

BOOK REVIEW

Women, Money, and Political Participation in the Middle East.
By Bozena C. Welborne. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.
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Rania Maktabi 

Østfold University College, Norway

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“Money doesn’t talk, it swears,” noted Bob Dylan in a song from 1965. Bozena C. Welborne’s book discusses three distinct ways in which money talks with respect to women’s political participation in Arab states. First, money takes the shape of oil rents, forming wealthy, tax-free welfare societies in Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Second, money flows in by the millions through remittances to Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Morocco; these states are among the world’s largest receivers of capital from citizens working abroad. And third, aid money is given by donors with strings attached to “promote gender equality and women’s empowerment,” as endorsed by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG 3) in 2000.

Welborne’s main research question is: how have rents, remittances, and foreign aid in the shade of neoliberal economics embraced by Arab regimes shaped the politics and economics of women since 2000? She discusses how interlinkages between economics and politics drive social change in a region where domestic institutions are too weak to encourage women’s mobilization and political participation (11). More than 10 years of fieldwork in Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, Yemen, and Oman inform her research.

Welborne engages in an important theoretical debate raised by Michael Ross (2008) on the impact of rentierism on gender equality in the Middle East. Ross argued convincingly that rentierism—capital generated from oil revenues—bolsters patriarchal structures because higher income at the state and household levels weakens women’s participation in the labor market. Rent-poor Tunisia and Morocco, he showed, do better on gender equality than neighboring oil-rich Algeria and the six Gulf monarchies where patriarchy is robust.

Notably, Ross’s data are from 1960–2002, and Welborne points out that “much has changed in the intervening years, including the mainstreaming of women’s

empowerment as a desired social good in the international community” (42). She maintains that the promotion of women’s empowerment together with the evolution of neoliberal rentier economies has created “gendered rentierism,” which opens up political, economic, and social opportunities for women in authoritarian polities. Gendered rentierism has, according to Welborne, increased women’s economic and political participation through foreign aid conditionalities in some oil-rich states (52).

Welborne provides us with a good read on the relationship between externally generated capital and women’s political participation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Monarchies are her core case studies, although she explores some republics (14 out of the 22 Arab League member states are republics). Notably, MENA monarchies have traditionally been more conservative compared with republics when it comes to gender equality, and it is there that Welborne finds the most change in women’s political participation. Over the past two decades, monarchies have indeed done better than republics on women-friendly law reforms, higher representation of women in councils and parliaments, and wider employment opportunities in the labor market. Welborne’s findings are viable and observable. However, the explanatory power of “gendered rentierism” is less convincing, although it is nuanced and empirically rich as analytical tool.

For one, Welborne’s analysis conflates women’s political mobilization with a narrow exploration of political participation in authoritarian states. For instance, women’s enfranchisement in Gulf states makes little sense outside Kuwait and Bahrain—the only two Gulf monarchies with electoral parliaments. That being said, one of Welborne’s most interesting findings is the phenomenon of independent female parliamentarians in Arab states, where women independents made up 38% of the total number of female legislators between 2015 and 2018. Women independents constituted 14% or less in most other regions in the world (130–31). Is the increase in women’s political representation related to rent and foreign aid conditionalities? Perhaps in Egypt and Algeria—two large and militarized security states. But in the other smaller states? Welborne’s description of women legislators reveals other explanations, such as the murder of male kin (Bahiya Hariri and Nayla Tueini in Lebanon); the blend of public and private professional careers, including medical careers in the military (Falaak Jamani in Jordan); and the fact that most women legislators are elite women with higher education.

Second, what I find problematic with Welborne’s “gendered rentierism” is the perception of women-friendly projects after 2000 as an effect of “virtue signaling” and “aid-galvanized state feminism” (71). She explains:

There is some evidence that outcomes generated by aid conditionality in North Africa and the Levant ... emboldened women in [Gulf monarchies] to lobby for enhanced rights.... This is a byproduct of the increasing trend of virtue signaling across Arab regimes, whether motivated by the need to signal state stability or compliance with neoliberal norms. Put more simply, the progress on gender issues we have seen in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait would have been less likely if Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco had not

piloted women's empowerment as a form of virtue and stability signaling to the West in hope of obtaining development financing and attracting renewed investment. (62)

This analysis simplifies complex political developments and devalues the historical trajectory of women's organizations as agents of change. The latter have at times allied with and at times been opposed to the ruling regime.

In the wake of the Arab revolts in 2011, volatile conflict and civil war erupted in republics such as Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. By contrast, all monarchies maintained political stability, although protests and violent demonstrations broke out in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Morocco. Monarchical rulers clamped down on demonstrators swiftly. They established rule of law standards and policies, some of which are clearly women-friendly and have been demanded by women's associations since the 1990s.

Could it be the case that autocratic rulers initiated state feminist policies as measures to renegotiate the social contract with female citizens, bolster rulers' legitimacy, and secure their survival as autocrats after 2011? Monarchs engaged in low-politics "empowerment of women" policies before 2011. In the wake of the revolts, these turned into strategic high-politics endeavors affiliated with state formation strategies aimed at bolstering civil institutions, such as courts and councils, and weakening clerical forces and religious institutions, which safeguard the underpinnings of traditional gender roles. This scenario does not delegitimize Welborne's arguments, but it provides a wider political lens in demystifying the power of money. At the turn of the millennium, poor and rich monarchs in the MENA region were investing in women in their endeavor to bolster their survival as autocrats.

Reference

Ross, Michael L. 2008. "Oil, Islam, and Women." *American Political Science Review* 102 (1): 107–23.

Rania Maktabi is Associate Professor of Political Science at Østfold University College: rania.maktabi@hiof.no