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Melissa El Feghali

To cite this article: Feghali, M. (2022). Scouts Versus Gender Discrimination: An Ongoing Fight. *Al Raida*, 45(2) and 46(1), 31-41. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v45i2.1897

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v45i2.1897>

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Corresponding author: Melissa El Feghali

Author contact: melissa.elfeghali@lau.edu

Article type: Article

Published online: 31<sup>st</sup> January 2022

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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## Scouts Versus Gender Discrimination: An Ongoing Fight

Melissa El Feghali

### Abstract

One of the largest youth movements in the world, the Scout Movement can play an important part in the fight against gender discrimination. This starts with raising awareness about gender inequality among its 50 million members. To date, scouts have played a major role in breaking gender norms. This work includes awareness raising and educational initiatives, notably in the Middle East and North Africa region. This paper reviews these initiatives and simultaneously points to future actions that the Scout Movement can take to strengthen its approach to gender equality.

### Introduction

The Scout Movement is a voluntary non-political movement dedicated to the education of the youth. It gives them the opportunity to further develop their potential and skills on different levels, whether it be emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual, or physical. It helps them become responsible young global citizens and active members of their local, national, and international communities. The World Organization of the Scout Movement, known as the WOSM or World scouting, is the organization currently governing the Scout Movement at the world level. It is an independent, non-political, non-governmental organization, open to everybody regardless of their gender, origin, race, or ethnicity. Being one of the largest youth movements in the world, with more than 40 million members, scouting can be a great asset for fighting gender discrimination and biases through its diverse programs, events, activities, projects, and initiatives. Scouts can become agents of positive change and in turn, inspire others to act as well. More specifically,

scouts can contribute to major changes in regions where it is most needed, such as in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This paper will discuss how scouting has played an important role in raising awareness on gender issues and in fighting gender discrimination in the MENA region.

Indeed, on International Women's Day, the WOSM asked scouts across the world how can they "step it up" for gender equality as scouts (What is gender equality? How can you as a Scout #StepItUp4Gender, 2016). One of the people who was interviewed, May Abdelhadi, a scout leader at the Sadaqa Palestinian Girl Guides Group, said that as scouts, it is our role to create a safe and equal environment for everyone to participate in. Additionally, she stated that as scout leaders educate their members about diversity, rights, and respect, they are contributing to the support and empowerment of marginalized groups through the future projects and community services that their members will plan. Recently, the WOSM has invested in organizing gender-related events in the MENA region. In fact, it held its first Women and Girls Empowerment workshop in the Arab Region; the four-day event took place in Saudi Arabia (Arab Scout Region join forces to empower women and girls through Scouting, 2019). The main purpose of this workshop was to support National Scout Organizations (NSOs) from Arab countries in educating boys and girls on the importance of women in scouting. Men and women worked together by sharing ideas on how to enhance the inclusion and engagement of women and girls in scouting. Through this event, it was affirmed that Scouts across the region are putting women's and girls' empowerment at the top of their agendas by designing new action plans and agreeing to move forward as more unified and equal communities. A scout leader from Egypt, Hoda El Agaty, reported that "the workshop was a great success on many levels, one of them was witnessing the constructive dialogue and willingness of men to empower women and girls and achieve equal opportunities for them" (Arab Scout Region join forces to empower women and girls through Scouting, 2019). Additionally, Dr. Abdullah bin Sulaiman Al Fahad, vice-president of the Saudi Arabian Scout Association, stated during the event that scouting is about developing young people's capacities and that the most important skills in life are needed by both men and women to better contribute to society (Arab Scout Region join forces to empower women and girls through Scouting, 2019).



Figure 1. Adapted from Arab Scout Region join forces to empower women and girls through Scouting, 2019, World Scouting. <https://www.scout.org/es/node/547097>



Figure 2. Adapted from Arab Scout Region join forces to empower women and girls through Scouting, 2019, World Scouting. <https://www.scout.org/es/node/547097>

Scouting has and is still positively influencing youth and spreading awareness on issues of gender equality and the important role of women in the community. Abeer Hamed Baalousha, a scout leader from Saudi Arabia, talks about the great impact that scouting has on women and girls as she has personally witnessed and experienced it (The Important Role of Scouts in the Development of Girls and Young Women in Saudi Arabia, 2020). She mentioned the several opportunities made available for girls in Saudi Arabia through the Scout Movement and emphasized the important role played by scouting during the COVID-19 pandemic in developing young girls' skills. Girls have acquired the true meaning of service, volunteering, helping their community in times of crisis, and making their own decisions according to their own abilities and preferences. Moreover, the Scout Movement has made the world's largest coordinated youth contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), so far, through its initiative "Scouts for SDGs" (Scouts for SDGs, 2018). An official website is available online for anyone who wants to learn more about the SDGs and the contributions made by Scouts toward achieving those goals. SDG Number 5, Gender Equality, has a section with a to-do list, an information section to know more about this goal, and about projects from around the world that are done by scouts to attain this goal (Scouts for SDGs, 2018).

Despite the numerous efforts of the Scout Movement in the MENA region to fight gender discriminations, the WOSM and NSOs have only just scratched the surface. Countless suggestions and potential solutions can be implemented to strengthen this commitment to gender equality. It is important to make global scouting resources available to scouts in the MENA region. With the development of technology, sharing ideas and projects online has become easier and more efficient. For example, the WOSM has developed a category on its official website dedicated to sharing projects and initiatives done by scouts across the world. However, scouting groups in the Arab region are often not aware that this information exists. Thus, promoting this official World Scouting website to all members of the organization is a first simple, yet crucial step to be done in the MENA region. NSOs from the MENA region are not very active or present among the projects being posted on this website; this does not necessarily indicate that no action is being taken by

them, but rather that they might not be aware of certain initiatives and opportunities made available to them by the WOSM.

It is true that scouting is commonly conceptualized as primarily learning how to care for the environment and how to problem-solve and survive in difficult circumstances. But scouts are taught much more than that: they learn valuable skills in order to make the world a better place. In fact, a major step towards achieving this goal was taken at the 41<sup>st</sup> World Scout Conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, where a new partnership with UN Women's "HeForShe" initiative was created through which millions of scouts will strive for a more gender-equal world (HeForShe partners with the Scout Movement to advance gender equality, 2017). The first output of this partnership completed in the MENA region was the implementation of the "HeForShe" Action Kit that was developed by the UN Women and WOSM for scout leaders. This kit includes a series of activities designed to get young people of all ages to think about gender equality and what they can do about it. Additionally, a website dedicated to this partnership was developed by the WOSM and includes the kit and several other steps to be taken to start one's journey as part of the initiative (#HeForShe, n.d.).

During an international scouting event, the Roverway 2018, scouts were interviewed about gender equality and the Scout Movement. Men rovers—male scouts aged 18 to 25—were asked about why men and boys should stand up for gender equality. Overall, the answers were very similar and highlighted similar conclusions: the lack of gender equality hurts everyone, not just women and girls, and the effort to fight gender inequality should not be one-sided but rather a joint effort from all genders (World Scouting, 2018). This shows that men and boys in scouting are willing to take part in the fight against gender discrimination and that they acknowledge the importance of their involvement in this opposition. As a first step, men and boys in scouting can partner up with activists from the MENA region and learn from them. For example, Laith Abu Taleb, a young activist in Jordan, redefined masculinity by leading workshops throughout his country and has mobilized more than 22,000 HeForShe commitments (HeForShe, 2016). In Jordan, many youths would like to participate in the HeForShe movement but are not capable to do so because their parents

would not allow them to interact with people of the opposite sex. As a man, Laith Abu Taleb stated that his role is to deconstruct the stereotypes that are present in small local circles. Scouts in the MENA region can contribute to the “HeForShe” initiative by partnering up with people like Laith, and encouraging scout members to join the movement.

NSOs and local scout groups in the MENA region can also implement ideas from previously completed “HeForShe” projects, such as the bicycle rally in India. The main idea behind this event was to create a symbolic image of gender inequality. Toward that end, they used a picture of a bicycle to represent the two genders in harmony and used the theme “You are not stuck in traffic, you are traffic.” Another interesting campaign that scouts in the MENA region can participate in is the “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes” campaign, an international men’s march to stop rape, sexual assault, and gender violence. This event would be a great contribution from scout boys and men to the fight against gender violence and discrimination. Similarly, MENA NSOs and local scout groups can participate in global scout campaigns, such as the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) campaign “STOP THE VIOLENCE” to end violence against women and girls. As part of this campaign, scouts have been tackling violence in their communities through advocacy, education, awareness-raising, community action, and research. A website is available and includes past projects made by scouts from all around the world that can be used as a source of inspiration for future actions.

All the actions that were taken and are currently being taken by the WOSM, NSOs, and by local groups in the MENA region are not to be discarded, but before seeking to make change and influence others and fight gender discrimination one should start with oneself. In other words, the scout organizations from all around the world should seek to fight gender discrimination inside their organizations before extending their cause to their local, national or international communities. But the question is, are these activities gender balanced? Is there really equality between boys and girls in Scouting? For this reason, the WOSM, in partnership with the Swedish Guide and Scout Association, has published a handbook entitled “Him ‘n Her – A Handbook on Scouting and Equal Opportunity for Boys and Girls”. This book is written with the firm conviction

that Scouting has not yet come that far down the road towards gender equality however, reading this book will be a step towards this.

One example of this gender imbalance in scout programming worldwide is the fact that today there are still two competing organizations in the Scout Movements, WOSM and WAGGGS (The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts): the WOSM has been gradually including girls, meanwhile the WAGGGS is restricted to girls, only. Gender inequality is rampant in the Boys and Girl Scouts of America organizations as well; there is an obvious “gender-ization” of skills that are learned with the scouts (McGowan, 2013). Girl Scouts earn badges based on creativity and domestic skills, while Boy Scouts earn merits that involve more rugged and outdoor activities. It is the existence of these kinds of gender separation practices that limits young members’ abilities to overcome societal gender norms. In Europe, scouting organizations have started to adopt the concept of mixed troops and patrols where boys and girls are included in the same activities rather than being separated based on gender. Contrarily, countries in the MENA region still divide their members based on age and sex, and often have restrictive rules regarding direct interactions of the genders in activities or camps. Even if the camp includes all the members at once, the activities are still divided. Furthermore, in certain scout groups in the MENA region, gender stereotypes can be seen through the official uniform that is worn by the members at official events and ceremonies. While boys can wear pants or shorts with regular shoes, girls have to wear skirts and tie their hair (Figures 3 and 4).

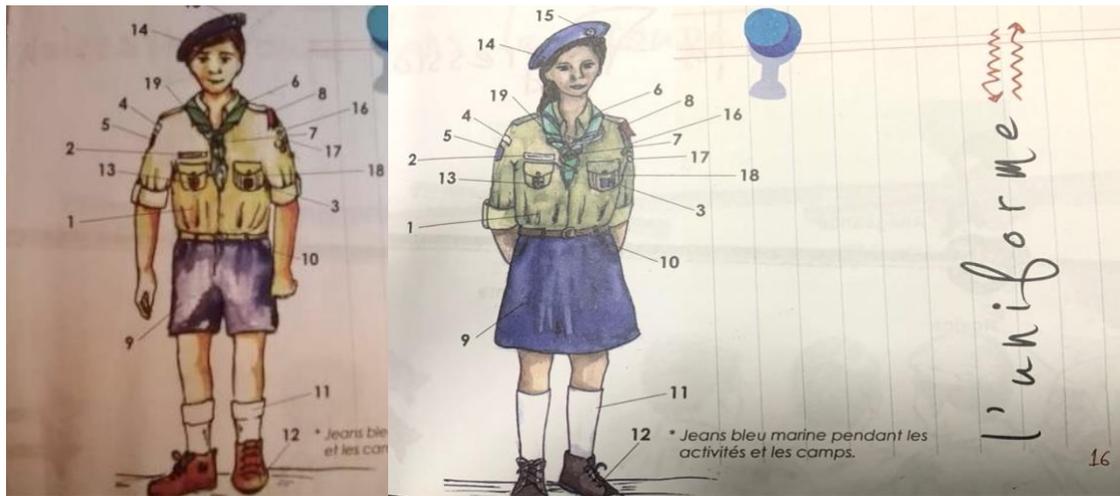


Figure 3, Figure 4. Adapted from "L'uniforme", 2012, Kabestan, 2, p.16. Copyright 2012 by Association des Scouts De l'Indépendance

Certain countries replicate their specific gender discriminatory practices at international events organized by the WOSM such as the World Scout Jamboree or the World Scout Moot. NSOs request special patrols that are girls-only and require no interaction with the opposite sex in activities that mainly focus on cross-culture communication and inclusion, which is quite ironic. In fact, Saudi girl scouts did not participate in the World Scout Jamboree until the 24<sup>th</sup> Jamboree that was held in West Virginia in 2019 (Saudi girl scouts attend 24th US Jamboree, 2019).



Figure 5. Adapted from Saudi girl scouts attend 24th US jamboree, 2019.

Finally, in a study done on scouts in Russia, Slovakia, Portugal, and Denmark, it was shown that even though leaders try to divide the tasks to include both boys and girls in activities, gender finds a way to structure the divisions of work and duties: “boys are glad to have girls in their teams as girls prepare meals, while boys deal with woodwork and hard jobs” (Nielson, 2002, p. 56). Also, it was noticed that girls get attention when they did not work well enough or did not take care of their health and are often perceived as fragile beings compared to boy scouts (Nielson, 2002). More attention should be given to the non-stereotypical and individual desires of the young members of the Scout Movement: the girls who love sports and physical challenges and the boys who love crafting activities and cooking meals. Both boys and girls feel restricted by the other gender in the work tasks that they are allowed to do. Boys want to cook more; girls want to do some of the more tough or exciting tasks.

Making scouting more gender-equitable does not imply that the main concept of activities should be changed. What should be worked on, however, is the gender culture and expectations surrounding these basic activities. This means that more attention should be paid to three aspects in the practice of scouting: the perceived dichotomy or separation between activities and relationships, the hierarchy between activities and relationships, and the underrating of girls’ competence in activities. As long as these aspects are not addressed, the girls will remain “the second sex” in scouting, left to negotiate their gender on unequal terms with the boys. The Scout Movement is crucial to help fight gender discriminations, stereotypes and biases through the youth which are the future leaders who will shape a better world. Nonetheless, being aware of one’s own problems and fixing them is an essential first step, followed by actions to be taken on and for others in our communities.

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