

## **Why is Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Religion, and Belief) Needed for Achieving Gender Equality?**

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Worldwide, survey research illustrates gender gaps in attitudes toward women's rights. According to a 2020 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center among US residents, women are more likely than men to say the USA has not made enough progress on gender equality, with 64% of females and 49% stating this.

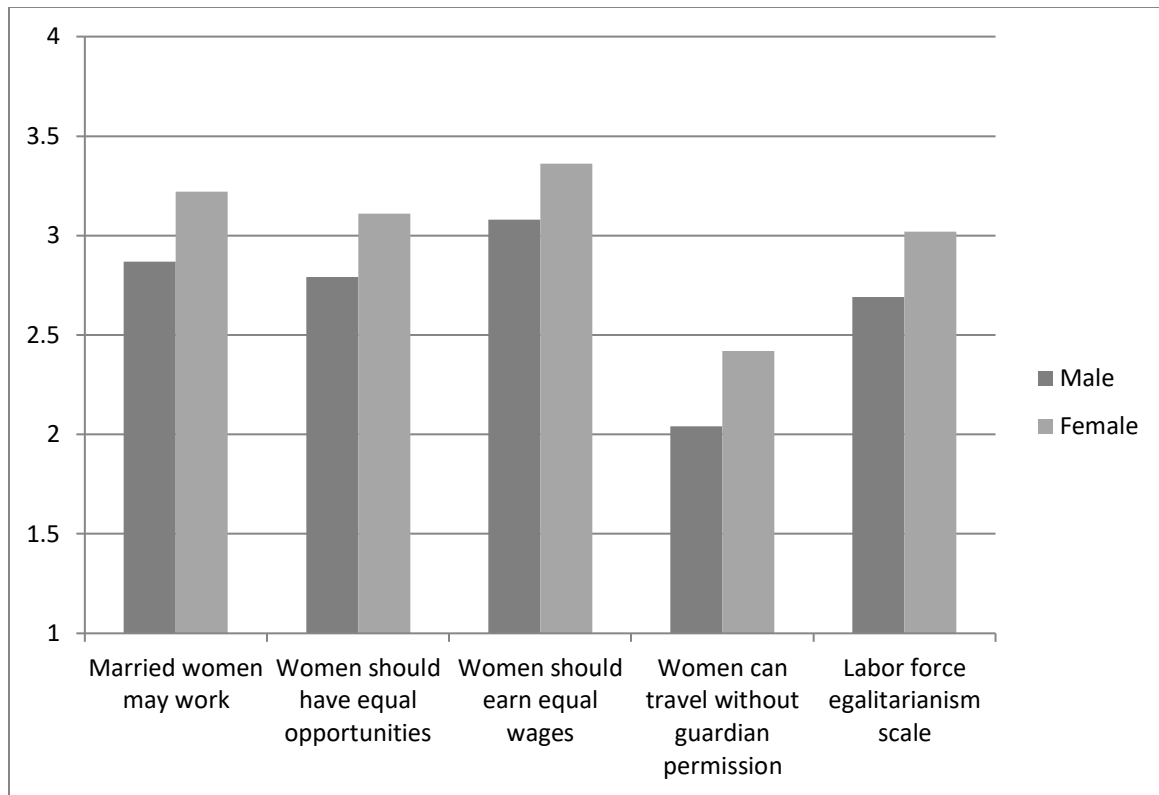
In other countries, including Kenya, Nigeria, Bulgaria, South Africa, Israel, Slovakia, and Italy, women are more likely than men to believe that women should have equal rights to jobs.

Similar gender gaps in beliefs about women's rights also exist in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The most recent Arab Barometer surveys conducted between 2022 and 2024 in seven Arab countries (Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia) find, for instance, that 66% of males and 82% of females believe that males and females should have equal work opportunities.

### **Freedom of religion and support for gender equality**

Yet the relationship between religiosity and support for gender equality underscores the crucial role that Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Religion, and Belief) plays in ensuring equal rights for women. In a 2016 chapter published in *Empowering Women after the Arab Spring*, I found that ordinary women in six Arab countries (Jordan, Algeria, Lebanon, Yemen, Morocco, and Palestine) support equal rights for women to a greater extent than men. In Figure 6.1, a higher number on a scale of 1 to 4 corresponds with greater support for gender equality. On all of the indicators, females held more egalitarian views than males when considering women's rights to employment and mobility.

**Figure 6.1 Attitudes toward Labor Force Equality by Gender in Six Countries in the Arab Barometer (Wave I), by Respondent Gender**



Source: [Arab Barometer Wave I](#), Question wording: “For each of the statements listed below, please indicate whether you agree strongly, agree, disagree, or disagree strongly.” (Coded on a four-point Likert scale, with the most egalitarian response coded or recoded as 4 and the least egalitarian response coded as 1). 1) “A married woman can work outside the home if she wishes.” 2) “Men and women should have equal job opportunities and wages.” 3) “Men and women should receive equal wages and salaries.” 4) “A woman can travel abroad by herself if she wishes.”

However, while higher religiosity predicted lower support for gender equality among males, among females, religiosity did not affect views on women’s rights. This suggests that women derive support for gender equality from their deeply held convictions, whether they adhere to a religious faith or not, whether religious or non-religious.

### **Freedom of religion is needed for gender equality**

Indeed, the presence of both secular as well as Islamic feminists has been documented in Morocco, as well as other countries. Secular feminists, whether they are personally religious or not, often see religion as a private matter. [Islamic feminists](#), in contrast, believe that Islam accords equal rights to women and men. Patriarchal norms, they argue, do not reflect the teachings of Islam but rather stem from non-Islamic influences on Shari’a law during its codification.

Whatever their beliefs, supporters of gender equality must be given the space to advocate for gender equality from their own beliefs and traditions.

### **The need to raise the profile of Article 18**

Gender equality has now achieved a high level of acceptance as an international norm. The right to freedom of religion and conscience, while less prominent in global discourse, is necessary to ensure gender equality. In order to eliminate discrimination against women, secular and Islamic feminists must be given the space to advocate for women's rights from their authentic and deeply held belief systems.