

AMSS 41st ANNUAL CONFERENCE

“Religious Dimensions of Democratization
Processes in Muslim-Majority Nations”

Cosponsored By:
Yale Divinity School
&

Council on Middle East Studies - The MacMillan Center
Yale University, New Haven, CT

Saturday, September 29, 2012

ABSTRACT

“Gender and Personal Status Law in the MENA Region:
Between Secular-Liberal and Islamist Visions”

By: Celene Ayat Lizzio
(Ph.D. Candidate, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA)

Since the passage of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and well before, countries in the Middle Eastern and North African region have been embroiled in disagreements over how to best secure the well-being of the family. This has entailed questioning the suitability of traditionally delineated gender-roles that are predicated on a sexual division of labor, and in some cases has even led to tenuous overhauls of personal status laws. However, new laws and proposals for further women-friendly, personal status amendments have garnered widespread opposition, most vociferously from religious elites and Islamist politicians. Despite their notable gains, such as raising the legal age for marriage and securing a mother’s rights to confer her citizenship in most countries, the tasks for gender activists in the region remain onerous. Priorities include establishing stronger penal laws for prosecuting rape and domestic violence, better legal apparatuses to ameliorate sexual discrimination, as well as gaining greater political representation through reserved seats for women in governmental bodies at all levels. In light of these dynamics, and with attention to country-specific as well as regional trends, my paper addresses the following questions: In countries most heavily impacted by the Arab Spring, how, if at all, have hard-won gender reforms fared under new governments? How is religion being mobilized simultaneously as a catalyst for social change as well as a mechanism to preserve the status quo when it comes to dispensing gender-based rights? In current political climates, what strategies for reform have proved most effective? What are some salient challenges and prospects for development in the immediate and long-term future? Throughout my analysis I give attention to the limits of the law and legal reform in mediating social realities, and discuss how disparate notions of women’s empowerment at play in public debates construct radically different priorities for women’s social engagement within and beyond the domestic sphere.