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Developing Peace Through Science

By: Yead Mirza

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t is their strategic calculus, the Asia Pacific major pow-
ners as well as other countries do not consider Russia

as a major military power for the region. Although those

Asia Pacific countries understand that Russia’s military

presence is increasing in Europe and Middle East, nearly

that overall Russian military might have an impact in the

Asia Pacific region only for the years to come. Nearly

regional countries were alarmed by Russia’s large scale war
games. The fact that the war games was conducted in the eastern part of Russia – which forms part of the Asia Pacific region, unlike Russia’s western part that forms part of Europe – makes it an alarming development for the Asia Pacific region. According to a Australian news website, the war games, namely Vostok-2018 or East-2018, involved more than 36,000 troops, 36,000 tanks, 100 aircraft, helicopters and drones and 80 warships and support vessels. More alarming was the inclusion of the Chinese military into the war games alongside the Russians. Around 3,000 Chinese troops were said to have taken part in the Russian war games. Troops from Mongolia too joined the drills. Sergey Shoigu, Russian Defense Minister, boasted about the drills saying, “Imagine 36,000 military vehicles mov-
ing at the same time: tanks, armored personnel carriers, battle tanks. We cannot stop them in such conditions as close to a combat situation as possible.” Condemning the drills, NATO said the war games “dem-

idicates Russia’s focus on exercising large-scale con-

flict”. Yead Mirza is an observer of global current affairs and
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Gender and The Arab City

By: Lina Abiarafeh

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e of the top priorities for the United Nations Sus-

tainable Development Agenda is to make cities “inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.” City leaders can take a simple step that would go long way toward achieving this goal: putting the needs of women and girls at the center of the urban planning process. By 2050, the majority of the world’s population will live in urban areas. And yet, while increased urbanization – and the economic access, mobility, and greater autonomy that accompanies it – will generate new opportunities for women, ensuring gender equality will also become more difficult. This concern is especially relevant to the Arab world. In many Arab countries, urban space is, by default, male space. Men act as if they “own” the street, which is reflected in how they walk and how they treat women in public. In many Arab cities, as in true elsewhere, men also are far more likely than women to litter, reinforcing the perception that men consider public spaces to be their proper domains. The irony is that the Arab “street” has long been a stage for feminist progress. Even before Arab women raised their voices during the 2011 Arab Spring, urban spaces played host to feminist protests and served as a political barometer for the rest of society. But urban feminisms are not widely studied by city plan-

ners in the Arab world. Awareness of how public space in Arab cities is gendered, rare and little information has been collected on how women affect – or are affected by – planning decisions. Without a deeper understand-
ing of the socio-cultural roles of Arab women, the region’s streets will remain the domains of men. While sexual harassment is common in Arab cities, at
tention to gender-related violence is not only about safety. Although many women in Arab cities do risk verbal and
physical abuse when they are in public, they must also contend with issues like poor sanitation, limited access to
toilets and clean water, and little privacy. Marginalized groups – like migrants, ethnic and religious minorities, young girls, elderly women, and the disabled – are par-
ticularly vulnerable to discrimination. Solutions, therefore, must consider the full range of so-
cial and cultural challenges that prevent women and girls from moving freely in urban settings. To help cities in the Arab region progress toward greater inclusivity, govern-
ments should focus on key reforms.

For starters, city planners should cooperate with wom-

en’s groups to conduct safety audits and map high-risk areas. By analyzing crime data, for example, planners could determine where to focus improvements such as better lighting and additional policing. When women’s organizations are involved in those types of decisions, they can become safer for women, which in turn improves their access to social, economic, cultural, and political op-

portunities. Next, education systems must be reconfigured to encour-
ge more women and girls to pursue careers in architec-
ture, planning, and urban design. In most Arab cities, girls are often discouraged from choosing careers that are even less accessible to women. To change the patriarchal status quo, we must encourage more young women to enter these fields, and to design modern spaces that are sensitive to women’s needs. Third, cities need standardized methods for measur-
ing the impact of gender on urban environments. A way to achieve this would be to establish scoring systems cre-
ated by and for women; surveys could include questions that work within the legal framework. Women’s decision-making, public transportation habits, and views on housing, recreation, and safety. Finally, urban planners must rethink how they fill public spaces. Consider, for example, historic statues; in many cities, only men are licensed to bronze. Why not women? If gender equality was a criterion in commissioning pub-

lic art, young women and men would grow up knowing that their city was a place where everyone is honored, protected, and respected.

Urban planning is never gender-neutral, and leaders in Arab cities, in particular, must work hard to account for all residents’ views and desires. For women and girls, re-

quirements include safe streets, well-maintained public transportation, and safe buildings. Women also want more rooms for mothers. In a truly equal, everyone’s rights are considered, everyone can access public spaces, and everyone can be involved in the planning process. If planners consistently applied such principles to their work, the Arab city would naturally become a catalyst for women’s rights, and governments would grasp the emerging engines of opportunity for women, everyone benefits. Lina Abiarafeh, Director of the Institute for Women’s Stud-
ies at American University, speaks and publishes frequently on a range of gender issues. In 2018, Apolitical, an international plat-
form that tracks global government, released their 2018 most in-

fluential people in gender policy worldwide.