

WOMEN AND GIRLS: MAKING A LASTING DIFFERENCE IN MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

ABOUT THE BRITISH COUNCIL

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.

We work with over 100 countries across the world in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society. Each year we reach over 20 million people face-to-face and more than 500 million people online, via broadcasts and publications. Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body.

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

This brief is part of a wider study undertaken by ODI that reflects on the work of the British Council in relation to the empowerment of women and girls between 2010 and 2015, generating recommendations on ways to improve on the existing offer through the identification of strengths, gaps and opportunities in this area. An important dimension of the analysis relates to the British Council's use of its cultural relations approach in its work on gender equality – that is, how much it shows a deep understanding of the context, promotes trust, works in partnership and fosters participation.

The study analyses impact with respect to five outcome areas for women and girls' empowerment to tackle gender inequality:

- (i) increased awareness and agency
- (ii) fairer access to opportunities and resources
- (iii) dialogue, collaboration and collective action
- (iv) supportive policy and institutional reform
- (v) changes in attitudes, beliefs, practices and discriminatory social norms

The focus of this brief is on how British Council programmes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have contributed to achieving results for women and girls across those five outcome areas.



BRITISH COUNCIL’S WORK ON WOMEN AND GIRLS’ EMPOWERMENT IN MENA

The British Council has over 70 years of experience in supporting sustainable change and improving people’s lives in the Middle East and North Africa. Decades of experience in this challenging and ever-changing region has led to powerful, long-term relationships on the ground in the public, private and voluntary sectors, valuable high-level networks, and a sensitive and comprehensive understanding of the region. It has offices across 17 countries and territories in the region.

The portfolio of projects that directly or indirectly impact on the lives of women and girls is diverse and includes work in the areas of personal development and capacity building, sports for development, peacebuilding and justice, volunteering and collective action; education, and the arts. Some of the projects ensure gender parity in participation, which is a positive step, while others have made more profound commitments toward contributing to improve the situation of women and girls and gender equality. While each country in the region decides what specific projects they implement, and sets their objectives depending on the country’s context as well as on resources and funding opportunities available, there has been a commitment at the global and regional level to increase the focus on women and girls. A regional strategy on the women and girls portfolio is yet to be developed.

Here we present five projects from countries in MENA that illustrate how the British Council is contributing to women and girls’ empowerment. It is important to note that while the projects are provided as examples of work in one outcome area, most of the projects have impacts on more than one dimension of empowerment.

This study conducted in-depth research in two countries in the region: Egypt and Tunisia. This brief presents five projects from these two countries that illustrate important achievements in these five outcome areas.

WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN PUBLIC LIFE (WPIPL), MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (2012–PRESENT)

The WPIPL programme was funded by the British FCO’s Arab Partnership Initiative through DFID in Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, where it ended in 2015, and later extended to Jordan, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories, where it will be completed by March 2017. The purpose of the programme is to build women’s capacities and broad-based support to increase their active involvement in public life, including national and local political processes.

In Egypt, WPIPL was implemented in partnership with a group of CSOs and helped women engage with policy-makers by sustaining their effort at advocating for a women quota in the parliamentary elections to be included in the constitution.

One participant interviewed for this study stressed that it was very hard to change perceptions around women in politics in Egypt: ‘Women are seen as voters and not to be voted for. Electoral results show this. WPIPL tried to challenge this but social and cultural norms around women in politics are very hard to change.’

Another beneficiary suggested women in Egypt did not have adequate legislation to secure the protection of women’s rights and guarantee such rights. She also said there was a cultural problem resulting from male dominance. For her, ‘The programme came as a surprise. It was useful as it had legislation at the core of action research,’ which, as a lawyer, she thought important. She also noted how, as a result of the action research, she was able to witness the change in the mind-set, abilities, perceptions and concepts of the group working with her. For example, while previously some of her collaborators did not believe in women’s rights, they now advocate for them.

In Tunisia, WPIPL was delivered in partnership with the Coalition of Women’s Organisations, composed of 30 CSOs across Tunisia. The focus group discussion with members of the coalition highlighted some important findings for this study. Firstly, while women’s political participation is low in Tunisia, the female president of the coalition emphasised the need to support women’s economic empowerment and address the challenge of unemployment and poverty in the country, therefore providing women with means of survival: ‘In some rural areas women work in agriculture as well as in construction but they are paid half the money men are paid and work mostly informally.’ Secondly, she suggested a need to challenge social and cultural norms to avoid the clash between reformed laws and an unchanged mentality among average citizens.

The programme raised awareness through workshops within the community, and Social Action Projects (SAPs) made women more active and aware of the public space. One participant said that, after taking part in the workshop, she decided to make women more aware of the electoral process in her community and address the corruption observed within institutions. However, the limited funding provided through the SAPs could not sustain some activities, such as electoral campaigning of women candidates. Finally, the male communication officer of the coalition stressed the need to get men involved in activities aimed at empowering women: ‘I am a man and I want women to get involved and be equal. We need to work to train young men and young leaders in their local communities.’

Thus, the project contributed to raise awareness and agency of women it reached, and it made some basic progress to improve social norms that typically exclude women from public life, while contributing to institutional change by using robust evidence and civil society engagement.

SPRINGBOARD, EGYPT (2012–PRESENT)

The British Council initiated the Springboard programme in collaboration with the Springboard Consultancy¹ in the Middle East and North Africa in 2005 to empower women and help them realise their potential and achieve success in their personal and professional lives. Springboard is a women’s self-development programme that provides personal and work development opportunities for women in the region, challenging public perceptions of their roles within and contributions to their societies. Women assess themselves, set goals and develop practical interpersonal skills and the self-confidence necessary to achieve success in their lives.

In Egypt, this was offered as a paid service to Vodafone and Baker Hughes and implemented across six governorates and as a community programme through NGOs and through work within three universities. Two international master trainers and 22 licensed trainers have received the Springboard certification in Egypt, and 900 women have received the cascade training.

The British Council staff, implementing partners and beneficiaries report benefits beyond the individual level. Springboard has the potential to enhance the quality of education to promote women’s access to opportunities and resources, as well as challenging social and cultural norms – two of the empowerment outcome areas. Indeed, the licensed Springboard trainer said, ‘Introducing Springboard in universities has a number of benefits related to: the ability of female students to perform well academically; the establishment of trustful and respectful relations between teachers and students... In that sense, it is going to improve the quality of higher education.’

¹ <http://www.springboardconsultancy.com/british-council-empowers-women-with-career-development-s/>

Referring to the implementation of Springboard at Asyut University, she added:

The Asyut model ... is linked to a big institution that collaborates; it is sustainable because it creates a pool of trainers embedded in university...; it is institutionalised... and is needs-based. Asyut is a marginalised governorate bound by traditions that restrict the role of women in society, male-dominated and patriarchal, that only acknowledges women's reproductive role and not their economic and social role. It is a society where women's participation is very limited.

Springboard participants reported a number of outcomes during a focus group discussion, such as growing self-confidence. One interviewee noted, 'I improved my self-confidence and being in media that is very important. Before Springboard I consulted male family members before doing anything, now I just do things.' Another said, 'I felt liberated by ties and bonds that I had before.' Yet another respondent explained that her parents told her, 'You are going to be trained but in the end you are going to get married and stay at home.' This sparked a discussion in the family, something she felt satisfied with as it illustrated a change in dynamics: 'Women can change the perception of the community towards women that she can be effective as a working woman and bring up children.'

While more systematic data from participants about the changes Springboard has triggered in their lives are needed, the information collected for this study suggests those participating have learnt useful skills that will enable them to have access to professional opportunities and resources, greater self-confidence and become more interested in having more active professional lives. This indicates that the programme is contributing to enhancing young women's access to resources and opportunities, as well as to their individual power and agency.

KARAMA, TUNISIA (2014–16)

Karama², which was set up as a pilot, was designed by British Council Tunisia and the main implementing local partner, the Tunisian Association of Management and Social Stability (TAMSS), to enhance the role of civil society in the promotion and protection of the rights of women in disadvantaged areas of Tunisia. The total funding was £250,000 with co-financing from the EU, British Council and TAMSS.

To inform the project's design, the British Council project manager explained that they did background research with partners and found 'Violence against women and citizenship were very popular in light of the upcoming elections but also because nobody addressed this issue [violence] before and it's a real issue in Tunisia and is slowly becoming less of a taboo, the space is opening and people are talking about it.'

Women victims of violence were targeted by the local NGOs, including in areas outside Tunis and in marginalised Tunisian suburbs. Policy links were limited to the Ministry of Women Affairs (MWA), with cooperation between TAMSS and MWA outside the scope of the project to develop two additional centres for VAW. Given that the subject matter of VAWG is relatively new in Tunisia, addressing it requires enhancing the capacities and knowledge of organisations interested in working on it. This was one of the project's aims. British Council partners identified the need to ensure a shared understanding of underpinning values when addressing such a sensitive subject to deliver clear messages within the community. This was done with strategic dialogue and engagement between the implementing partners and the community.

The short timeframe of the programme (18 months) made it difficult to produce change within the communities involved and assess the impact on the lives of beneficiaries. Despite the clear challenges, the EU representative observed that the project exceeded the expected results. Positive outcomes included the creation of and access to an extended network of organisations working within the national gender space, which was supported by British Council, as well as opening up dialogue and action to address 'violence against women', which is considered a taboo topic. Evidence from the project showed enhanced knowledge and skills for both participants in the workshops and NGO personnel. The centres established through the programme have provided a range of services that have reached 1,420 women who attended the awareness-raising workshops on citizenship and women's rights; 2,439 women attended the workshops on violence against women; 400 women received psychological support (personal or in group sessions) and 10 cases were recorded in total of women who benefited from legal support.

By building the capacity of local organisations working with women and strengthening the network of women with an understanding of issues concerning violence against women, the British Council planted a seed for collective action and collaborative work on this important area in the future. Other empowerment outcome areas to which the programme contributed include increasing awareness for participating women about VAWG and to work through partners to promote institutional change in favour of women.

It will be essential to build on the lessons learnt and networks established through this project when developing other in-country gender projects in the future. Also, it is in the interest of the organisation to ensure sustainability of projects and efficient use of resources by establishing synergies among projects in country and at the regional level.

MY RIGHT, EGYPT (2015–PRESENT)

My Right³ is a partnership between the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the British Council, in collaboration with civil society representative organisations⁴. Valued at £1m, the programme is co-funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). It aims to contribute to the reduction of violence against women (VAWG) and helps women know and understand their rights.

The programme has established women support centres in Egypt, which dispense expert legal advice to women and girls who are subject to violence. Psychological and social support is also there to help women who are over 18 years old. Cases that fall outside the women support centres' remit are referred to the appropriate bodies. The MoJ has made spaces available for centres inside the courts of four cities that according to national statistics have the highest rates of violence. The MoJ also recruited individuals from among its staff who can deliver free, quality support and who have been through extensive training by UK and Egyptian organisations to respond to cases of violence against women⁵. A community and a male engagement strand have been included to raise awareness among young people and men about the centres (students in universities, men working in civil society and community leaders) and issues of violence against women through training. The community strand supports locally led SAPs to address violence against women. The training has been taking place in the four cities since December 2015, thus it is too early to assess the impact on individuals or communities. Alongside the programme, there will be a campaign to challenge the social acceptance of VAWG.

2 www.karama-dignite.org/en/presentation-en/

3 <http://www.britishcouncil.org/en/programmes/society/my-right>

4 Appropriate Communication Techniques for Development Centre, Sting Consultancy, HarassMap and Victim Support in the UK

5 See Section 6 on empowering women and girls through volunteering and collective action in this report.

The implementing partners and stakeholders interviewed agreed the project reflects a deep understanding of the local context in the training toolkits and responds to local needs. The male engagement trainer at HarassMap pointed out that domestic violence and rape inside and outside the family is high in Egypt: ‘To empower these women means to give them the space to take action and support them not to protect them... In the case of rape, women should not be pushed but given the space to voice their problems.’ The project is giving women the space in the form of centres within family courts, ‘a place where only MoJ has jurisdiction and where women feel protected’, as one of the judges interviewed explained.

A high-level representative from MoJ stressed that My Right adopts an innovative approach by providing women with services before they undertake legal action. She also appreciated the seriousness, commitment and strict methodology of the British Council. This indicates that the British Council’s strategy to work with the government and reflect an understanding of the local context can make the process stronger. Whereas the legal consultant acknowledged that it was too early to assess the impact of the programme on women and girls, she also said that, ‘Slowly but strongly the project is achieving a paradigm shift from a narrow understanding of justice focused on punishment to a broader understanding of justice that considers the victim and the witnesses.’

Implementing partners agreed what was exceptional about this project in the Egyptian context was its ability to bring together government, civil society, youth and men around such an important issue for Egyptian society. The male engagement trainer at HarassMap said, ‘This is the first project that engages with MoJ and we hope that in five years these offices will spread across the country in every court... What My Right is doing working directly with MoJ is a huge success.’

Thus, by engaging with the government and working through existing institutions and CSOs, My Right contributes positively to developing a supportive policy and institutional environment for vulnerable women, while helping strengthen individual power and agency for women victims of violence. In addition, working with men and youth reflects a good understanding of how change in attitudes and social norms – in this case those linked to violence against women – can be achieved only by taking greater root in the community.

PREMIER SKILLS, EGYPT (2007–PRESENT)

The British Council’s major sports initiative is Premier Skills⁶, a global programme delivered in partnership with the Premier League that uses football to develop a brighter future for young people around the world, primarily through training courses run by Premier League club coaches for grassroots football coaches and referees. Since 2013, the programme has run in 25 countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, South and East Asia, and South America.

Here we present findings from one of these countries - Egypt - where the programme engages young Egyptians and is running in various locations in the country. Since 2013, 83 community coaches have been trained by Premier League coaches (32 of them women) and a further 97 new coaches (55 of them women) by the Egyptian coach educators (master trainers). About 30 per cent of the young beneficiaries (13,274) participating in community projects and events are young women⁷.

Premier Skills in Egypt has made positive inroads at the policy level. The project organised a regional policy conference that involved ministerial delegations from Egypt, Sudan and Tunisia to discuss how to empower women through football. This led to the lifting of restrictions on girls playing football in youth centres. At the grassroots level, four local football projects were recently funded by the British Council, all of them with a specific gender focus and in partnership with key stakeholders such as the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Education, the Egyptian Football Association and universities.

As a result of the programme, male and female coach educators are all working as football coaches, so the programme has become an employment opportunity for them. They are cascading the activities to other females to become coaches which is seen by programme staff as promoting direct change in social norms. A beneficiary interviewed for this study stressed that, by bringing males and females together, boys listen to the opinions of girls and understand they have opinions and respect them more: ‘Now they know they have something of substance changing the concept and their way of looking at girls.’

During a focus group discussion with Premier Skills participant said, ‘People were not used to girls playing football. They would say, “Why is she doing so? It’s not proper for a girl to do so.” But the community is starting to accept this gradually.’ Another beneficiary highlighted that:

I gained confidence and this will be reflected in everything in my life. If my husband does not like the fact that I am a woman and do sports, I will bring up the new generation in a way that they will, changing them at home.’ A trainer also noted the ‘benefit of having girls trained who will then train little girls who will know that they can do this.

Findings suggest that the programme encourages collective participation, broadens perspectives, provides opportunities to gain experience, increases self-esteem and offers new theoretical information and practical experience. This implies that it is making positive contributions to three of the empowerment outcome areas: increased awareness and self-confidence for participating young women; fairer access to opportunities and resources for female coaches; and promoting changes in discriminatory attitudes and practices which used to exclude women and girls from playing football.



6 <https://www.britishcouncil.org/society/sport/current-mes/premier-skills>
7 UK statistics from Premier Skills in Egypt since August 2013 provided by Susanna Carmody, British Council Senior Project Manager.

Photo credit: Hamdy Reda

The examples presented illustrate how the British Council is implementing programmes with important actions across the five empowerment outcomes that frame this area of work. The examples show that in most cases, programmes contribute across a number of outcome areas, contributing by subverting gender stereotypes, helping change discriminatory social norms – particularly in relation to violence against women and girls and their equal participation in society. Most programmes have also been able to promote participants' awareness, agency and self-confidence as an initial step to achieving progress in other outcome areas.

The British Council in MENA faces the important challenge of working in a very dynamic context, with active young people that face important problems such as conflict and unemployment. There are particular challenges for adolescent women and girls who want to be recognised as equal members of society at all levels. As such, it will be important to frame its work on women and girls' empowerment in a culturally sensitive way that engages partners – from government to local CSOs – to work together to put in place projects to promote sustainable changes in the medium term, particularly by involving active young women as promoters. It will be very important as well to ensure that young women have equitable access to the British Council's programmes designed to generate better educational and work opportunities for young people. Currently young women might face barriers that do not guarantee their equal access, so the British Council needs to work explicitly and strategically to address those barriers and include women by gender mainstreaming its work in English, Arts, Education and Society.

The breath of the work in this region, characterised by such diverse countries, as well as the confidence the British Council has gained from key stakeholders, should serve as a platform to remain deeply engaged and use evidence from its projects - which require more consistency and systematic monitoring and evaluation - to influence changes at a greater scale and to deploy its cultural relations approach to highlight the importance of women and girls' empowerment to economic, social and political transformation amongst its partners at all levels in countries and in the region. Moreover, it is in the best interests of the organisation to ensure sustainability of projects and an efficient use of resources.

The development of a regional strategy to address women and girls' empowerment placed within a global framework can be the first step in that direction. Adopting a regional perspective is not detrimental to achieve a deep understanding of the countries' contexts. On the contrary, providing a regional strategy on women and girls' empowerment, offering guidance and stimulating synergies among country offices across programmes has the potential to enhance the impact of the organisation at the country and regional levels while strengthening the British Council's track record on women and girls' empowerment in country and region consistently. The organisation is well positioned to develop its view and tools to achieve women and girls' empowerment based on global, regional and local trends and research.

The British Council should ensure that projects are designed and financed consistently in a way to reflect a deep understanding of the local and regional contexts as well as of the mission of the organisation which has been developing significantly in the past few years. Resources should be used efficiently and in a way to avoid one-time projects whose impact is hard to assess and to become long lasting. Placing projects within a country, regional and global strategy on women and girls' empowerment would help to avoid these shortcomings and enhance the profile of the organisation as a key player within the gender field.