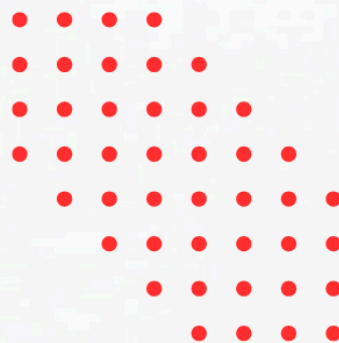




GENEVA CENTRE  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
ADVANCEMENT AND  
GLOBAL DIALOGUE

# Women's Economic Empowerment in the MENA Region

FINAL REPORT



GENEVA  
GRADUATE  
INSTITUTE

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## **Women's Economic Empowerment in the MENA Region**

An Applied Research Project for the Geneva Graduate Institute in partnership with the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue

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## Introduction

The purpose of this project, in partnership with the Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue, is to examine the issue of women's economic empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Given the region's vastness and diversity, we focus on three case studies – Iraq, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia – allowing for a more in-depth analysis. These countries were selected to reflect the diversity within the MENA region, with each having its own unique context and specificities. Although we will acknowledge both similarities and differences across countries in the region, this study is not intended to serve as a comparative analysis.

We focus on legal and policy developments from 2017 onward to align with the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Sessions. The analysis will focus on these international reporting mechanisms so as to ensure the review remains both timely and relevant. However, our sources will not be limited to this timeframe, as previous publications may also offer valuable insights.

### Research question

Across the MENA region, despite efforts to promote gender equality, many legal and policy frameworks still uphold barriers to women's economic participation. Empowering women is crucial not only for sustainable and inclusive growth but also for fostering peace, stability, and social cohesion in the region. This study attempts to understand the factors that prevent women's economic empowerment in three countries in the MENA Region: Iraq, Morocco and Saudi Arabia. It aims to answer the following research question:

**What are the key barriers to women's economic empowerment in the MENA region, and what legal and policy reforms are needed to address these challenges?**

To address this question, the following sub questions are considered:

- What are the core factors to economic empowerment measures for women in Iraq, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia?
- What factors are being reported and monitored through international reporting mechanisms (CEDAW and UPR)?
- What reforms are recommended, and should be the focus of future efforts to improve women's economic empowerment in these countries?

## Women's Economic Empowerment

Women's economic empowerment is a multidimensional concept that has evolved over time and varies depending on the analytical purpose or regional context. Amartya Sen's (1989) capability approach defines empowerment as the freedom to live the life one values. Naila Kabeer (1999) provides a widely adopted conceptualization based on access to resources, agency, and achievements – where resources enable agency, leading to meaningful outcomes. Building on Kabeer's model, UN Women adds a systemic dimension, emphasizing structural transformation beyond individual advancement. It defines women's economic empowerment as a “transformative, collective process” through which economic systems become equitable, and women fully exercise their rights and agency (UN Women, 2024, p. 11). In the MENA region, Abeer Abd Aljaleel Ibrahim (2023) describes a woman's economic empowerment as the ability to take strategic decisions that gives her power to control her own life – including control over income and family resources – a view that aligns closely with Sen's emphasis on autonomy and choice.

This report adopts the UN Women definition as its working framework. In the MENA region, where women are often overrepresented in the public sector compared to the private sector, or in precarious informal work – especially in rentier states with undiversified economies – and where social norms significantly influence women's participation, addressing structural and institutional barriers is essential to advancing meaningful empowerment. This choice also ensures alignment with the UN-based reporting mechanisms under review, while recognizing that alternative definitions offer valuable complementary insights. Finally, labor force participation will be examined in depth as a key component – an important expression of achievement, though not synonymous with economic empowerment.

## Background: the CEDAW and UPR Mechanisms

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is a convention which functions through a system of periodic reporting by state parties. States submit reports every four years and are reviewed by the CEDAW Committee through public hearings with state representatives. The Committee then assesses the country's progress in implementing the treaty's provisions and issues concluding observations with recommendations, ensuring accountability and promoting progress in eliminating discrimination against women.

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) reviews UN member states in a cycle of four years where all other member states are invited to participate in the review. The UPR operates as a peer review mechanism, therefore the involvement of the state being reviewed is crucial, as well as the participation of other states who submit questions and offer recommendations.

In combination, these two international reporting mechanisms function as an oversight of women's empowerment (among other areas) at the highest level, including their economic empowerment, but they do so with different approaches.

These mechanisms were chosen as they provide regular sessions of reporting and show consistent engagement from MENA region countries on the topic of women's economic empowerment. While the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (among other treaties) also presents relevant reporting and recommendations, due to less frequent engagement by MENA countries, availability of recent data (2017 and onwards), and the necessarily limited scope of this project, this mechanism was not chosen. For further discussion, please see the limitations section below.

## Literature Review

### Iraq

The evolution of Iraq's political landscape has been tumultuous, marked by wars, sanctions, and foreign interventions that have significantly impacted its societal structure and governance (Ali, 2020). The political history of Iraq is characterized by a series of authoritarian regimes. The overall instability has led to tensions between the various ethnic groups: Kurds, Sunnis, Turkmen, and Shiites. The US-led "coalition forces", and the emergence of extremist groups have also led to ongoing violence, where Iraqis as a result seek refuge abroad (Sirkeci, 2005). These factors, among others, have played a role in affecting women's economic empowerment in Iraq. According to the World Bank Group, Iraq has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates, ranking third after the Syrian Arab Republic and Republic of Yemen (World Bank Group, 2020). According to the Global Gender Gap Index, Iraq scores 54%, where several barriers affect women's labor participation. A primary constraint is a weak labor demand, amplified by instability and conflict in the region. These factors affect employment growth, resulting in high unemployment rates especially among women and youth (World Bank Group, 2020).

The World Bank describes that social norms play a role in women's economic empowerment in Iraq. Women are not easily recruited by employers (World Bank Group, 2020). Marques also claims that women's mobility, practices, and body are controlled by society and family. Marriage also adds another layer of pressure on women and their roles (Marques, 2023). Al Shamy and Abbas state that women report household burdens as the main challenge to working (Al Shamy & Abbas, 2021). The World Bank adds that this is due to family responsibilities, as well as lack of adequate and affordable childcare services (World Bank Group, 2020). Marques reports that harassment in the workplace and transport are also barriers to women's participation in the labor market where complaint mechanisms are ineffective (Marques, 2023).

Women are paid less than men for the same jobs, despite similar experience and educational levels (World Bank Group, 2020). Nawafly claims that women's vision is not a part of decision-making due to the lack of women in high positions (Nawafly, 2020). Furthermore, the World Bank confirms that women face difficulties accessing education especially in the rural areas, where girls face difficulties completing education (World Bank Group, 2020). Marques claims that the lack of jobs even for those who graduate school and university, leads women to settle down and marry a man with financial income. Some women try to generate income for themselves, by depending on personal savings or male family members (Al Shamy & Abbas, 2021).

Additionally, UNDP points out that Iraq's laws fail to provide equal opportunities for women and men, and advances in legislation for women's participation in paid jobs did not reach all women, especially those in the rural areas. In some cases, the interpretation of the law caused such challenges (UNDP, 2012).

## **Morocco**

Morocco, with a bicameral Parliament and a constitutional monarchy, follows a semi-secular governance model based on the Maliki school of Islam. Despite progress, significant challenges remain in women's economic empowerment, as reflected in its ranking of 137 out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2024 (World Economic Forum 2024, p. 265), with the largest disparities compared to global averages found in the economic sector.

Kerras et al. (2023, p. 978) argue that social norms and stereotypes pressure Moroccan women to prioritize household duties over paid work, with married women facing added burdens (Ibourk et al., 2023, p. 466). The World Bank (FLFP, 2024, p. 4) highlights that discrimination particularly limits women's employment, citing factors such as lack of family-friendly work conditions, gender-based violence (GBV), unsafe transport, and low wages, especially in rural areas.

Women's political empowerment in Morocco remains limited, scoring just 0.188 on a 0 to 1 scale – where 1 indicates full gender parity – the lowest among all sectors (World Economic Forum, 2024, p. 266). Despite quotas improving representation in parliament and ministries, Zaanoun (2022, p. 16) and Benbelli (2023, p. 2) note undemocratic candidate selection, exclusion from key institutions, and limited influence in decision-making. In the private sector, Morocco became in 2021 the first MENA country to adopt gender quotas in corporate governance, targeting 30% women on boards by 2024 and 40% by 2027 (Mouline et al., 2022). The World Bank also observes that limited financial inclusion and weak support restrict women's entrepreneurship, which in rural areas remains largely informal and home-based (FLFP, 2024, p. 4).

Regarding economic and social rights, female enrollment in primary and secondary education has increased according to Lopez-Acevedo et al. (2021, p. 34), despite a gender gap. In rural areas, Ennaji (2018, p. 5) and Kerras et al. (2023, 985) emphasize additional challenges including distance to school, language barriers for Amazigh girls, and cultural norms. However, the World Bank notes that increased education has not led to higher labor force participation, with educated women increasingly becoming inactive due to weak job creation for skilled workers (FLFP, 2024, p. 4). Finally, civil society, particularly feminist organizations, has been a key force for legal reform and cultural change in Morocco according to Ennaji (2016, p. 1). Bensouda (2022) notes that within the women's movement, strategies vary – some NGOs adopt a secular approach, others a religious one – which has led to internal divisions and a lack of unity.

Finally, regarding marriage and equality before the law, the 2004 Family Code amendment is considered a significant step for gender equality according to Zoglin (2009, p. 970). However, the World Bank (FLFP, 2024, p. 12) notes that the national legal framework remains misaligned with the Constitution and international conventions, and Aublanc (2024) observes inadequate implementation, including limited access to justice and legal abuses, particularly the allowance of child marriage.

## **Saudi Arabia**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy led by Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman who is supported by a council of ministers, the Shura council (assembly of advisors appointed by the King), and the Ulama (advisors on Islamic law) with Sharia law as the basis for the Constitution. In 2016, the Vision 2030 policy agenda was launched laying out pertinent themes for progress in Saudi Arabia today. The World Economic Forum in their Gender Gap Report of 2024 have ranked Saudi Arabia as 126 out of 146 countries globally and 125 out of 146 in Economic Participation and Opportunity, indicating that there is still much progress to be made. The World Bank reports that Saudi women's labor force participation sits at 34.5%, with 22% of business owners being women ('Saudi Arabia', n.d.).

Some workplace policy provisions have been made to accommodate women at work, and mothers in particular, such as providing nursing areas and 10 weeks of maternity leave (Kooli and Muftah, 2020, p. 4; 'Women's Leave' 2023); however, attention has also been drawn to the shortage of daycare facilities (Alhussein and Peck 2023), pressure to perform other familial and housekeeping duties, particularly for mothers (Aldossari et al., 2023), and lack of legislation protecting women specifically against discrimination at work (Kooli and Muftah, 2020, p. 6; World Bank, 2024). The Nitaqat policy, aimed at increasing the number of Saudi citizens hired by private Saudi companies, has had a markedly positive impact on women's labor force participation by incentivizing companies to commit to one-time higher costs for hiring in order to meet the required quotas (Peck, 2017; Miller et al., 2022).

Women are still largely excluded from decision-making, particularly when it comes to policy about women, an area which Aldossari argues is often lost when looking at larger-scale changes (Aldossari, 2023). Advocacy groups have long noted that women who campaign for changes in legislation are often not only barred from participating in reforms, but are also frequently jailed for their campaigning (Al Jazeera, 2021). While the driving ban policy was lifted, Loujain al-Hathloul and several other women who campaigned for this change were persecuted (Wintour, 2020; Lyse Doucet, 2020). However, Dr. Tamadar Al-Rammah was appointed Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Development in 2018 (Arab News, 2018) and 19 additional women were appointed to the Shura Council in 2024, speaking to some progress in terms of representation (Bnjabi, 2024).

The ‘MENA paradox’ (Assaad et al., 2020) is a noticeable pattern in Saudi Arabia, which refers to high levels of educational attainment not being reflected in women’s labour market prospects and participation. Among advocacy organizations, there are also concerns that while Saudi women’s employment rate has increased to 34% (‘Saudi Arabia’, n.d.), they are not being employed in sectors or positions which reflect their educational attainment (Aldossari, 2023; Alkhawaiter, 2021). In contrast to other MENA countries, the World Bank shows women in Saudi Arabia are relatively more easily able to open bank accounts: 63.5% of Saudi women currently hold accounts (‘Saudi Arabia’, n.d.). However, guardianship laws impact how and when Saudi women are able to open these accounts, as well as how they are able to access and use them (Topal 2019). The 2017 lifting of the driving ban has also been cited as a powerful change for women’s economic empowerment, enabling greater freedom of movement for women in Saudi Arabia (‘Saudi Arabia’, n.d.).

There is no penal code in Saudi Arabia, meaning that punishments are chosen as befitting the crime with no consistency in sentencing for similar crimes (van Eijk 2010; Topal 2019). The Personal Status Law, counter-terror and anti-cyber crimes laws are notably vague in their wording, something which academics and advocacy groups alike have noted allows for a wide range of interpretations based on the ruling judge and are frequently used in prosecuting civil society organizations (Amnesty International, 2023, p. 1; Topal 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2023; ‘A People’s Vision for Reform In Saudi Arabia’, n.d; Montagu, 2015).

## Methodology

### 1. Data collection

#### I. Choice of case studies

The selection of country case studies was guided by the objective of reflecting the geographical and cultural diversity of the MENA region, with one country chosen from each major sub-region (Maghreb, Levant, and Gulf regions). This initial list was further narrowed based on specific criteria: active engagement with CEDAW and UPR reporting processes, availability of sessions from 2017 onwards, the presence of sufficient data to support research, and a relatively stable political landscape. Following this selection process, Iraq, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia were identified as the final case studies.

## **II. Literature Review**

A literature review was conducted to examine scholarly and NGO research on women's economic empowerment in Iraq, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. This review helped shape the research methodology, particularly in developing a framework for categorizing key factors into main and subcategories, and in the decision to include all recommendations related to women in the international reporting reviewed, reflecting the definition of women's economic empowerment used in this research. A synthesized overview of the literature is presented above to contextualize the subsequent analysis, with selected insights integrated throughout the findings where relevant.

## **III. Data Collection Framework**

A data collection framework was developed to standardize the data collection and ensure consistency in recording the findings. This grid was developed on excel and includes thematic analysis. Based on the literature review findings on the most prevalent themes impacting women's economic empowerment in the MENA Region, five main categories were designed to collect data. These main categories were originally based on the reporting structure of CEDAW, while subcategories were identified based on UPR categorization. This choice of division was made in order to collect and analyse the UPR, CEDAW, and NGO report recommendations within the same framework.

The main and subcategories are as follows:

1. Non-discrimination and stereotypes
  - a. Discrimination against women (prevention and protection)
  - b. Gender-based violence and sexual harassment
  - c. Domestic violence
2. Politics and representation
  - a. Participation within society, advancement in all areas including economic
  - b. Right to vote
  - c. Political representation

3. Economic and social rights
  - a. Access to education, vocations and training
  - b. Inheritance
  - c. Access to jobs and right to just and favorable working conditions
  - d. Access to health including sexual and reproductive health services
  - e. Financial inclusion
4. Marriage and equality before the law
  - a. Child and forced marriage
  - b. Rights related to marriage and family
  - c. Constitutional and legislative framework
  - d. Gender equality and women's empowerment
5. Adoption of international law
  - a. Reservation to CEDAW
  - b. Sign and ratify optional protocol to CEDAW
  - c. Harmonize national legislation with international norms

#### IV. Reviewing UPR and CEDAW Reports

In order to collect the most updated and relevant data, CEDAW and UPR Reports were reviewed from 2017 onwards. Hence, the reports submitted to CEDAW and UPR by Iraq, Morocco and Saudi Arabia from 2017 were collected. Since the Iraq UPR 2025 report has not yet been published due to the recent timing of the UPR session, the session was attended live. It is worth noting that for both mechanisms, women's empowerment and rights more broadly are typically the focus of recommendations and discussions – for this reason, close attention was paid to both the choice of wording and the interrelated nature of factors to identify data relevant to women's economic empowerment (even when not explicitly labelled as such).

The sessions reviewed were as follows:

	<b>CEDAW Sessions</b>	<b>UPR Sessions</b>
<b>Iraq</b>	2019, 2023 <sup>1</sup>	2019, 2025
<b>Morocco</b>	2024	2017, 2022
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	2018, 2024	2018, 2024

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<sup>1</sup> Report unavailable at time of research.

## **1. UPR**

The Thematic List of Recommendations was the first source used to collect the data. This data was collected by counting each time a recommendation addressed one of the above main and subcategories. Recommendations were reported every time it contained the specific words corresponding to a category. The UN Matrix of Recommendations included a ‘supported/noted’ category, which reflects when the country supported/noted a recommendation. This information was recorded in the data collection table using color coding.

The second source used to collect data was the National Reports of the countries. A new category called ‘measures taken’ was created in the data collection table to report on this, and followed the same categories and subcategories identification listed above.

## **2. CEDAW**

The Concluding Observation reports delivered by the Committee after each CEDAW Session is the source used to collect the data. This data was collected by reporting the recommendations given by the Committee. The data observed reflects the exact language of the Committee’s concerns and their recommendations for the same categories seen above. The measures taken to address these concerns *prior* to the session are also noted to give context to the Committee’s concerns.

## **V. Reviewing NGO Reports**

The summaries provided for the UPR sessions and individual reports submitted by NGOs ahead of the CEDAW conventions were used as the sources of data collection. These NGO reports were collected exclusively for the most recent sessions of both the UPR and CEDAW. Recommendations were counted and reported when they fell within the scope of the study, by the same categories as the UPR and CEDAW reports.

## **VI. Analysis**

### **1. Quantitative**

Quantitative analysis was conducted to give a sense of the frequency of recommendations within each category and subcategory. Each instance of a recommendation was noted and was summarized by calculating the percentage of each category and subcategory so as to ensure data was comparable across mechanisms and sources. Frequency tables were developed to demonstrate the frequency of categories by country, mechanism, and source. Additionally, tables were developed by country, mechanism and source

to visualize the frequency of recommendations within the most recommended category (e.g. ‘marriage and equality before the law’) and the three most recommended subcategories across all categories (e.g. ‘GBV – sexual harassment’).

## **2. Qualitative**

Qualitative analysis was undertaken to further explore the measures taken by countries on the most frequently recommended categories and subcategories to analyze themes on women’s economic empowerment. This was conducted by categorizing measures taken through a ‘stoplight’ system where green signalled ‘substantial measures taken’, orange signalled ‘some measures taken’, and red signalled ‘no measures taken’. These measures were then compared to the recommendations issued in the CEDAW and UPR sessions as well as the recommendations issued by NGOs to identify consistency and points of divergence regarding the content of recommendations and the measures taken by the country.

## **VII. Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with experts on Iraq and Morocco to validate or challenge emerging findings, identify additional relevant cases, and deepen the understanding of practitioner needs in the field of women’s economic empowerment at the level of international reporting. It was not possible to secure an interviewee from Saudi Arabia, which reflects some of the broader difficulties in accessing information related to this case study. These limitations are discussed further in the Limitations section.

## **Analysis**

### **Overview of Findings**

The data gathered is examined in this section through the use of graphs to illustrate a broad overview of the priority areas between recommending countries at UPR, the CEDAW Committee, and NGOs for factors related to women’s economic empowerment in Iraq, Morocco and Saudi Arabia. In particular, it is used to highlight any patterns or discrepancies by frequency.

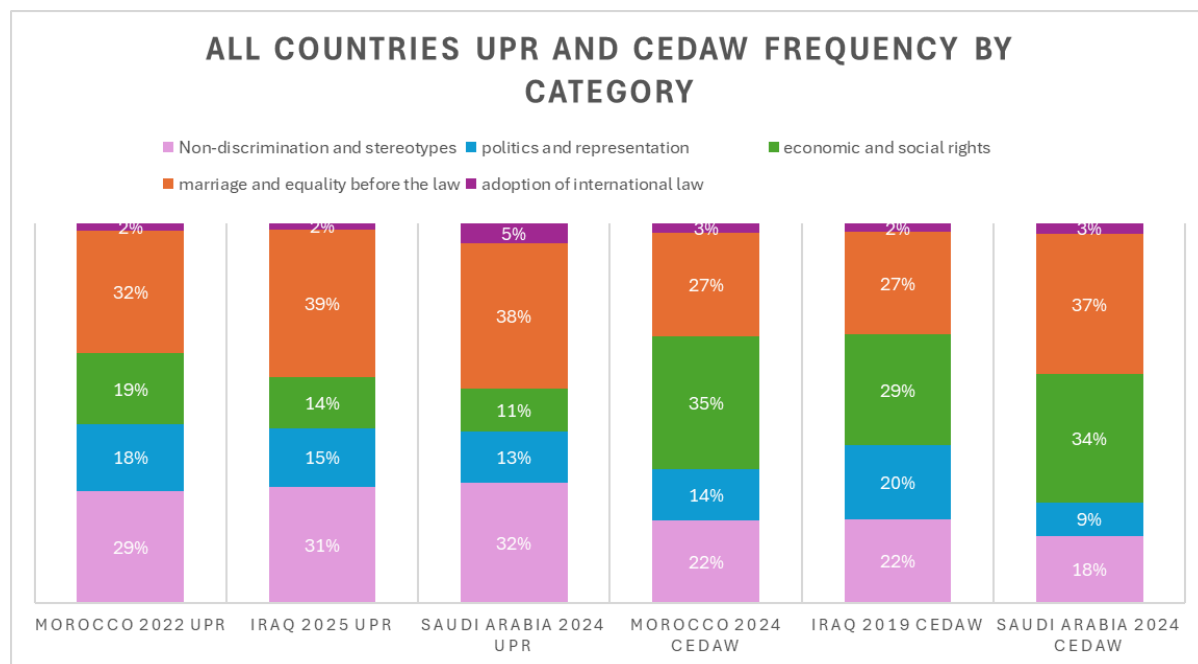


Figure (1): Stacked bars illustrating frequency of categories by country and mechanism

Figure (1) illustrates the five main categories in the three countries, Iraq, Morocco and Saudi Arabia in the most recent UPR and CEDAW sessions. As observed, the most recommended category in the UPR sessions is ‘marriage and equality before the law.’ Recommendations on ‘non-discrimination and stereotypes’ are the second most recommended. In contrast, CEDAW recommendations were more evenly distributed between ‘marriage and equality before the law’, ‘economic and social rights’, and ‘non-discrimination and stereotypes.’

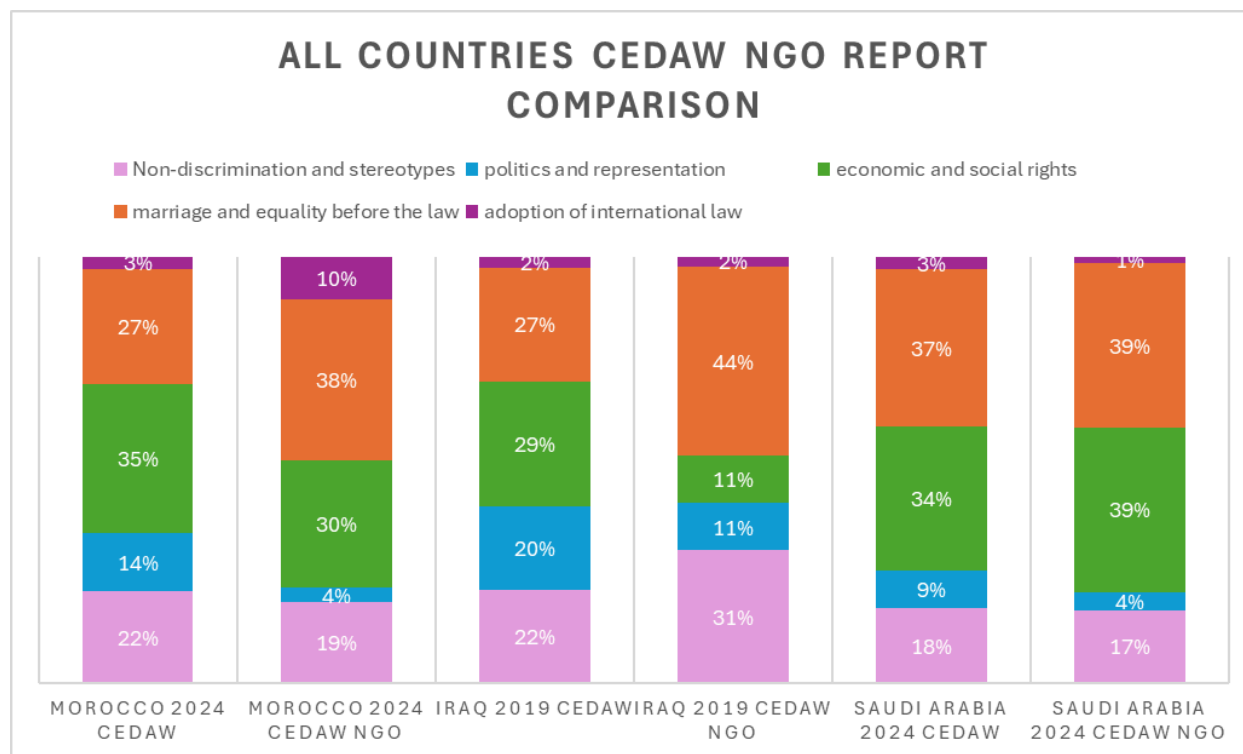


Figure (2): Stacked bars illustrating frequency of categories by country and CEDAW NGO reports

Figure (2) illustrates the five main categories in the three countries, Iraq, Morocco and Saudi Arabia in the most recent CEDAW and NGO Reports. The recommendation frequency for Saudi Arabia issued by the Committee was closely aligned with those of the NGO reports. In contrast, NGOs in Morocco focused more on ‘marriage and equality before the law’ and ‘adoption of international law,’ and less on ‘politics and representation.’ For Iraq, NGOs focused more on ‘marriage and equality before the law’ and ‘non-discrimination and stereotypes’, and less on ‘economic and social rights.’

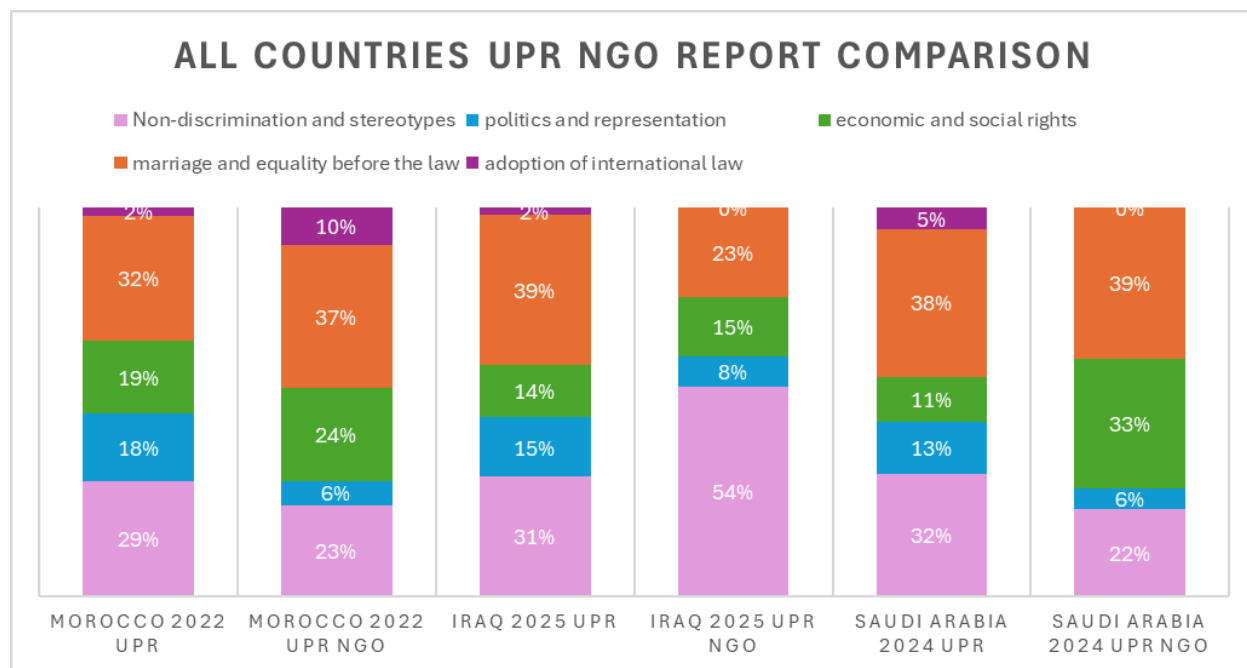


Figure (3): Stacked bars illustrating frequency of categories by country and UPR NGO reports

Figure (3) illustrates the five main categories in the three countries, Iraq, Morocco and Saudi Arabia in the most recent UPR and NGO reports. In Iraq, NGOs focused much more heavily on ‘non-discrimination and stereotypes’ and less on ‘marriage and equality before the law.’ In Saudi Arabia, NGOs focused more heavily on ‘economic and social rights’ than ‘politics and representation’ and ‘non-discrimination and stereotypes.’ In Morocco, NGOs focused more heavily on ‘adoption of international law’ and substantially less on ‘politics and representation.’

## Iraq

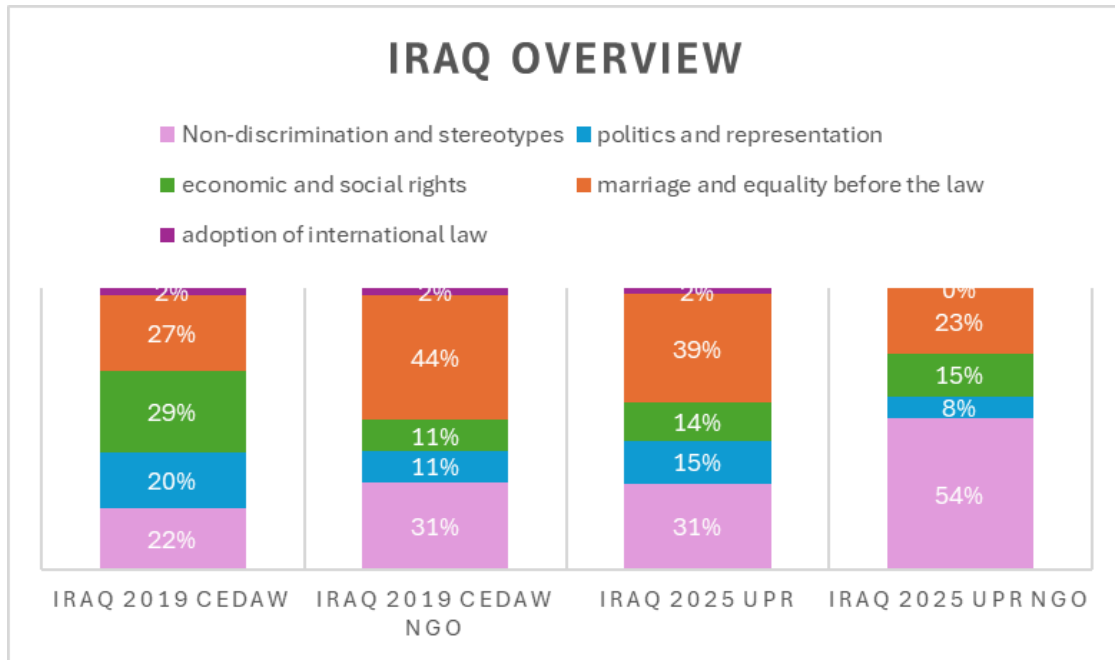


Figure (4): Overview of categories where recommendations were made by mechanism and source for Iraq

Taking this general overview, there are similarities in the reporting of the CEDAW, UPR, and NGO reports. The three most frequently mentioned categories are ‘non-discrimination and stereotypes,’ ‘marriage and equality before the law,’ and ‘economic and social rights.’ Differences are also seen when comparing the UPR NGO reports to the UPR sessions.

Comparing the NGO reports to the UPR and CEDAW sessions, many similarities are noted concerning the identification of categories and subcategories. From the findings, it can also be noted that CEDAW NGO reports focused more on sub-categories such as ‘constitutional and legislative frameworks’ than the UPR NGO reports. These differences can also be seen in the ‘discrimination against women’ category, and the ‘GBV – sexual harassment’ category.

To deepen the understanding of the main categories, an analysis of their subcategories is needed, as seen in Figure (5) and Figure (6) below.



Figure (5): Bars illustrating the three most recommended subcategories in UPR and CEDAW for Iraq



Figure (6): Bars illustrating breakdown of the most recommended categories in UPR and CEDAW for Iraq

During the UPR session in 2025, the most frequently recommended category was ‘marriage and equality before the law’ with a particular focus on ‘constitutional and legislative framework.’ This was very similar to the case with the CEDAW session. In 2019, the most recommended category in the CEDAW session was ‘economic and social rights’, followed by ‘marriage and equality before the law’. The most recommended subcategories were ‘participation within the society,’ and ‘constitutional and legislative framework.’ This consistency throughout the years reflects on the importance of the ‘constitutional and legislative frameworks’ subcategory, and the need for legal and constitutional improvements in Iraq. Hence, the most recommended sub-categories were the ‘constitutional and legislative framework,’ ‘discrimination against women,’ and ‘GBV – sexual harassment.’

‘Constitutional and legislative framework’ was a consistent subcategory of concern in both the CEDAW and UPR sessions. Additionally, eleven NGOs have raised concern about this subcategory in the CEDAW NGO reports. Specifically in the 2019 CEDAW session, the Committee raised several concerns regarding discriminatory legal frameworks towards women. These included several articles in the Penal Code, provisions in the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Personal Status Act. Among those

discriminatory provisions in the Penal Code is the provision in the case of homicide, where perpetrators are allowed to invoke the defence of honor. Another important example is the Act on Protection Against Domestic Violence, which was first drafted in 2011 and has been submitted on three occasions since 2015 to the Council of Representatives for approval. However, it has not yet been adopted.

According to Marques (2023), Iraq's laws fail to establish equal opportunities for both genders and economic security. He claims that there are certain laws that provide equality for women but at the same time restrict them. For example, the first Iraqi labor code was created to guarantee equal pay, to forbid discrimination at the workplace, to protect women from being dismissed during pregnancy, and to give women maternity leave. Despite these rights, the code prevents women at the same time from "working at night and performing arduous or harmful physical work." Finally, Marques points out that these limitations continue until today. UNDP (2012) notes that advances in legislation, education and support for women's participation in paid jobs, did not reach all women; especially working-class women in rural areas.

In recent years, there has been progress. In 2015, the Iraqi Parliament issued the new Iraqi Labor Law, No. 37, which came into force in 2016, replacing the earlier Labor Law No.71 of 1987. This new law aims to address the shortcomings of the previous labor law and to align its regulations with international principles ratified by Iraq (PartnersGlobal, 2021). UNDP also notes that Iraq has signed a number of international treaties to govern both men and women's economic participation and security (UNDP, 2012). This progress can also be seen through the measures taken by Iraq to tackle concerns in the 2019 CEDAW session. The state party established a commission consisting of retired judges within the Supreme Judicial Council to review such discriminatory legislation, with a focus on the Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Personal Status Act.

In the interview conducted with Iraqi civil society, the interviewee confirmed the vital role of constitutional and legislative frameworks on women's economic empowerment. The interviewee points to the deteriorating situation in Iraq ever since 2003, with lack of laws to protect women, or the enforcement of discriminatory laws such as child marriage and the protection of honor killing.

'Discrimination against women' was one of the top subcategories of concern, in the UPR 2025 session. In the 2019 CEDAW session, the Committee was concerned about the persistence of discriminatory stereotypes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and society, as well as the the persistence of harmful practices discriminating against women, such as child marriage, discriminatory provisions in the Penal Code allowing perpetrators to invoke the defence of honor, and the prevalence of female genital mutilation. No reported measures have been taken to improve the Committee's concerns.

Social norms also play a role in women's economic empowerment. Women face societal expectations and are defined by the role of women in society (World Bank Group, 2020). Gender norms are shaped by values of honor and respectability, which impact family prestige, as well as shame. Marques describes women's bodies, mobility, and practices as being controlled by the family and the community (Marques, 2023). Moreover, employers are reluctant to recruit women (World Bank Group, 2020). Marques adds that after marriage, specifically, other pressures and norms are added on a woman and her responsibilities. In Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region, there are perceptions in the society that husbands and members of the community disapprove of women working outside the household, especially mothers. This is crucial, because women's perceptions of their husbands and society's opinions and expectations of them play a big role in their own practices (Marques, 2023).

The subcategory 'GBV – sexual harassment' received 13 recommendations in the UPR 2025 session. In the 2019 CEDAW session, this subcategory was also of major concern. These concerns included the prevalence of female genital mutilation, especially in the rural areas, the underreporting of violence against women due to cultural barriers and impunity of perpetrators, and the insufficient number and capacity of State-run shelters that have often been forced to relocate to ensure safety of victims and staff. Iraq has since adopted a national strategy on violence against women (2018-2030). These concerns not only affect women's safety but also their capacity to participate fully in the society. Indeed, the interviewee confirmed the grave violations against women in Iraq, from honor killings which are protected by law, to violence ranging from beatings to stabbing and burning women, to sexual harassment at the workplace.

Moreover, Marques (2023) adds that women encounter barriers to remain in the labor market, due to harassment not only in the workplace, but also on transport (both public and private), usually with no consequences to the perpetrators. He notes that complaint mechanisms tend to be ineffective, and women are often prevented from raising complaints by their family members, governmental staff, and the society. Poorer women especially suffer the most from this, as they rely heavily on public transport. Finally, the World Bank (2020) states that in Iraq, one in three women has been verbally harassed in public, and one in five women has been physically harassed. Women with disabilities are another vulnerable group of women that suffer the consequences of this.

The 'child and forced marriage' subcategory was also of a concern in the UPR and CEDAW sessions and NGO reports, where legal exceptions allow women and girls to marry at the age of 15, instead of the minimum age for marriage at 18. Despite Iraq 'supporting' the Committee's recommendations to repeal such discriminatory exceptions, measures that negatively affect this subcategory have recently been taken. In 2024, the Iraq parliament proposed a bill that would allow religious rules to govern matters in marriage, such as permitting marriage for girls as young as nine and boys at fifteen. UN deputy Amina Mohammed called this an assault on childhood (Rudaw, 2024). In 2025, the bill was passed. A researcher at Human Rights Watch said, "it's deeply disheartening to see

Iraqi leaders move the country backward rather than forward on women and girls' rights." The draft amendment violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The interviewee highlighted how child marriage has become legitimate through enforcing this law, and its dangerous and negative effects on women and children. Such a law affects girls' access and completion of education, thereby influencing their future role and participation in society.

Regarding the 'access to education, vocations, and training' subcategory, the CEDAW Committee was concerned that Iraq was placed at the bottom rank of Middle Eastern countries, where only 6% of the State party's national budget was spent on education in 2016. Additionally, the Committee was concerned about the accessibility of education, the low rate of enrolment of girls at the primary, intermediate, and secondary levels, and the high dropout rates.

The World Bank notes that the lower the education, the less equal views there are on gender roles in the household and a woman's power to make decisions. Particularly in rural areas, where access to education is difficult, and girls face additional challenges in completing education (World Bank Group, 2020). Those who accessed education and graduated university are still faced with hardships accessing jobs due to the lack of them. Marques views this as a reason that leads women to "settle down and marry a man with a job and a salary" (Marques, 2023). The interviewee pointed to the fact that Iraq had a very strong education system before 2003; in fact, the country succeeded in eradicating illiteracy by 1980. However, today, many Iraqis are once again affected by illiteracy.

The subcategory 'access to jobs' was also of concern but not as high of a concern as other subcategories. However, Marques argues that women who are still determined to work in the public or private sector are faced with several challenges. On one hand, work in the public sector is considered higher prestige, one with more benefits, lower gender pay gap, and shorter working hours. On the other hand, the private sector is seen as being more discriminatory with wages. Moreover, due to the verbal character of the contracts, women are said to be easily fired without being able to make complaints, and sometimes not even paid for the work they have done. Additionally, governmental jobs are associated with corruption, ones where jobs and promotions are given to people with personal connections to those who can pay large amounts of money (Marques, 2023).

As for the 'financial inclusion' subcategory, it was rarely mentioned in the UPR and CEDAW sessions, except for once in the 2025 UPR session. Therefore, it has not been a topic of discussion and measures have not been taken to address it. Despite this, Al Shamy and Abbas describe the struggle of women due to limited access to capital. Businesswomen do not depend on banks or other finance institutions because there are strict guarantee conditions, where asking for a loan is subject to conditions such as salary requirements, real estate, or material guarantees. Women are also faced with high interest rates, as well as a short period of time to pay those loan installments, which doesn't allow the business to secure revenues. Additionally, most of the women who are entrepreneurs are partners with a male family

member or their husbands (Al Shamy & Abbas, 2021). Finally, women typically have little experience dealing with microfinance institutions and banks (Al Shamy & Abbas, 2021).

The importance of the ‘financial inclusion’ subcategory is seen for example when a unique initiative was created through the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Graduation Approach (GA) Programme, which is funded by USAID and the KfW Development Bank. It targeted 101 women, all heads of households, and founders of their own businesses. The initiative addressed poverty and empowered some of the most vulnerable families with needed resources and tools to build sustainable livelihoods (Kaka, 2024). This is an example that brings into light the importance and capabilities of women if they gain more experience and training regarding financial knowledge. The interviewee confirmed that the financial situation is not steady in Iraq, which always drives someone from the family to protect the woman in the household, leading to other challenges for women.

The ‘political representation’ subcategory was another concern in the UPR and CEDAW sessions. Women minority groups are also underrepresented in political and public life. Women tend to be paid less than men for the same jobs. The gender wage gap in Iraq is 18% for women and men working similar jobs with similar experience and educational levels. The World Bank reports that from 2000 to 2017, the annual economic growth rate was 1.4% in Iraq, and “increases in the value added by female workers contributed 0.3 percentage points of this” (World Bank Group, 2020). Additionally, Nawafly comments that there is a lack of women in high positions, which prevents women’s vision from being a part of decision-making. This contributes to the reduction of achieving gender balance in both the public and private sectors (Nawafly, 2021).

The interviewee revealed another main challenge that women in Iraq face: the silencing of human rights defenders and activists. This affects women’s empowerment in general and more specifically the economic empowerment of women, as speaking out against challenges or discrimination faced are met with silencing, intimidation, death threats, and forced disappearances. Furthermore, the interviewee points out the stark difference between what is reported in formal reports such as in the UPR sessions and the reality on the ground. Diplomatic relations between states may also lead to overly favorable assessments, with delegations offering praise that does not accurately reflect the situation on the ground.

Finally, it is essential to view all these categories not as isolated, but as intertwined and mutually influential. The legislative frameworks in Iraq are crucial for women’s safety, access to education, and overall equality. Issues such as child marriage, discrimination against women, or lack of laws protecting women are closely linked to women’s education, their participation, and political representation. Together, these factors hinder women’s economic empowerment in Iraq.

## Iraq Summary Table

Top 3 categories	Top 3 subcategories	Key Points of Analysis
Marriage and Equality before the Law	Constitutional and Legislative Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This subcategory was a consistent subcategory of concern in the CEDAW, UPR sessions, and NGOs.</li> <li>Discriminatory provisions include the Penal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure, and Personal Status Act.</li> <li>Some measures were taken by Iraq such as establishing a commission consisting of retired judges within the Supreme Judicial Council to review such discriminatory legislation.</li> </ul>
Economic and Social Rights	Discrimination against Women (Prevention and Protection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Persistence of discriminatory stereotypes, harmful practices such as child marriage, and provisions in the Penal Code allowing perpetrators to invoke the defense of honor.</li> <li>No reported measures were taken by Iraq to address these concerns.</li> </ul>
Non-discrimination and Stereotypes	GBV - Sexual Harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prevalence of female genital mutilation, underreporting of violence against women, impunity of perpetrators, and insufficient number and capacity of State-run shelters for victims.</li> <li>Iraq adopted a national strategy on violence against women (2018-2030).</li> </ul>

## Morocco

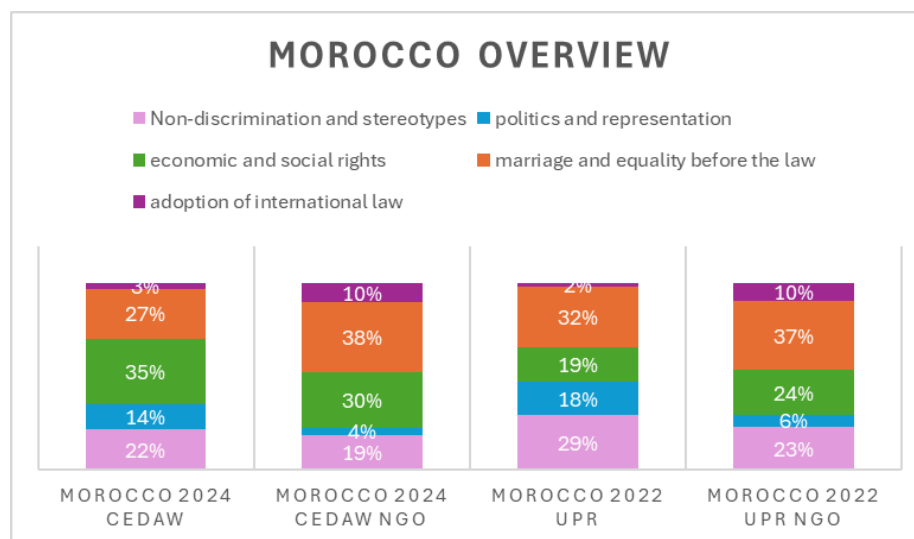


Figure (7): overview of categories where recommendations were made by mechanism and source for Morocco

When considering the overview figure, no significant disparity appears among the categories mentioned by the different actors. ‘Marriage and equality before the law’ is generally the most frequently mentioned category, while ‘politics and representation’ receives overall low attention.

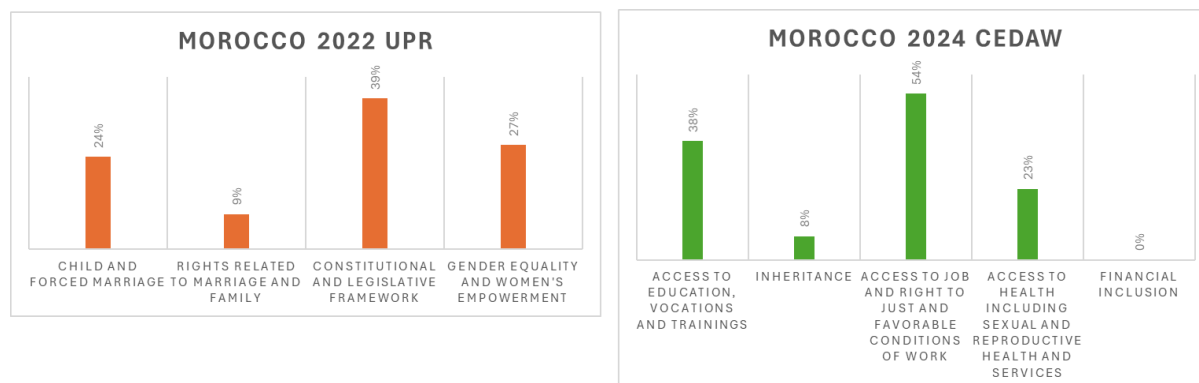


Figure (8): Bars illustrating breakdown of the most recommended categories in UPR and CEDAW for Morocco

During the UPR Session in 2022, the most frequently recommended category among those addressing women's rights was ‘marriage and equality before the law,’ with a particular focus on ‘constitutional and legislative reforms.’ In other words, recommendations addressed by

stakeholders were through legal reform. In the 2024 CEDAW session, the emphasis shifted to women’s ‘economic and social rights’, specifically the subcategory ‘access to jobs.’



Figure (9): Bars illustrating the three most recommended subcategories in UPR and CEDAW for Morocco

Figure (9) represents the three and four most recommended subcategories for Morocco in the last session in both mechanisms. This is to illustrate the general trends of the UPR and CEDAW sessions. A few key findings have emerged from the quantitative analysis and will be discussed further. Notably, ‘GBV – sexual harassment’ appears as the most frequently cited subcategory overall.

A notable discrepancy concerns ‘access to healthcare’, which is frequently raised by NGOs – within both the UPR and CEDAW mechanisms – but is less frequently addressed by reviewing states and the CEDAW Committee. There is nevertheless consensus on incorporating sexual and reproductive health programmes, as well as the particularly dire situation of women in rural areas. Indeed, 90% of women in rural areas do not have health insurance coverage, compared to 53% of women in urban areas (Bordat et al., 2018).

Concerning ‘financial inclusion,’ it has been scarcely mentioned. The CEDAW Committee refers to this subcategory only once, noting that women were not adequately supported financially during the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore require access to stimulus packages similar to those provided to men. Additionally, one NGO in the 2022 UPR process briefly pointed out the need for support measures and improved access to financial resources. According to the Central Bank of Morocco (BAM, 2024, p. 93), 39% of women had access to a bank account in 2023. Women's financial inclusion varies by employment status: access is nearly equal among salaried workers but drops significantly for the self-employed and

unemployed (BAM, 2019, p. 9). The data therefore reveals inequalities among women themselves. Taken together, these elements suggest that financial inclusion may warrant more sustained attention in future recommendations.

‘Access to jobs’ received relatively limited attention from states participating in the UPR process, with only one mention in the 2017 session and three in the 2022 session. In contrast, both the CEDAW Committee and civil society organizations addressed this issue more thoroughly. Regarding the substance of the recommendations, both Committee’s and NGOs’ reports focus on the need for implementation measures. The CEDAW Committee’s recommendations (2022) broadly focus on areas including affordable childcare, flexible work arrangements, tackling labor market segregation, promoting access to the formal sector, ensuring measurable outcomes from programs, preventing sexual harassment, and improving social protection in rural areas. NGOs raise similar points but place greater emphasis on enforcing labor law compliance. They report that violations of labor rights are insufficiently sanctioned, revealing a lack of effective monitoring of employer practices. Common issues include unlawful terminations, salaries below the minimum wage, and denial of paid maternity leave (Bordat et al., 2018).

On the ground, the situation is concerning: the female labor force participation rate fell from 26.6% in 2008 to 19.5% in 2024 (World Bank, 2025). In 2024, Morocco ranked 141st out of 146 countries in the Economic Participation and Opportunity sub-index of the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum 2024, p. 16). Education alone does not explain this disparity: in 2022, only 33.2% of highly educated women aged 25 to 59 were active in the labor force, compared to 92.2% of men (HCP, 2023) – highlighting deep-rooted systemic and cultural barriers.

The interviewee for Morocco highlighted the pervasive role of social norms in limiting women’s access to employment at every stage of life – whether through early school dropout, withdrawal from the workforce after marriage, or discouragement from returning to work after childbirth. They therefore stressed the need for targeted measures at each stage of a woman’s life, as well as a cross-cutting approach involving all components of society: women and girls, families, employers, and the broader society.

Ultimately, there is widespread consensus on the need for comprehensive measures to support women’s access to employment. The main challenges lie in the poor implementation of legal protections, the absence of supportive measures to help women reconcile personal and professional responsibilities, inadequate enforcement and monitoring mechanisms, limited access to justice, and enduring gender norms. These problems are even more acute in rural areas, where women – predominantly working in the informal sector – face greater vulnerability and significantly fewer protections.

One of the recurrent elements mentioned explaining the poor access to work for women is sexual harassment. The report submitted by The Advocates for Human Rights (The Advocates) to the CEDAW’s

Committee in 2022 reveals that despite these legislative advances, women experience multiple barriers to reporting sexual harassment. The lack of procedures to facilitate reporting, investigation, and prosecution, or clear standards of what constitutes “proof” prevent these articles from being applied in practice.

There is also an issue with the legislative framework. The Advocates (2022) reports that sexual harassment provisions require that the harassment be “persistent” – an undefined term that again raises issues of how to prove elements of a crime or what evidence is admissible and sufficient. Women who report technology-facilitated harassment by an intimate partner (such as the non-consensual sharing of intimate images) to the authorities are often deemed to have “confessed” to sexual relations outside of marriage and are themselves prosecuted (The Advocates, 2022).

In rural areas, the issue is intensified. Sexual harassment occurs often among women working in agriculture or other unofficial jobs. Female seasonal agricultural workers, who often don’t have official contracts, health insurance, or job benefits, say many cases of sexual harassment go unreported because of threats of firing or physical abuse (Al-Zahara, 2012). Many women who experience verbal sexual harassment at work report feeling helpless to stop it or file a complaint because of difficulties obtaining evidence to present in court (HND, 2022).

GBV more broadly is mentioned consistently by UPR reviewing states, the CEDAW Committee and NGOs. Reports from the CEDAW Committee and civil society emphasize the numerous barriers women face when seeking justice: high legal fees, social stigma, insufficient police training, and limited access to courts – particularly in rural areas. Aublanc (2024) stresses that many women are not even aware of the existence or scope of the law. Law 103-13, adopted in 2018, was a significant legal step in criminalizing various forms of violence against women. However, the requirement that harassment be “persistent” should be improved as it renders prosecutions difficult and places the burden of proof entirely on victims. The Advocates reports (2022) to CEDAW highlights the danger of criminalizing victims themselves – particularly in cases of digital harassment, where women reporting the non-consensual sharing of images are sometimes prosecuted for extramarital sexual relations. However, its enforcement remains weak. As previously mentioned, In 2019, 7.6 million women and girls between 15 and 74 years old (57.1%) experienced at least one act of violence in the 12 months preceding the survey (HCP, 2019). Despite the seriousness of this phenomenon, HND reports that victims tend not to report it or file a complaint to the competent authorities. Only 11.3% of victims report non-conjugal violence, 8% report conjugal violence and only 3% report sexual violence (HND, 2022). This contributes to social acceptance of GBV and impunity of the aggressors.

Moreover, the marital and domestic context remains the most affected by GBV, with a prevalence rate of 52.2% (HND, 2022). In its reporting to the CEDAW for 2024 Session, Morocco indicates that marital rape is covered under article 486 of the Penal Code. However, this provision appears insufficient in light of the statistics, indicating a need for enhanced legal protection and measures to facilitate

reporting and prevent such violence. Recommendations from all actors consistently emphasize the importance of including civil society in efforts to address GBV. For example, they call for specialized community shelters, counseling services, proactive legal assistance, and media awareness programs, as well as the establishment of a system that allows civil society organizations to act as civil parties in cases of violence against women and girls.

This analysis highlights a significant intersectionality among these categories. GBV, particularly sexual harassment, plays an important role in preventing women from accessing employment. As emphasized in the Moroccan Policy Brief 2025, the interconnected nature of economic, social, and institutional mechanisms that limit women's labor force participation requires an integrated policy framework (HCP, 2025). Additionally, while Morocco still needs to enhance legal protection for women, the major issue appears to lie in the state's failure to implement these laws effectively and to engage civil society in the process.

Another consistently mentioned element in the different subcategories is the greater challenges faced by women in rural areas. Most rural women work in low-paying and/or unpaid jobs that do not qualify them for social benefits (HCP, 2019). Despite some improvement, in 2019 they were three times more vulnerable to poverty than urban women (12.4% vs. 4.8%). In addition, their life expectancy is 4.3 years less than that of urban women (75.3 years versus 79.6 years) (HCP, 2019). The disparities between urban and rural areas – and their consequences for women in the latter – are both significant and alarming. Other categories of women frequently mentioned reviewing states, the CEDAW Committee and NGOs as facing greater disadvantages include: women with disabilities; older women; single mothers and women prisoners.

One of the most significant legal developments in Morocco in recent years is the latest reform of the Family Code (Moudawana), for which the revision process began in September 2023 (Zouiten, 2024). As this reform is very recent, there are not yet specific recommendations from international human rights mechanisms addressing its content. This analysis therefore focuses on assessing to what extent previous recommendations – from reviewing states at the UPR, the CEDAW Committee, and NGOs – have been reflected in this updated version of the law. Because legal reform is perceived as an urgent and foundational need, the vast majority of these recommendations focus on the substance of the law itself – rather than on its implementation. The new Family Code introduces substantial changes in areas such as child custody, divorce, and financial support, granting women greater legal standing in the private sphere.

This reform process has been inseparable from the mobilization of Morocco's women's movement – such as the 2000 Women's March, which mobilized thousands across the country and laid the groundwork for the previous reform of the Moudawana in 2004 and the constitutional recognition of gender equality in 2011 (Bensouda, 2022). As the literature shows, some women's movements adopt a secular approach, while others work within a religious framework. Given that any legal reform must

ultimately be approved by the Supreme Council of Ulemas, the second strategy seems to be more effective in securing institutional acceptance. A relevant example is the NGO Musawah, which advocates for women's rights using Islamic principles, drawing on new historical interpretations of Islamic texts and referencing reform examples from other Muslim-majority countries.

In its report to the CEDAW Committee in June 2022, Musawah recommended amending Article 175 of the 2004 Family Code – which currently deprives a woman of child custody upon remarriage – drawing on examples from Iraq, Qatar, and Tunisia. This recommendation was incorporated into the current revision of the Family Code, marking a notable victory for faith-based feminist advocacy.

An important point emerges from Morocco's experience with the reform of the Family Code: the active engagement of civil society, particularly feminist organizations, has proven to be a powerful driver of legal change. Their capacity to mobilize, advocate, and frame legal demands – including within religious discourse – has made them central actors in shaping reform outcomes. This culturally grounded and inclusive approach could serve as a useful model for other countries aiming to advance gender justice in ways that respect and resonate with local contexts and values. Civil society represents a critical agent of change; it could play a crucial role not only in advocating for legal reform, but also in supporting its implementation.

Finally, regarding 'inheritance', while equal rights have been consistently mentioned by all actors, Morocco – similar to its stance on the criminalization of marital rape and the decriminalization of sexual relations outside marriage – has consistently chosen to 'note' rather than 'support' these recommendations. In its current revision of the Family Code, however, Morocco has introduced a nuanced modification to the existing rule. The law is still following the traditional Islamic rule and granting men twice the share of inheritance compared to women, but individuals now have the option to gift property to female heirs during their lifetime, offering a way to reduce gender disparity in inheritance (Atalyar, 2024). This flexible option offers a potential way to reduce gender disparities in inheritance without requiring a complete departure from traditional practices. It deserves to be explored as it presents an innovative approach to reconciling religious tradition with contemporary demands for gender equality before the law.

## Morocco Summary Table

Top 3 categories	Top 3 subcategories	Key Points of Analysis
Marriage and Equality before the Law	Constitutional and Legislative Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Marriage and equality before the law' is the most frequently cited category overall.</li> <li>• Recommendations converge on the need for legal reform of the Family Code to achieve gender equality. A number of these recommendations have already been accepted in the current revision of the Family Code.</li> </ul>
Economic and Social Rights	Access to Jobs and Right to Just and Favorable Conditions of Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Although NGOs and CEDAW (2024) express strong concern for access to employment (ranking among the top three subcategories), the issue is largely overlooked in UPR States' recommendations.</li> <li>• Recommendations converge on the need for measures and policies to encourage and facilitate women's access to employment.</li> </ul>
Non-discrimination and Stereotypes	GBV - Sexual Harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GBV is the most frequently mentioned subcategory overall.</li> <li>• Recommendations indicate that while legal protections exist, they remain insufficient, and the implementation is alarmingly lacking, with access to justice being particularly difficult. There is a consensus on the need to involve civil society in efforts to address GBV. Sexual harassment is recurrently identified as a major barrier to women's access to employment.</li> </ul>

## Saudi Arabia

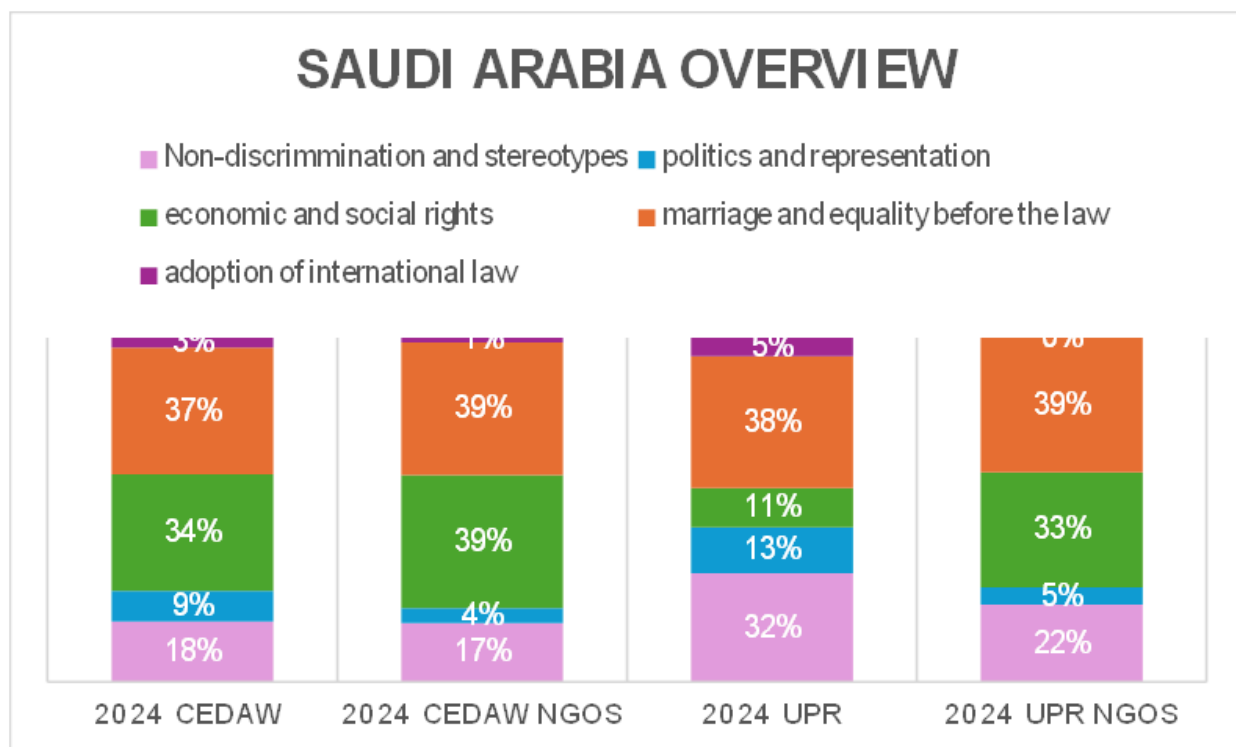


Figure (10): Overview of categories where recommendations were made by mechanism and source for Saudi Arabia

Taking the broad overview in Figure 10 into account, it is clear that there are general similarities on the frequency of recommendations which are offered within the CEDAW Committee and the NGOs which submit reports (including recommendations) to CEDAW. In contrast, the UPR sessions display points of divergence in terms of frequency of categories, with NGOs focusing more heavily on ‘marriage and equality before the law’ and ‘economic and social rights,’ whereas states’ recommendations more frequently address the ‘non-discrimination and stereotypes,’ ‘adoption of international law,’ and ‘politics and representation’ categories.’

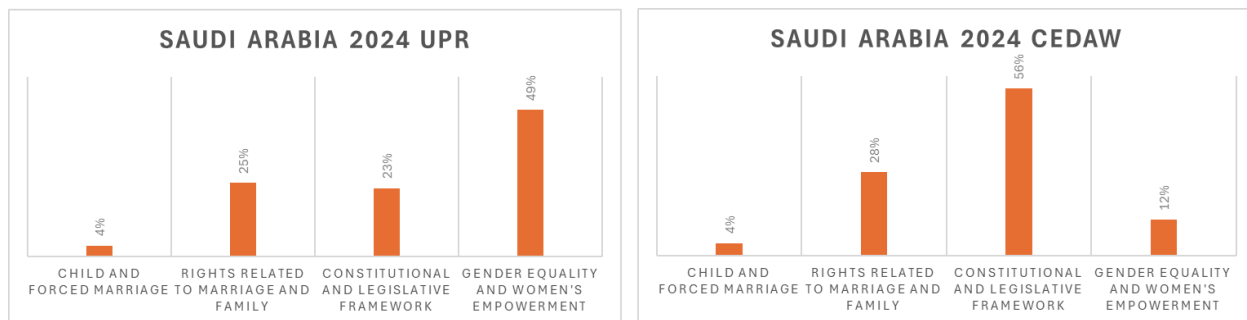


Figure (11): Bars illustrating breakdown of the most recommended categories in UPR and CEDAW for Saudi Arabia

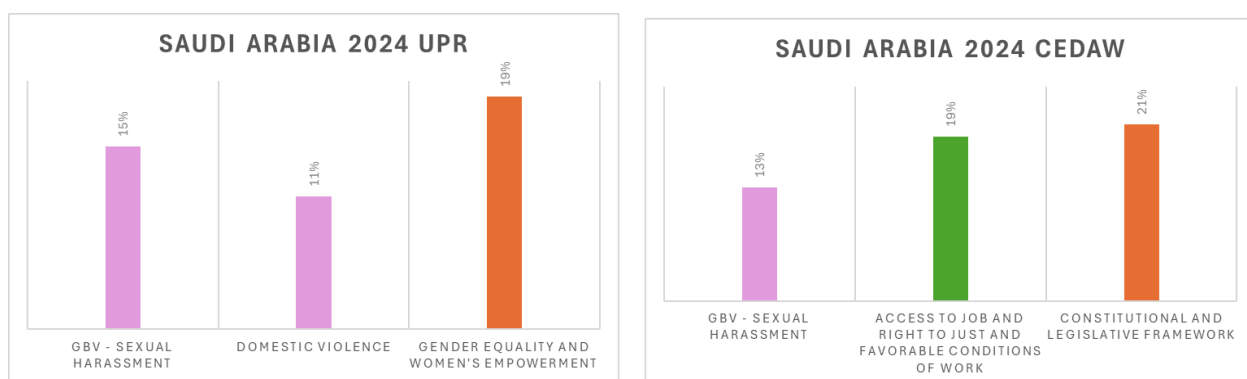


Figure (12): Bars illustrating the three most recommended subcategories in UPR and CEDAW for Saudi Arabia

Figure (10) and Figure (11) represent the breakdown of the most recommended category ('marriage and equality before the law') and the three most recommended subcategories for Saudi Arabia. This is to illustrate the general trends of the UPR and CEDAW Sessions in terms of frequency.

These figures pinpoint the areas in which international reporting mechanisms focus, but do not account for the topics which most frequently surface, nor whether these are consistent across the categories. In the case of Saudi Arabia, it is clear that recommendations on 'marriage and equality before the law' are frequent, whether CEDAW Committee, UPR sessions, or NGOs offering recommendations. Within this category, recommendations overwhelmingly focus on the Personal Status Law. As of March 2022, the Personal Status Law (PSL) in Saudi Arabia has codified many of the social norms surrounding women's rights in the country. Perhaps most relevant to women's economic empowerment is the codification of a wife's financial support from her husband being contingent on the wife's "obedience".

The PSL also codifies a system of male guardianship for women, which stipulates that women require a male guardian's permission for the many decisions about their lives. While this no longer includes decisions on working and travelling, the vague language surrounding married women's "obedience" in practice impacts married women's rights, which Human Rights Watch have cautioned (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Looking specifically at the UPR mechanism, 'gender equality and women's empowerment' was most addressed, however, the wording of these recommendations by States were consistently vague. Recommendations on 'gender equality and women's empowerment' were typically phrased as such: "continue to take measures for women's empowerment". While this appears to ensure that the recommendations are 'supported' instead of 'noted' by Saudi Arabia, it provides little direction as to the measures which Saudi Arabia should take to address this feedback. As for 'GBV – sexual harassment', state's recommendations primarily focused on criminalizing *all* forms of violence against women (with an emphasis on sexual violence), improving access to community associations, and improving complaint and reporting mechanisms. In this regard, Saudi Arabia has taken some measures, including to improve its Protection against Abuse Act through a Royal Decree addressing case monitoring and increased penalties for perpetrators. Saudi Arabia does not address through any measures the concern brought by NGOs to create preventative measures for addressing violence against women such as the recommendation by European Saudi Organization for Human Rights, Berlin to "activate mechanisms to protect women from violence" (UPR 2024).

Within the 'domestic violence' subcategory, State's recommendations focused primarily on criminalizing marital rape. While Saudi Arabia has taken measures to improve its Protection against Abuse Act through a Royal Decree, it currently does not specifically address marital rape.

In regards to the CEDAW mechanism, there are a greater variety of categories for most frequently recommended subcategories as compared to the UPR, though still with the recurrence of 'GBV – sexual harassment'. Much of the Committee's discussion revolves around the draft Penal Code and male guardianship, stating:

*"the persistence of a de facto male guardianship system facilitates domestic violence and limits women's access to justice and victim support services, or their possibility to be released from a domestic violence shelter, as any such actions require the male guardian's consent, in particular if a woman wants to file a complaint against an abusive guardian"*

*"reports indicating that the draft Penal Code does not adequately protect women from gender-based violence, including harassment, domestic violence or marital rape, as well as the delays in the adoption of the draft Penal Code"*  
(CEDAW 2024)

Currently, there is no penal code in Saudi Arabia, meaning that punishments are chosen as befitting the crime with no consistency in sentencing for similar crimes (van Eijk, 2010; Topal, 2019). Many laws, including the Personal Status Law, are notably vague in their wording, allowing for a wide range of interpretations based on the ruling judge. Specifically, vague counter-terror and anti-cyber crime laws are frequently used in prosecuting civil society organizations. This contributes to a lack of transparency and accountability by the Saudi government when it comes to women's empowerment generally, and is directly applicable to policy and enforcement of women's economic empowerment (Amnesty International, 2023, p. 1; Topal 2019; Human Rights Watch 2023; 'A People's Vision for Reform In Saudi Arabia', n.d; Montagu, 2015).

This overlaps significantly with both NGOs and the CEDAW Committee's concerns and recommendations on 'constitutional and legislative framework', particularly regarding the lack of penal code and its implications for death sentences and the use of counter-terror and anti-cyber crime laws against women's activists. Though necessarily categorized separately for purposes of quantitative analysis, these two categories remain thoroughly intertwined. Together they form a structure which negatively impacts women's opportunities more broadly – in activism for changes to improve their economic empowerment and their safety to pursue employment and economic empowerment more broadly. For example, a major shift in women's economic empowerment came with the lifting of the driving ban, which was declared in 2017 and went into practice in 2018. Since the lift of the ban, women's labor force participation has increased by nearly 15% (from 20% in 2017 to 34.5% in 2023), and though this is far from the only factor to influence this rise, it still clearly illustrates the positive impacts greater freedom of movement provides ('Saudi Arabia', n.d.). Prior to 2017, there was no policy in place which prevented women from driving, they were simply not issued licenses as a function of social norms (Macias-Alonso et al., 2023). While its impacts were felt with deliberate speed in many of the national and international reporting metrics on employment, the subsequent arrest of Loujain al-Hathloul who campaigned for the lifting of the driving ban attests to this concerning trend. While the driving ban policy was lifted, Loujain and several other women who campaigned for this change were persecuted rather than consulted on the change (Wintour, 2020; Lyse Doucet, 2020).

Despite these concerns brought by the CEDAW Committee, Saudi Arabia has done little to address concerns about the PSL and Penal Code – though it is worth noting the Penal Code is still in the drafting stage and as such is difficult to assess. In regards to 'constitutional and legislative framework' concerns, Saudi Arabia has appointed Ms. Hala bint Mazyad Al-Tuwaijri as President of the Saudi Human Rights Commission; however, the state has not addressed the remaining concerns.

19% of recommendations by the CEDAW Committee addressed the subcategory of 'access to jobs', making it one of the most addressed subcategories by frequency (see Figure 11). Within this subcategory, both the CEDAW Committee and NGOs draw attention to conditions of migrant domestic

workers. The ILO estimates that there are approximately 3.7 million domestic workers currently in Saudi Arabia, representing around 28% of their total employment (ILO, 2021). A survey by OKUP (Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program), one of the contributing NGOs, has found that 60% of women migrant domestic workers experience abuse. These concerns have been consistently brought up in both UPR and CEDAW mechanisms and have largely gone unaddressed by Saudi Arabia, signalling this as an area resistant to change.

In addition, the CEDAW Committee has issued recommendations on improving women's economic empowerment, drawing attention to wage gaps, the persistence of the 'MENA paradox' pattern of women's roles not reflecting their high levels of education, and the lack of resources to support mothers. These concerns are carried through in the World Economic Forum in their Gender Gap Report of 2024 where Saudi Arabia ranked 126 out of 146 countries globally, indicating that there is still much progress to be made by this metric's standard. In terms of Saudi Arabia's ranking for Economic Participation and Opportunity specifically, they maintain a similarly unfavourable ranking of 125 out of 146 countries. To this end, Saudi Arabia has increased programs and initiatives to support women's teleworking, self-employment, flexible work arrangement, day care, and transportation through the "Qurrah" and "Wusul" programs. Additional programs have included those to support low-income families through financial support and a Sustainable Agriculture Development (SRAD) Programme (Saudi Arabia, 2024). In conjunction with an amendment via Royal Decree to the Labor Code aiming to improve equality through all stages of the employment process, it is clear that Saudi Arabia has made efforts to address these recommendations.

Looking specifically at the improvement in women's labor force participation, there has been a substantial increase by nearly 15% from 2017 to 2023 ('Saudi Arabia', n.d.). The World Bank reports that Saudi women's labor force participation as of 2023 sits at 34.5%, an increase from 20% in 2017. This sharp rise has been attributed to a number of factors by scholars, with two of most often cited including the lifting of the driving ban in 2017 (discussed above) and the introduction of the Nitaqat program. This policy, which was introduced in 2011, aims to increase the number of Saudi citizens hired by private Saudi companies. While not specific to women, this policy has been theorized to have a markedly positive impact on women's labor force participation. Peck et al. argue this has incentivized companies to commit to one-time higher costs for hiring in order to meet the required quotas, an incentive not present prior to the advent of the Nitaqat policy in 2011 (Peck, 2017; Miller et al., 2022). Among advocacy organizations, there are concerns that while Saudi women's employment rate has increased to 34%, women are not being employed in sectors or positions which reflect their educational attainment (the 'MENA' paradox): notably, that Saudi women are often hired in place of unskilled migrant workers in low-paying jobs, such as trade and retail (Aldossari, 2023; Alkhowaiter, 2021).

Within this broader category of 'economic and social rights', the subcategory of 'financial inclusion' was only mentioned twice across both mechanisms – on both occasions by the NGO Alnahda

to the 2024 CEDAW session on the topic of increasing financial literacy. Similar to the other case studies of Morocco and Iraq, this speaks to an area which is rarely addressed explicitly within both CEDAW and UPR mechanisms by any party involved. With 22% of business owners being women ('Saudi Arabia', n.d.), comparatively with the rest of the MENA region, this paints a positive picture of financial inclusion 'achievement' measurements; however, this is somewhat complicated by the roles which women inhabit in the labor force as well as the difficulty in gauging shifts in social norms. As Aldossari notes, the women who are able to secure positions of leadership are largely the women who are most privileged in Saudi Arabia, coming from wealthy backgrounds themselves (Aldossari, 2023).

Across both CEDAW and UPR sessions, recommendations have focused specifically on amending the PSL. Moreover, it appears that the category of 'marriage and equality before the law' and emphasis of recommendations within it on the Personal Status Law and drafted Penal Code could be explained through a perception that these topics are viewed as linchpins to women's empowerment more generally, especially in relation to economic empowerment. This trend is particularly evident in the comparatively low percentage (11%) of recommendations offered by states in the 2024 UPR on 'economic and social rights'. Given these trends, and the absence of specific recommendations on 'financial inclusion', there appears to be space for additional and more specific recommendations to be made to Saudi Arabia, especially given their apparent receptiveness to improving economic empowerment measured when addressed, as discussed above.

## Saudi Arabia Summary Table

Top 3 categories	Top 3 subcategories	Key Points of Analysis
Marriage and Equality before the Law	Constitutional and Legislative Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressure of recommendations on amending the Personal Status Law to give women greater freedom to pursue and participate economically (movement, banking, managing finances, working, etc.).</li> <li>• The use of vague wording in laws (e.g. counter-terror, anti-cyber crime) to target and otherwise impede the activities of civil society organizations pursuing women's economic empowerment.</li> </ul>
Economic and Social Rights	Access to Jobs and Right to Just and Favorable Conditions of Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Migrant domestic workers make up a large proportion of the Saudi labor force and are subjected to poor conditions of work and rights while working.</li> <li>• Persistence of 'MENA paradox' where women's educational attainment is not reflected in sector or position of their work.</li> <li>• Positive signs of the Saudi government taking steps to create programs which support women at work, particularly for mothers and providing more flexible work conditions.</li> </ul>
Non-discrimination and Stereotypes	GBV - Sexual Harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recommendations focus on criminalizing all forms of violence against women, with an emphasis on including sexual violence within this.</li> <li>• Saudi Arabia has improved its Protection Against Abuse Act, but not addressed calls for improving preventative measures or addressing sexual violence specifically.</li> </ul>

## Observations on the Mechanisms

While collecting and analyzing the data, the format of the recommendations in the UPR sessions were observed, revealing an important trend. Recommending states submitting vague recommendations, without referencing a specific act or section of a policy, are more likely to be ‘supported’ rather than ‘noted’. Additionally, the research revealed several discrepancies between both the number of recommendations per category and content of these recommendations for NGOs and the states or Committee recommending during UPR and CEDAW sessions. In regards to frequency, NGOs consistently made fewer recommendations in the category of ‘politics and representation’ across both mechanisms. This could potentially be explained by the general focus of NGOs on more specific or smaller scale topics in their recommendations (often stemming from their focus areas as an organization), whereas the CEDAW Committee and the recommending States frequently addressed broader, systemic changes to encourage women’s participation at the political representation level. At the subcategory level, NGOs were also much less likely – if at all – to recommend in the subcategory of ‘gender equality and women’s empowerment.’ As many of the recommendations made by states and the CEDAW Committee were vague and broad within this category (i.e. to continue to improve), a potential explanation for this could be that such recommendations serve more as symbolic gestures of diplomatic engagement rather than as expressions of concrete concern or intent to prompt specific action.

## Recommendations

Following on from the analysis of the case studies, this report offers the following recommendations to improve women’s economic empowerment in the MENA region through the UPR and CEDAW mechanisms at both the regional and national level:

### 1. Recommendations regionally

- a. Specifically address and use metrics relating to ‘financial inclusion’ as a category to reflect a broader approach to women’s economic empowerment.
- b. Given conditions of intimidation and retribution against civil society organizations and to improve meaningful engagement by local NGOs, create a mechanism for UPR which allows for confidential submission of concerns and recommendations by NGOs.
- c. Improve state’s transparency of data collection methods and introduce mechanisms for verification of data reported to both CEDAW and UPR mechanisms on women’s economic empowerment status.

## **2. Recommendations per country**

### **a. Iraq**

- i. Remove existing discriminatory laws which perpetuate violence against women and develop additional legislation to improve access to and conditions of workplaces for women, including legislation which targets discrimination against women.
- ii. Improve the access to and quality of all levels of education, including a focus on completion of education and access to schools to better prepare women for entering the labor force.
- iii. Create an independent commission to document and improve accountability of the state's actions on GBV, including a request for an amendment for inquiry to the UN to ensure transparency and accuracy of reporting for UPR and CEDAW mechanisms.

### **b. Morocco**

- i. Increase concrete measures to support women's inclusion in the labor force, address restrictive social norms, and effectively prevent and respond to GBV.
- ii. Ensure that the forthcoming Family Code reform is accompanied by measures and mechanisms that improve access to justice in order to ensure its proper implementation.
- iii. Integrate women's movements in the implementation of the economic empowerment process to ensure civil society participation in policy and service development.

### **c. Saudi Arabia**

- i. Include women's rights defenders and civil society organizations in conversations to improve women's economic empowerment, including by ensuring that the forthcoming penal code and existing counter-terror and anti-cyber crime legislation cannot be used to target these groups.
- ii. Amend the Personal Status Law and create policy measures to improve women's freedom to make their own decisions regarding finances, access to employment, and opportunities for work that align with their qualifications.
- iii. Improve the rights and conditions of work for female migrant domestic workers.

## Conclusion & Reflections

This report adopts the UN Women definition of women's economic empowerment, which particularly emphasizes the structural change in societies necessary to advance women's economic empowerment. Within this framework, the exercise of women's rights is both an outcome of economic empowerment and a prerequisite for it. As this report focused on the UPR and CEDAW reporting mechanisms, a rights-based definition such as this allowed for a consistent analysis across categories impacting women's economic empowerment. However, the reliance on quantitative metrics – particularly those provided by the World Bank Group and World Economic Forum – and the prevalence of women's labor force participation in academic literature to gauge progress in women's economic empowerment prompts reflection. Specifically, these indicators raise questions about how this framework is operationalized and invite broader consideration of women's economic empowerment as a system of context-specific, interacting, and interlocking factors that cannot be fully captured by labor force participation, gender gap metrics, or rights indicators.

Beyond methodological reflections, this research also identified the areas more accessible and resistant to change based on international reporting mechanisms' ability to influence measures taken by countries in the MENA region. Given the absence of specific recommendations on the topic and the trend of voluntary measures taken by Iraq, Morocco and Saudi Arabia, financial inclusion appears to be the area most accessible to change. Because it intersects both the social norms and economic systems in place to enable women's economic empowerment, this report suggests additional scrutiny and recommendations to be issued on financial inclusion at CEDAW and UPR sessions. In contrast, while inheritance is commonly present in recommendations over the years, due to the confluence of Sharia law and longstanding norms around this topic, this appears to be one of the more resistant areas to change within measures taken following international reporting sessions. Finally, the social norms around women's economic empowerment, perhaps best demonstrated by Saudi Arabia's 'driving ban' practice – lacking official policy prohibiting it – is an area in which all states both within the MENA region and beyond are often resistant to change. This finding ties women's economic empowerment in the MENA region to broader feminist campaigns to dismantle legal and sociocultural barriers and ensure that women are able to meaningfully participate in economies around the world.

## Limitations

In general, for all three case studies, certain categories – including human trafficking – were excluded in order to maintain the recommendations focus, and to confine the scope of analysis to the legal limits of employment. For this reason, this study did not engage with the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESC), Committee on Migrant Workers (CMW), and other treaty bodies despite their relevance to the many-faceted topic of women's economic empowerment in the MENA region.

Research on Iraq focused predominantly on recent research papers. This excluded other outdated research, even though the consequences of past events can still be felt today, e.g. US invasion. Additionally, more limitations can be identified due to data gaps encountered during research on Iraq. Particularly, data from Iraq's 2023 CEDAW review was unavailable, and information on whether Iraq has supported or noted its 2025 UPR recommendations is also unavailable, as the final outcome report had not yet been published at the time of this report's release. In addition, some research papers mentioned the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, while others only mentioned Iraq. Furthermore, the recent political developments in Palestine and Syria might also have an effect on the region, the economy, and on women; a factor whose effects will be revealed with time.

In regards to Saudi Arabia, it is challenging to obtain information on the gap between policy and practice due to its closed legal system, the prosecution against Civil Society operations, and the high risks of retribution against individual reporting information outside of the country, all of which limits access to verifiable data. This is particularly true for more qualitative measures (such as for agency), and can lead to a reliance on policy such as Vision 2030 and international reporting at CEDAW and UPR over local reporting and perhaps most pressing, representing women who are not in the most privileged positions in Saudi Arabia. This was also observed in the difficulties in securing an interview to review the findings of this report, which has not allowed for a review of findings and recommendations based on firsthand expertise. However, it is critical to acknowledge that this is a continuously evolving situation, as demonstrated by Human Rights Watch's admittance in December 2024. The scope of this research has not permitted an in-depth discussion of the pressing and prevalent issue of migrant domestic workers rights in Saudi Arabia despite this being a substantial part of their labor economy.

Concerning Morocco, the prevalence of informal work among women – especially in rural areas, where data is limited and protections are weak – complicates a full understanding of their economic participation. Additionally, gaps in quantitative data – specifically on wages, labor income, and firm-level microdata – further restrict a comprehensive analysis of gender disparities in the labor market.

## Further Research

This study can be expanded to assess women's economic empowerment, focusing on specific target groups that are vulnerable to additional obstacles such as disabled women, LGBTQ+, migrant domestic workers, and women in rural areas. Further research could examine the impact of conflict on women's economic empowerment in the MENA region and how measures can be adapted accordingly. Another valuable direction could be to focus on the work of women's networks and NGOs across the region, whose close understanding of local realities and knowledge of needs on the ground offer important perspectives and recommendations for effectively promoting women's economic empowerment.

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## **Appendix: Data Collection and Analysis (open access document)**

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