

Legal systems in Arab League countries failing rape survivors, Equality Now analysis finds

Discriminatory laws and poor enforcement foster victim-blaming and harmful stereotypes, enabling impunity for perpetrators in League of Arab States countries.

CAIRO, EGYPT, December 31, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Legal analysis by [Equality Now](#) reveals how Member States of the League of Arab States (LAS) are not adequately defining, prosecuting, and addressing rape, leaving women and girls without effective protection. Equality Now is calling for governments to conduct urgent and comprehensive law reform and invest in implementation to strengthen legal systems and improve access to justice and support for rape survivors.



Equality Now's report, [In Search of Justice: Rape Laws in the Arab States](#), identifies how

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Dima Dabbous, Equality Now

discriminatory penal codes and poor enforcement of laws foster victim-blaming, perpetuate harmful stereotypes, and enable perpetrators to evade criminal liability.

Dima Dabbous, Equality Now's Representative in the Middle East and North Africa, explains: “Access to justice is hindered by excessive evidence requirements based on narrow legal interpretations of rape, such as those requiring proof of physical force. Various forms of sexual violence are not adequately recognised legally, and

critically, no Arab League country has explicitly criminalised marital rape. A few still permit rapists to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims, although some countries have recently closed “marry your rapist” loopholes.

“We urge League of Arab States members to act now. Sexual violence laws need urgent and comprehensive reforms that are grounded in consent, survivor dignity, and enforcement mechanisms that actually work.”



The report covers all 22 LAS Member States: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

A deeper evaluation of Egypt and Lebanon highlights stark disconnects between laws on the books and the reality in police stations and courts. Survivors frequently encounter disbelief, rape myths, and procedural hurdles that deter reporting and obstruct cases from advancing.

RAPE LAWS BASED ON FORCE, NOT CONSENT

Most LAS countries use force-based definitions of rape, failing to recognise sex without free and informed consent as rape. In Djibouti, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine (West Bank), Somalia, Sudan, and Syria, rape is solely defined by the use of force.

Some LAS countries distinguish how rape can occur when perpetrators exploit positions of authority, with harsher penalties often applied. This reflects some understanding that genuine consent cannot exist where there is coercion, manipulation, or unequal power dynamics.

However, no LAS country has adopted a law that comprehensively reflects the broad spectrum of circumstances where exploiting a position of trust, dependency, or vulnerability could negate consent, such as relationships involving teachers and students, family members, or a religious leader and follower.

RAPE SURVIVORS FACE LEGAL AND PROCEDURAL BARRIERS

International law defines rape as any act of sexual penetration, no matter how slight, using any body part or object, committed without the victim's full and informed consent.

Many LAS countries only classify vaginal penetration by a penis as rape, while other forms of non-consensual penetration are categorised as different, lesser offences, with significantly lighter penalties that reinforce harmful hierarchies of sexual violence.

Survivors are often expected to report rape within 72 hours and undergo invasive medical

exams. They are also typically required to provide proof of physical resistance. When visible injuries or forensic evidence aren't available, survivors' complaints are usually dismissed.

Implementation of laws is weak and inconsistent. Inadequate training of justice sector personnel, insufficient legal aid, and limited psychosocial support foster justice systems that are disbelieving, indifferent, or hostile to survivors.

Equality Now's examination of rape laws around the world has found that stigma and victim-blaming fuel silence and re-victimisation globally. In LAS countries, women and girls are frequently shamed and discredited for behaviour, dress, or sexual history, while conservative social norms and criminalisation of consensual sexual relations outside marriage make discussions about sexual violence especially difficult.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IS EMBEDDED IN LAWS

High value is placed on women's and girls' chastity, with rape often treated as a crime against "public decency" or the "honour" of the family or tribe, rather than a violation of victims' rights and bodily integrity. Wording in laws such as "assault on a person's honour" and "indecent act" emphasises morality and reputation, reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria all have laws permitting rapists and/or abductors to escape prosecution by marrying their victims. Civil society advocacy has driven the repeal of so-called "marry your rapist" provisions in several countries, but implementation remains inconsistent. Survivors, especially minors, are still sometimes coerced by family, law enforcement, and the judiciary into marrying their rapists.

Although international legal standards prohibit marriage under 18 years old without exception, many LAS countries set a lower legal minimum age, some allowing girls to be wed at nine, while others set no minimum age. Laws banning child marriage are often poorly enforced, enabling sexual violence against children to occur with impunity under the umbrella of marriage.

Marital rape remains effectively legal across all LAS countries. In Jordan, Palestine (West Bank), and Syria, penal codes explicitly exclude the possibility of rape within marriage. Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen go further by codifying in law a husband's "right" to sexual access, regardless of a wife's consent.

Although some LAS countries have domestic violence laws, these often fall short. Instead of recognising rape within marriage, such laws typically address only the physical assault used to gain sexual access and apply lesser charges and penalties.

Gender discrimination in family status laws governing marriage, divorce, inheritance, and custody makes it harder for women to escape abusive relationships by limiting their rights to child custody, property, and financial security. In some countries, family laws vary between

religions, sects, or locations, institutionalising divergent levels of legal protections for women and girls in different communities.

A complex web of political, religious, and socioeconomic forces impedes legal reform. Religious interpretations, particularly those referencing Shari'a law, are invoked to contest aligning national legislation with international women's rights obligations, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The breakdown of law enforcement, healthcare systems, and social protections during armed conflict leaves women and girls especially vulnerable to sexual violence. This risk is heightened considerably by displacement, family separation, and minimal access to safe shelters. Accountability is rare, with survivors denied justice due to legal, procedural, and social barriers remaining long after armed combat ceases.

BLUEPRINT FOR RAPE LAW REFORM

Most LAS countries have ratified UN human rights treaties such as CEDAW, committing themselves to upholding women's rights with the adoption of gender-sensitive legal frameworks. While progress has been made, all LAS states still fall short of international obligations.

Equality Now urges governments, policymakers, legal practitioners, and civil society actors to use our report as a blueprint for concrete, coordinated action. Recommendations include:

- Adopt a comprehensive [consent-based definition of rape](#).
- Ensure laws meet international human rights standards and use gender-sensitive terminology.
- Explicitly criminalise marital rape and repeal all legal provisions permitting impunity through marriage.
- Raise the age of marriage to 18 without exceptions.
- Ensure all non-consensual sexual acts are treated equally and seriously, regardless of gender, penetration type, or marital status.
- Remove legal and procedural requirements that make it burdensomely difficult to prove rape.
- Invest in healthcare, psychosocial services, legal aid, and confidential mechanisms for reporting gender-based violence.
- Train law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, and medical personnel in rights-based, gender-sensitive, survivor-centred approaches.

ABOUT: Equality Now is a worldwide human rights organisation dedicated to securing the legal and systemic change needed to end discrimination against all women and girls, everywhere in the world. Since its inception in 1992, it has played a role in reforming 120 discriminatory laws globally, positively impacting the lives of hundreds of millions of women and girls, their communities and nations, both now and for generations to come.

Working with partners at national, regional, and global levels, Equality Now draws on deep legal expertise and a diverse range of social, political, and cultural perspectives to continue to lead the way in steering, shaping, and driving the change needed to achieve enduring gender equality, to the benefit of all. For more details, go to www.equalitynow.org.

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