As Long as the Arab World Keeps Women Down, It Will Not Progress

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To grasp the extent to which Arab society lags behind one doesn’t have to roam the Arab world; all that’s needed is to look at what’s happening in our own neighborhood, which is a microcosm of that world.

One of the main reasons the Arab world trails behind is the exclusion of women from decision-making circles that determine the fate of society in all areas of life. This exclusion cries out to the heavens.

Arab leadership was always male. We’ve never seen an Arab queen as ruler, a female president or prime minister, not even a female mayor. A healthy society stands and marches forward on both legs, female and male. The female leg of Arab society has been paralyzed since ancient times, which is why it’s not surprising that Arab society limps, and will always require external crutches.

Here’s an example of this Arab societal failure. Only last week, tribal and clan chiefs in the Mount Hebron area held an emergency session to protest the Palestinian Authority’s ratification of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW).

The session, which was, obviously, attended by males only, called on the Authority to retract its signature. In a manifesto these leaders published they called for banning the activities of all women’s organizations, which are “shady,” in their words. They also called to forbid them from entering schools and not to rent them office space.

The manifesto also included threats to judges who would rule according to CEDAW guidelines. They were furious at the treaty’s setting the age of marriage at 18, arguing that this contravenes the laws of Islam.

Such Islamic laws recently came down on the children of Gaza. The residents of Gaza, suffering under the yoke of the Israeli-Egyptian siege on one hand, and the rule of Islamists on the other, were prohibited from holding a concert given by the [Edward Said National Conservatory of Music](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/threats-from-gaza-trumpeter-violinist-1.5440595). This prohibition came after a fatwa was issued by an Islamic sheikh due to the appearance of boys and girls on stage together. Does this remind anyone of anything similar in the [Jewish state](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-s-ag-says-gender-segregated-events-permissible-if-public-desires-1.7733542)?

This evil wind blowing through Palestinian society has also reached universities, not in Islamist-ruled Gaza but at An-Najah University in Nablus, under the rule of the Palestinian Authority. The dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts broke up a campus theater production about the state of women in the Arab world. The dean came on stage and stated that the performance did not conform to societal values and culture. His fury was directed at dancer [Ashtar Muallem](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/.premium-mahmoud-abbas-cult-of-personality-is-out-of-control-and-sparking-protest-1.8294307) who, during her performance, cast off a few articles of clothing.

This happens in Gaza, Hebron and Nablus, as well as in Arab communities in Israel. Islamist citizens of Israel often vent their fury against mixed-gender performances and against women’s organizations that fight for Arab women’s rights. They are accused of dissolute behavior and collaboration with foreign agendas.

If Arab society here and across the region truly wishes to escape the predicament it has been in for centuries, Arab intellectuals and opinion shapers must proudly and courageously bear the torch of gender equality. If they don’t, they’ll betray their mission. They must make clear to Islamist and patriarchal elements in the Arab world that the principle of gender equality is not a foreign agenda. On the contrary, this is the only agenda that could take Arab society from darkness to light.