to pass a bill that would require at least 1/3 of the parliamentary MPs to be of the opposite gender from the majority, which would require the number of MPs in parliament to increase by about 50. People fear that doing this would increase their taxes, which may be true, but they do not have a problem electing more male MPs into office. The second comes from the lack of quorum during the vote. The president, who normally controls the parliament to get quorum during votes, did not push so hard for the parliament to calm down during this vote, thus

the vote partially did not happen, causing it to fail. The third of these reasons was because there was another bill proposed at the same time, one that would increase the MPs' benefits and salaries, which would take priority to those voting on things. The final of these reasons was that not many women have been pushing the government for equal rights, not because they don't want them, but because many people in Kenya are simply looking to survive the next several days, not to participate in politics. In Nigeria, the Sultan of Sokoto rejected a bill that would allow men and women to inherit equal amounts from estates<sup>iv</sup>. His reasoning was that it was not Islamic to do so and would violate Sharia law and how they have always done things, yet the Christian community in Nigeria (about half of the population) supported this bill.

In the Middle East, gender inequality is generally more known to the outside world, due to the prominent country of Saudi Arabia not allowing women to drive until recently. In Saudi Arabia, while women may be allowed to drive, they are effectively "legal minors who cannot make key decisions for themselves"<sup>v</sup>. Elsewhere in the Middle East, however, the gender differences are not much better. Even in Israel, which is widely regarded as a 'western' country, women still cannot get a divorce without their husband's direct permission<sup>vi</sup>.

In Saudi Arabia, women are openly discriminated against, as the entire country is run on Sharia Law, or following that of Islam. It is next to impossible for women to get custody of children unless they are under a certain age, they cannot wear whatever they want, and they must get permission from a man simply to travel outside of the country<sup>vii</sup>. Even in Israel, a country that is considered western in their ideals and ideologies, women must get permission for divorce<sup>viii</sup>. Even outside of the discrimination in politics

and institutions, many men are still very conservative and against women's rights, with only about one in four men in the Middle East being supportive of women's rights<sup>ix</sup>. This mainly comes from their fathers being so conservative, and the sons are adopting their father's ideals, as happens in most societies. Even within this quarter though, the men were only supportive of some expansions towards equality, rather than total gender equality as is present in more western countries (or is ideally present). Of the countries in the Middle East, however, Turkey has some of the worst statistics of women inequalities. In their parliament, only 14% of the representatives are women, and only 28% of women participate in the workforce (this is compared to 27% and 63% in the European Union, respectively)<sup>x</sup>. This shows a remarkable level of institutionalized sexism in the country, but there are also other forms of sexism that are widespread, including violence. Between January and June of 2015, over 100 women were killed by men in Turkey, and the numbers have only been growing<sup>xi</sup>. Activists in the country say that the best way to fix this rampant sexism within the country is to get more women involved in politics and to get more female representation in the national parliament.

Sexism exists almost everywhere in the world, but it is the worst in Africa and the Middle East due to the fact that both of these regions are dominated primarily by theocracies still, and the countries that are not a theocracy, have a very strong religious presence in politics and in general life. The best way to fix this in almost every situation would be to get more women involved in the national assemblies of these countries to speak out for those who are being oppressed.

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<sup>i</sup> Joseph Warungu, "Letter from Africa: Why Kenyan men don't want to share power with women", *BBC*, 12 December 2018

<sup>ii</sup> "Nigeria's Sultan of Sokoto rejects gender equality bill", *BBC*, 28 December 2016

<sup>iii</sup> Warungu, "Letter from Africa"

<sup>iv</sup> "Sultan rejects bill", *BBC*

<sup>v</sup> "What can women still not do in Saudi Arabia", *BBC*, 27 September 2017

<sup>vi</sup> "What can women not do", *BBC*

<sup>vii</sup> "What can women not do", *BBC*

<sup>viii</sup> "What can women not do", *BBC*

<sup>ix</sup> "Only one in four Middle East men backs equality, study suggests", *BBC*, 2 May 2017

<sup>x</sup> Pinar Sevinclidir, "Beyond the headscarf: Turkey's women struggle for equality", *BBC*, 3 June 2015

<sup>xi</sup> Sevinclidir, "Turkey's women"