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Cross-Sectoral and Inter-Sectional Collaboration at #ASPA2018, #ASPA2019 And Beyond

Elevating women's empowerment and leadership in Middle Eastern public administration and civil society has been the theme of the last two panels convened by the ASPA Section on Effective and Sound Administration (SESAME) in the Middle East at [ASPA's Annual Conference](#). What insights have we gained from the research and practice discussed at the panels? What steps have been taken to expand transnational, cross-sector engagement among women? How have these panels helped SESAME to serve its members?

The 2018 panel in Denver, [*Amplifying Women's Leadership across the Middle East*](#), looked at the efforts of four nonprofit organizations to advance the work of women organizers, activists, academics and municipal public servants. The panel idea was conceived by SESAME member Jim Grant, who engaged Emma Alpert of [Just Vision](#) as a panelist. Section executive committee members identified three Denver-based civil society organizations fostering women's leadership in the MENA and other regions.

Just Vision, whose production of the documentary film, *Naila and the Uprising*, chronicles the struggle and achievements of the women's movement during the first Palestinian uprising and continues as an exemplar for nonsectarian grassroots organizing in Israel and Palestine today. [Beirut and Beyond](#) Executive Director/Founder Suzann Mollner presented on the organization's work with Palestinian refugees, providing humanitarian relief and reconciliation in the Levant, along with United States-based educational efforts on their behalf. Larry Sampler, then President of [One Earth Future](#), emphasized the critical role of women in furthering good governance and peacebuilding across the globe. [Meet the Middle East](#) Founder and Executive Director Iman Jodeh described the work of implementing cross-cultural exchanges to improve United States-Middle East relations.

SESAME's March 2019 panel was, ["Strengthening Women's Leadership in Middle Eastern Public Administration and Civil Society and Innovative Approaches to Women's Empowerment."](#) The first presentation, by Dr. Maria D'Agostino, Dr. Meghna Sabharwal and Professor Helisse Levine, current and recent officers of the Section on Women in Public Administration, provided global context on trends, challenges and stereotypes in women's public administration practice. They find that MPA programs should include treatment of, "Gender negotiation," and more gender diversity in authors of class readings, as well as in journal editors. Glass ceilings and cliffs will only be eased when theory and practice address these structural biases and inequities.

On Lebanon, doctoral candidate Zachary Bauer presented surveys about local government and nonprofit officials' on informal and formal collaboration and leaderships styles across gender and other individual characteristics as they associate with cross-sector collaboration. The study, co-authored by Dr. Khaldoun AbouAssi (a former SESAME chair) and Dr. Jocelyn M. Johnston, finds that women appear to collaborate more informally, which is expected since prior research shows that they are more likely to rely on arrangements based on trust, communication and other mechanisms associated with relationship-building.

The third panelist, Just Vision's Emma Alpert, was invited back to reinforce the vital peacebuilding role of women leaders in Palestine and Israel after a year of screenings of *Naila and the Uprising* around the world. The documentary continues to be praised for shedding light on the reality of the First Intifada from the perspective of the Palestinian women who were organizing on the frontlines of the movement, defying stereotypical images that portray the uprising as one characterized by stone-throwing youth confronting Israeli tanks.

International governance consultant and former SESAME treasurer Lyn Boswell offered an analysis of women's rights in light of the #MeToo movement. Interviews of journalists and women victims of human rights abuses in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Twitter narratives of these and other transnational campaigns, uncover gender-based power struggles. In the MENA, interpreting press and social media reporting on women's rights, as well as teaching, research and implementing and evaluating programs in gender equity, call for increased awareness about conscious and unconscious bias. Reducing bias toward women in the Middle East and trans-globally requires listening to and privileging women's experiences from their perspectives.

As the #MeToo research and other presentations suggest, improving interpretive methods is imperative given rising numbers of working women, access to the internet, demands for gender justice and expanded pathways for women leaders. Surveys, comparative studies, documentary filmmaking and other ethnographic methods, and more focus on minimizing bias and maximizing outcomes in academic and training programs will contribute to greater participation and leadership of women in society.

Both panels emphasized the diverse experiences of key stakeholders in the region, as well as the teaching and practice of conflict mediation in public administration. Audience participation was lively. When someone bemoaned lack of trust of emerging women public managers and academics, a panelist responded that to avoid setting women up for failure, incorporate gender-neutral teambuilding and leadership from kindergarten forward and mentor women so that they will be less vulnerable. Another audience member questioned Palestinians' commitment to peace, to which a panelist responded that policy toward the Palestinians needs to change. Other comments reflected a need for evidence-based institutional change, e.g., how to: improve enforcement of the Family and Medical Leave Act in the United States; convene inclusive stakeholder dialogues on policy reform, locally and nationally; and foster nonviolent communication. Scholars and practitioners should pursue more international research and pilot projects through the lenses of women's leadership and cross-sector governance, starting with training in common languages and cultural competency and humility.

Post-panel networking afforded opportunities for ASPA members, guests and Denver/DC-based practitioners to connect. Inaugural SESAME distinguished scholar awardee, Dr. Laila El Baradei, introduced Emma Alpert to her daughter Nawara Shoukry, an Egyptian film distributor, and they arranged the first two screenings of *Naila and the Uprising* in Cairo. Several other SESAME members were invited to write an article for a Gulf-based journal; it is now in press. The #ASPA2019 paper on gender equity has been accepted for inclusion in the textbook, *Practicum in Public Administration*; the study of informal and formal relationship-building in Lebanon's local governance power structures is part of a project assessing local government-nonprofit collaboration in Lebanon. A dialogue at the April 4, 2019 Middle Eastern Studies Symposium of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley included #ASPA2018 panelist Iman Jodeh, invited by SESAME Chair Aziza Zemrani.

Based on last year's member survey results, the section's support of member interests is ongoing. Member updates are welcome and posted regularly (see @SESAME_ASPA). #ASPA2020 panel plans are well underway, with a panel on preparing public sector and NGO managers to govern in a globalized world and participation in a roundtable. Joint programming is envisioned with the Section on Professional & Organizational Development, Section on International & Comparative Administration and the Section on Women in Public Administration. There is plenty of room in the SESAME tent for new collaborations!