



## Policy Perspective

# Redefining Masculinities: Navigating Pushback to Gender Mainstreaming in the MENA Region through Positive Masculinities

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**Abstract** – This policy brief examines the potential of redefining masculinities to counter resistance to gender mainstreaming in the MENA region. Despite robust global support for frameworks such as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas, deeply held cultural conservatism continues to drive resistance across the region. The paper advocates for promoting positive masculinities as a strategic tool for behavioral change. Through approaches that connect with local traditions and values, it proposes actionable solutions to engage key stakeholders in reshaping social norms. Recommendations include integrating positive masculinities into education, community advocacy, storytelling, and capacity building programs for policymakers to transform gender dynamics and foster more equitable societies.

**Keywords:** MENA region; gender mainstreaming; positive masculinities; Women, Peace and Security; gender equality; social norms; behavioral interventions.

## Introduction

Despite a growing body of research on gender and security, the role of men and masculinities remains largely overlooked in policy frameworks and programming on the ground. Of the nine UN Security Council Resolutions on WPS, only three (2106, 2242, and 2467) explicitly reference men, primarily viewing them as victims of violence or allies in its prevention (Wright, 2019). Experts conclude that, while men and boys play a crucial role in advancing gender justice, WPS frameworks fail to capture a nuanced perspective of masculinities and to engage them in a meaningful way (Duriesmith, 2019; Myrntinen, Khattab, & Naujoks, 2017). Additionally, there is a significant gap in both policy and academic scholarship when it comes to the resistance these initiatives encounter, and the tools needed to effectively counter such opposition.

The paper aims at filling this gap by exploring strategies to counter resistance to gender-related initiatives in the MENA region and engage stakeholders in advancing gender equality within the

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region's WPS and Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agendas. Given increasing pushback against women's rights, culturally sensitive interventions are needed to shift conservative norms. The author discusses how encouraging positive masculinities and promoting qualities such as empathy, respect, and fairness can help overcome resistance and support lasting change toward gender equality.

This paper reviews relevant theoretical and policy frameworks, examines behavioral interventions for shifting social norms in the region and offers an analysis of the pushback faced by women's rights movements in the MENA region, including its root causes. Subsequently, the paper proposes actionable solutions on using the debates on positive masculinities as an efficient strategy to counteract the resistance from conservative groups. The author contributes to global efforts to advance women's empowerment by emphasizing the strategic promotion of positive masculinities as an essential tool for gender programming.

## **Theoretical and policy framework**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, integrating policy analysis, case studies, and literature reviews on gender norms, masculinities, and behavioral interventions in the MENA region. By examining policy documents, academic studies, and reports, it assesses the role of positive masculinities in addressing resistance to gender mainstreaming. The research explores historical and contemporary perspectives on gender norms and draws insights from initiatives promoting positive masculinities.

The MENA region was selected for analysis because of its active efforts in gender mainstreaming, including National Action Plans and commitments to Women, Peace and Security (WPS). Although there has been real progress in addressing the gender gap, resistance from conservative social groups continues to be a major challenge. For example, in post-Assad Syria, gender has become one of the most contentious issues. While activists express concern about the role of women in the public sphere (Sallal, 2025), efforts to promote women's rights are often perceived by conservative groups as externally imposed, fueling concerns about "politicization of the agenda" (Rozana, 2024).

In this context, international actors operating in similar environments must demonstrate diplomacy and cultural sensitivity. Considering that gender inequality has long been associated with the persistence of discriminatory social norms shaping power dynamics between men and women, reshaping them to influence behavioral patterns serves as a critical starting point in the process of promoting women's rights. This paper aims to explore the potential of positive masculinities as a strategic avenue for advancing women's empowerment while mitigating resistance to gender mainstreaming.

Research highlights the role of behavioral interventions in shaping social norms, including gender equality. For instance, economic studies show how social norms influence female labor participation (Codazzi, Pero, & Sant'Anna, 2018; Chen & Ge, 2018; Bussolo et al., 2023). In Saudi Arabia, Bursztyn, Gonzalez, and Yanagizawa-Drott (2020) found that most men privately support women working but underestimate similar support among peers. Correcting these misperceptions through experiments increased support for female employment, highlighting the importance of perceived social acceptability in shaping household decisions.

The argument that perceived social acceptability of certain norms correlates with individual acceptability within households is an important takeaway for future gender programming in the region. These findings highlight the effectiveness of behavioral interventions, particularly low-cost strategies such as information provision, in changing people's ideas and attitudes. As resistance to gender mainstreaming grows, awareness-raising initiatives about the harms and the "real cost" of toxic masculinity (Heilman et. al., 2019) could support global efforts to advance women's empowerment.

## Women's rights movements in the MENA region and resistance to gender mainstreaming

The history of women's movements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region reflects a complex interplay of nation-building and women's grassroots activism. For example, in the early 20th century, women's rights became deeply intertwined with nationalist movements, as women played important roles in anti-colonial movements and the formation of political groups, often situating their demands for equality within the broader struggle for national sovereignty and reforms (Husseini, 2021; Magdy, 2017; Evrard, 2014). For instance, in Egypt, figures like Huda Sha'arawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union advocated for education and political participation for women while also supporting the country's independence from British rule. In Algeria, women actively contributed to the independence movement against French colonialism, participating as combatants, organizers, and community leaders (Harize, 2020).

Post-independence, several MENA countries implemented reforms aimed at enhancing women's rights, reflecting both the influence of women's activism and state-led efforts. In Tunisia, reforms under the 1956 Code of Personal Status outlawed polygamy, established judicial divorce, and set minimum marriage age (Khedher, 2017; Whidden, 2019). These policies underscored the state's commitment to redefining traditional gender roles within legal framework. Similarly, in Egypt, women movements' efforts culminated in Egyptian women gaining the right to vote and run for office in 1956 and continued during the presidency of Anwar Sadat when women acquired more economic rights (Magdy, 2017).

Together, these examples show how women's rights in the region have been shaped not just by governments, but by the determination and activism of women themselves who worked from the ground up to push for change, even in challenging sociopolitical circumstances. Ratification of international conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), underscores many MENA countries' commitment to women's empowerment. The international commitments to advance women's empowerment in the region signal a willingness to align with global norms. However, the reality on the ground is often more ambiguous. Reservations on marriage, inheritance, and nationality provisions reflect the enduring influence of cultural, religious, and societal factors that often impede full gender equality (Hussaini, 2021).

Despite the introduction of national strategies aimed at advancing gender equality, these efforts often face significant challenges in practice, primarily because their implementation is perceived by certain actors as threats to existing power structures. Backlash to gender mainstreaming refers to the resistance that emerges in response to policies and initiatives aimed at advancing gender equality and challenging established norms. According to researchers that explore challenges to women's rights activism in the MENA region, it manifests in various forms, from rhetorical opposition in public discourse to institutional barriers (Hussaini, 2021; Al-Ali, 2019). The resistance is not only deeply rooted in traditional values and power structures but is also driven by concerns about identity threats.

Many view feminist movements and gender equality interventions in the MENA region as foreign impositions, particularly those funded by international donors, which are often framed as part of a Western agenda. This perception is compounded by the association of gender equality efforts with LGBTQ+ rights, a connection that many conservative groups interpret as a threat to family values and moral norms. As a result, research confirms that the backlash against women's rights movements has intensified, creating a shrinking space for women's rights activism and making it increasingly difficult for local organizations to advocate for change or gain the support needed to challenge entrenched power structures (Kvinna till Kvinna, 2021).

Furthermore, gender mainstreaming is often viewed with suspicion due to deeply ingrained social norms surrounding masculinities and femininities, which are closely tied to cultural concepts of honour and family reputation. In many societies within the region, the honour of both men and

women is often framed within the context of maintaining traditional gender roles and societal expectations (Halabi, Founouni, Arawi, 2019). Masculinity across the Arab world is frequently associated with control, rigidity, aggression (Alsawalqa, Nasr Alrawashdeh, and Hasan, 2021) and commemoration of kinship and warfare (Aldoughli, 2024), while femininity is often linked to modesty, subordination, and adherence to prescribed social norms. Any challenge to these established roles can be perceived as a threat to societal integrity.

To summarise, resistance to gender equality initiatives in the MENA region arises from a combination of cultural, political, and societal factors:

1. *Social norms and traditions.* Traditional gender norms, prevalent in many communities across the MENA region and beyond, view men as protectors and breadwinners and women as caregivers. Any attempt to change or reverse these roles is perceived as a threat to local values and traditions.
2. *Religious interpretations.* Religious teachings are often used to justify male superiority and oppose gender equality, framing gender mainstreaming efforts as contradictory to religion.
3. *Conflation of gender mainstreaming with promoting LGBTQ+.* The association of gender equality with LGBTQ+ advocacy often exacerbates resistance.
4. *Perceptions of western influence.* Internationally funded gender mainstreaming programs are often viewed with suspicion, as if they were trying to spread foreign ideas inconsistent with local context.

## Using positive masculinities to trigger change: Case studies

Social scientists and humanitarian practitioners underline the importance of using positive masculinities as a key strategy for advancing gender equality and preventing gender-based violence (United Nations Population Fund, 2022). This approach fosters emotional intelligence, empathy, and equitable relationships, offering an alternative to traditional norms that reinforce dominance and emotional suppression (Perez-Martinez et al., 2023). In contrast, harmful forms of masculinity often make violence seem acceptable and help sustain patriarchal systems that block progress on women's rights. By challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes, promoting positive masculinities empowers women and benefits men by improving their emotional well-being (Heilman et al., 2019). While ongoing monitoring and evaluation are essential, similar initiatives across the MENA region and beyond have already taken shape.

In the West Bank, the HAYA Joint Program's "Men's Alliance" engages 60 men and young men in Bethlehem and Hebron to advocate for gender equality and combat violence against women (UNFPA, 2022). In Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Palestine "Dare to Care" program promotes shared caregiving and household responsibilities of men and boys as a strategic entry point (UN Women). In line with this approach, an advocacy and behavioral change campaign "Because I am a man" was launched across the region. It encourages men to take an active role in caregiving, childcare, domestic work, and preventing violence against women and girls (UN Women).

Similar initiatives extend to Central Asia, where UNFPA's Kazakhstan Communications Plan guides civil society and policymakers in engaging men against gender-based violence and promoting women's rights (UNFPA, 2023). In Turkmenistan, UNFPA's #MenEngage platform provides resources, policy updates, and discussions to encourage male involvement in gender equality efforts (UNFPA). In the framework of this campaign, UNFPA provides information on reproductive health, active fatherhood, and positive gender practices at work and society. In Uzbekistan, UNFPA launched a capacity building program aimed at preparing trainers to involve men in efforts to prevent GBV (UNFPA, 2024).

## Policy recommendations

To effectively address resistance and mitigate backlash against gender mainstreaming initiatives in the MENA region, this paper advocates for the integration of the concept of positive masculinities into gender programming through the implementation of the following strategies:

1. *Incorporate positive masculinities in educational curricula.* Gender programming should engage men and boys as advocates for women's rights, starting with educational curricula in schools, universities, and potentially the military. For example, schools can promote gender norms and values associated with positive masculinities, while military training in countries with conscription such as Morocco or Qatar could include modules on developing emotional intelligence, cooperation, and respectful relationships. Training teachers or military psychologists to facilitate inclusive discussions on the role of positive masculinities for communities and families is also crucial.
2. *Partner with local role models for men.* Engaging influential figures, such as religious leaders, celebrities, social media influencers, and youth leaders, is crucial to promoting gender equality. These role models can play a key role in framing positive masculinities within culturally and religiously resonant narratives, helping to challenge gender stereotypes and mitigate backlash. Additionally, creating culturally sensitive content that aligns with local values and highlights the power of positive masculinities can strengthen the efforts of gender programming.
3. *Counter pushback through media.* Storytelling can play an effective role in countering misinformation about gender equality and reshaping public perceptions by highlighting relatable narratives. Collaborating with media outlets to create content that underscores the benefits of positive masculinities such as fostering stronger family bonds and building safer communities can also influence public opinion. The goal is to convey that positive masculinities are not a threat.
4. *Strengthen intersectional approaches.* Recognizing that class, religion, geography, and gender frequently overlap is essential to effectively address resistance to gender equality. Conducting intersectional analysis to uncover the unique barriers faced by diverse communities, including minorities, allows for the development of more nuanced and impactful interventions. Gender programming must be tailored to address the specific needs of rural populations, low-income groups, and other marginalized communities.
5. *Enhance data collection and research.* Enhancing data collection on resistance dynamics is crucial for informing effective policymaking and advocacy efforts. Systematic research can uncover emerging trends, identify key actors, and assess the impact of existing interventions across the MENA region. Collaboration with academic institutions to examine gender norms and the drivers of resistance, as well as conducting in-depth studies on the primary stakeholders behind the pushback and their strategies, should be prioritized to ensure targeted and evidence-based approaches.
6. *Build capacity among policymakers.* Equipping activists and policymakers with the skills to navigate resistance and promote gender equality is crucial. Workshops on negotiation and conflict resolution for activists, as well as providing policymakers with evidence-based research and appropriate training by scholars and practitioners to support gender-sensitive policies, will help advance gender programming in the region.

## Conclusion

The promotion of positive masculinities by international development actors and policymakers can lead to long-term behavioral changes among men, with the goal of advancing gender equity and reducing gender-based violence. When men are encouraged to demonstrate qualities such as empathy, respect, and emotional intelligence, harmful

social norms can be challenged at the societal level. This approach presents an alternative to traditional masculinities rooted in aggression and control, helping to ensure that violence is reduced and gender justice thrives.

Changing social norms is a non-linear gradual process – it often starts when enough people begin to act differently and those around them take notice. When men see others embracing more respectful, empathetic ways of being, and realise they too can benefit from these changes, it creates momentum. Sharing the idea of positive masculinities and its relatable examples can be an affordable and powerful way to encourage broader shifts in behavior. However, implementing gender-sensitive initiatives often triggers resistance from conservative groups. Although significant progress has been achieved in several sectors such as access to education, deep-seated cultural conservatism makes gender programming complex.

Overcoming this resistance requires practical solutions rooted in local realities. This might include working with respected religious leaders, using storytelling to highlight new version of masculinities, and updating school textbooks and other teaching materials to reflect values such as compassion and fairness. Media campaigns and using role models could be helpful too, provided they speak the language that resonates with their target audiences. Finally, incorporating intersectional approach ensures that gender-sensitive initiatives consider the needs of diverse communities.

Efforts to address the resistance to gender equality in the MENA region must start with contextualising the root causes of the backlash and understanding the key actors involved. To make real progress, it is important to map and engage with the main resistance actors in ways that feel respectful and relevant to them. This means considering local needs and concerns and then tailoring the message. For international actors, bringing cultural awareness and a spirit of collaboration to this work can help create space for honest dialogue where both men and women take part in shaping more cohesive and equitable societies.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

Julia Rushchenko holds a PhD in Criminology and is a Research Fellow at King's College London. She has extensive experience working in international development with United Nations agencies, including UNFPA, UNDP, IOM, and UNODC, across the Middle East and Asia.

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