The Impact of Military Spending on Gender Inequality and Growth in MENA: An Empirical Investigation

Adem Elveren
Fitchburg State University, Massachusetts
Email: aelveren@fitchburgstate.edu

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between military spending, economic growth, and gender inequality in MENA countries. Military spending can stimulate economic growth by increasing aggregate demand or hinder it by reducing the economy's productive capacity in the long run. Moreover, military spending is likely to exacerbate gender inequality by diverting resources from social expenditures that benefit women disproportionately. A substantial body of literature has explored the relationship between gender (in)equality and economic growth. Consequently, military spending can influence economic growth both directly and indirectly through its impact on gender inequality. Despite the importance of this linkage, very few studies have investigated the connection between military spending, gender inequality, and economic growth. Given the persistently high levels of military spending and gender inequality in the MENA region, this study focuses on these countries over the period 1990–2018. Utilizing a feminist-Kaleckian model, the analysis incorporates the Gender Inequality Index from UNDP to provide new evidence on the direct and indirect effects of military spending on economic growth.

Key words: Military spending, growth, gender inequality, post-Keynesian, MENA
JEL Classifications: H56, J16, O47

Introduction

This study examines how militarization impacts economic growth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region through its impact on gender inequality. While the direct economic impact of military expenditure has long been examined, less attention has been given to the indirect channels through which militarization undermines development. Drawing on a feminist-Kaleckian framework, this paper investigates both the direct and indirect effects of military spending (particularly its gendered consequences) using a panel of 19 MENA countries for the period of 1990-2018.

Military spending can stimulate short-term economic growth by increasing aggregate demand and generating employment. However, it can also undermine long-term growth by diverting public resources away from productive sectors such as education and healthcare. Empirical studies have shown that higher military spending is associated with greater gender inequality, likely due to its crowding-out effect on social expenditures that disproportionately benefit women. Additionally, a substantial body of literature drawing from both neoclassical and feminist economic perspectives has identified multiple channels through which gender (in)equality influences growth. Gender disparities in labor markets can reduce overall productivity and human capital accumulation, while, in some cases, wage gaps have been linked to enhanced international competitiveness in labor-intensive economies.

Taken together, these insights suggest that military spending can affect economic growth both directly and indirectly through its impact on gender inequality. While there is considerable theoretical and empirical work on the bilateral relationships among these variables, only one study to date has examined their interaction in a trivariate framework (Elveren et al., forthcoming). Building on that foundation, this study focuses on MENA countries to provide new empirical evidence on the intertwined dynamics of militarization, gender inequality, and growth. Empirical findings reveal that military spending not only negatively affects economic growth directly but also indirectly lowers growth by reinforcing gender inequality. Specifically, higher military burden increases gender inequality, which in turn significantly reduces economic performance. These results challenge the conventional view that militarization can stimulate aggregate demand and underscore the importance of inclusive development strategies that prioritize gender equity. By integrating gender dynamics into the militarization-growth nexus,

this paper contributes to a more holistic understanding of economic development in militarized societies.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: The next section discusses the interaction between militarization, gender inequality, and economic growth, and introduces a structural theoretical model. Section 3 outlines the methodology and data. Section 4 presents the empirical results and discusses the findings. Finally, the conclusion highlights the key insights of the paper.

2. Militarization, Gender Inequality, and Growth

2.1 Theoretical Discussion

Militarization exacerbates gender inequality, which in turn can negatively influence economic growth. Below discussion is based on Elveren et al. (forthcoming).

Militarization and Gender Inequality

Militarization, a more quantifiable aspect of militarism, is typically measured by the share of military expenditure in national budgets or GDP. This paper focuses on militarization due to its empirical measurability. War and conflict often intensify gender inequality by destroying infrastructure and reinforcing traditional gender norms. Women and girls, in particular, face limited access to essential resources and increased exposure to violence during conflicts. Disruptions to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities disproportionately harm women. But militarism's effects extend beyond conflict, also undermining women's wellbeing in both public and private spheres during peacetime. Feminist scholars have long emphasized that militarism reinforces patriarchal structures within households and societies at large (Enloe 1983, 2016; Reardon 1985).

Empirically, military expenditure is shown to crowd out public social investments such as education and healthcare—sectors that disproportionately benefit women (Ikegami and Wang 2023; Elveren 2025). This creates a gendered burden of austerity. To date, only four studies directly examine the relationship between militarization and gender inequality (Elveren and Moghadam 2022; Elveren et al. 2022; Elveren 2024b, Jilani 2025), and all find that higher military spending is associated with greater gender inequality. In peaceful contexts, reductions in military spending free up resources for social investment, which tends to benefit women and children, and is correlated with higher female empowerment.

Gender (In)equality and Economic Growth

The relationship between gender (in)equality and economic growth has been widely explored in both feminist and neoclassical economics literature. Neoclassical theory highlights a "selection-distortion effect," where gender disparities in education and labor force participation reduce productivity (Klasen 1999). Women bring distinct skills, preferences, and perspectives to the workplace, and their underrepresentation undermines overall economic efficiency (Boschini 2003; Berik et al. 2011; Ostry et al. 2018). Gender inequality also hinders intergenerational mobility and human capital development by limiting women's economic participation and investments in children's education and health (Haddad et al. 1997). While some studies argue that wage gaps and gendered labor segmentation in export-led growth regimes may boost competitiveness by lowering unit labor costs (Seguino 2012; Kabeer and Natali 2013), such outcomes are context-dependent and often come at the expense of equity.

Microeconomic studies further show that women's income is more likely to be spent on household needs, while men's income is more often allocated to luxury goods (Blumberg 1991; Antonopoulos et al. 2011). Increasing women's income, therefore, has a dual benefit: it raises short-term growth through higher consumption of local goods and enhances long-term development by increasing household savings and investments in children's welfare (Seguino and Floro 2003; Morrison et al. 2007).

Militarization and Economic Growth

Military spending has conflicting effects on economic growth. On one hand, it can stimulate growth in the short term by expanding aggregate demand and creating employment (Smith 2019; Elveren 2025). On the other hand, it diverts public resources from productive sectors such as education and health, thus weakening long-term growth potential. Empirical research presents mixed results. Overall, it is worth noting that studies employing more recent econometric methods tend to find that military expenditure negatively impacts growth (Elveren 2019; Dunne and Tian 2020). Taken together, these dynamics suggest that militarization influences economic growth both directly and indirectly, most notably through its effect on gender inequality. Military spending, by increasing gender disparities, undermines the economy's productive capacity. Elveren (2024a) is the only formal model that captures this dual pathway, and Elveren et al. (forthcoming) provides the first empirical estimation of both the direct and indirect impacts of militarization on economic performance.

Against this background, what outcomes can be expected for the MENA region? MENA countries vary in terms of development levels and resource endowments. These range from low-income (e.g., Yemen), lower-middle-income (e.g., Egypt, Morocco, West Bank and Gaza, Syria, and Tunisia), and upper-middle-income (e.g., Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, and Türkiye) to high-income countries (e.g., Bahrain, Israel, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE). In many of these countries, national wealth is derived either entirely (Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) or partially (Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia) from oil resources. That is why the dynamics between growth, military spending, and inequality needs a special attention. For example, Ali (2012) shows that, in contrast to the findings of other studies using global data or those of case studies for various countries, increasing military spending improves income distribution in MENA. The author notes that one interpretation is that the military's pervasive role in MENA societies blurs the line between productive and unproductive resource use. Alternatively, this negative relationship may reflect redistributive effects, where military industrialization provides employment or income opportunities for disadvantaged groups. It could also indicate a political strategy in which governments increase both social spending and military expenditure to maintain social control and consolidate power. This finding has been confirmed by Coutts et al. (2018) that increasing military spending in MENA does not crowd out social spendings.

Furthermore, Ali and Abdellatif (2013) argued that in MENA countries, the military serves as a key protector of political regimes, a dynamic made evident during the Arab Spring, when regimes collapsed following the military's withdrawal of support, as seen in Egypt and Tunisia. To mitigate this risk, regimes incur a premium by allocating greater resources to the military. Natural resource wealth, particularly oil, lowers the opportunity cost of such spending. Supporting the 'resource curse' hypothesis, the authors argue that oil abundance drives higher military expenditures. In contrast, revenues from coal and natural gas are associated with reduced military spending, while mineral rents show no significant effect.

Regarding the impact of military spending on growth, Karadam et al. (2017) shows that the level of military spending and arms imports influences regime transitions and exerts asymmetric effects on economic growth. Specifically, as military expenditures or arms imports rise, their initially positive impact on growth diminishes and eventually turns negative beyond a certain threshold.

Yet, it is important to emphasize that MENA countries are not exceptional in terms of the impact of military spending on gender inequality. Elveren and Moghadam (2022) show that increased military spending (or militarization, as measured by the Global Militarization Index) is significantly associated with higher gender inequality in MENA countries as well.

2.2 Theoretical Model

Theoretical background of this paper is based on Elveren (2024a), a feminist-Kaleckian model to examine the direct and indirect impact of military spending on economic growth through its impact on gender inequality. The model extends the demand-led Kaleckian tradition by introducing a two-sector economy (i.e. civilian and military), and by incorporating gender-differentiated employment and wages. The model suggests that the short-term impact of military and civilian government spending on aggregate output is ambiguous. However, the effect of military expansion may be weaker than that of civilian spending for two reasons: the military sector employs fewer women, and women tend to allocate a larger share of their income to education and health, thereby enhancing human capital and productivity. Military spending influences aggregate output through consumption, private investment, and multiplier effects. While it can stimulate demand, two competing views exist: the neoclassical "crowding-out" perspective, which posits that higher military spending raises debt and interest rates, thereby reducing private investment; and the Kaleckian view, which downplays these concerns by treating public debt as an internal transfer rather than a societal burden.

In this model, private military investment is minimal, so the traditional crowding-out effect may not apply. In fact, public military spending could stimulate private investment through defense-industrial linkages. Although military innovations may spill over to civilian sectors, this effect has diminished since the 1990s as technological diffusion increasingly flows in the opposite direction (Elveren 2019). Ultimately, whether rising military spending harms or boosts growth depends on whether it increases GDP more than debt. If not, a rising debt-to-GDP ratio may harm growth in the medium run. The mode of spending also matters: arms imports may worsen the balance of payments, while domestic arms production and export could boost output and profits (Elveren 2019). From a Kaleckian standpoint, debt sustainability hinges on growth: as long as economic growth outpaces interest rates, debt remains manageable (Kalecki 1944; Sawyer 2020).

3. Method and Data

3.1 Empirical Strategy

I employe a three-equation system to analyze how gender inequality, economic growth, and military expenditure are jointly determined in line with Elveren et al. (forthcoming).

$$growth_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 milex_{it} + \beta_2 gii_{it} + \beta_3 democracy_{it} + \beta_4 unemployment_{it} + \varepsilon_{it1} \quad (1)$$

$$gii_{it} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1\, gdppc_{it} + \alpha_2\, milex_{it} + \alpha_3\, democracy + \varepsilon_{it2} \quad (2)$$

$$milex_{it} = \delta_0 + \delta_1\, gdppc_{it} + \delta_2\, democracy_{it} + \delta_3\, globalmilex_{\ it} + \varepsilon_{it3} \quad (3)$$

Where dependent variables refer to economic growth, the Gender Inequality Index of UNDP, and military spending as a share of GDP. *i* and t denote country, and time, respectively. In the first equation, *unemployment* is the general rate of unemployment in the economy and *democracy* refers to Polity score of country. In the second equation, *gdppc* is logarithmic form of GDP per capita. In the third equation, *globalmilex* refers to the cross sectional means of military spending as a share of GDP. There is a common pattern in global world that impacts the general trend of the military spending across countries, so this variable addresses this cross sectional dependance. ε_{it1}, ε_{it2}, and ε_{it3} are (N x 1) vector of random disturbances. *i* denotes the country and t denotes the time period.

Feminist economics and defense economics literatures show that growth, gender inequality, and military expenditure impact each other; therefore, one may expect collinearity between the residuals of these equations. In this study, the Seemingly Unrelated Regression (SUR) method is employed to allow for contemporaneous correlation and for heteroskedasticity in the individual regression error factors. SUR models, a system of individual regression equations (Fan et al. 2018), are a more efficient way to cope with a shock if it has a comparable impact on all equations but is not taken into account by the explanatory variables than by generating a number of different regression equations. A portion of the variables on the right-hand side are the same or correlated across equations (Yildirim and Sezgin 2002). Even if the parameter estimations are still linear and unbiased in such circumstances, they are no longer efficient. Due to the correlation between concurrent disturbances across regions, SUR offers parameter estimates that are asymptotically more efficient than conventional least squares

estimates. In order to test if the error terms are correlated across equations ($\varepsilon_{it1}, \varepsilon_{it2}$ and ε_{i13}), the Breusch–Pagan test statistic is employed. The potential simultaneity problem is resolved by estimating Structural Equation Models (SEMs). In order to assess the existence of simultaneity, the Hausman test is employed.

3.2 Data

The data used in this paper are drawn from multiple sources and cover 19 countries for 1990-2018: Algeria, Armenia, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Table 1 presents the definitions and sources of all variables.

One of the key variables is the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which is obtained from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The GII captures gender-based disadvantages in three dimensions—reproductive health, empowerment, and labor market participation—for as many countries as possible, based on data of reasonable quality. The index ranges from 0 (indicating gender equality) to 1 (indicating maximal gender disparity across all measured dimensions).

Country-level economic variables (i.e. growth, GDP per capita, and unemployment) are obtained from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) database. In addition to economic development, the level of democracy is a central determinant of gender inequality. The primary measure used for democracy is Polity2, derived from the POLITY™ IV Project. Polity2 reflects three interrelated components: (1) the presence of institutions and procedures that allow citizens to express effective preferences over political alternatives and leadership; (2) institutionalized constraints on the executive's power; and (3) guarantees of civil liberties in everyday life and political participation. The Polity2 index ranges from −10 (most autocratic) to +10 (most democratic).

I also use *globalmilex*, a cross sectional mean of military spending, in line with Elveren (2019). This approach is consistent with the findings of Pan et al. (2014) and Ucler and Ozsahin (2024), arguing a convergence in military spending across the countries in the region. This is also in line with the findings a substantial body of literature indicating a significant association between the level of democracy and military expenditure (Goldsmith 2003; Fordham and Walker 2005; Töngür et al. 2015; Elveren 2025).

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Variables and Their Definition

Variables	Definition	Source
GDP growth	Annual percentage growth rate of GDP at market prices based on constant local currency. Aggregates are based on constant 2015 prices, expressed in U.S. dollars.	World Bank World Development Indicators database
GDP per capita	GDP per capita (constant 2015 US$)	
Unemployment	Unemployment rate	
Military burden	Military expenditures (% of GDP)	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)
Democracy	The Polity Score: regime authority spectrum on a 21-pont scale ranging from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy)	The Center for Systemic Risk
Gender inequality index (GII)	Gender-based disadvantage	UNDP

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Growth	772	3.993	9.206	-64.05	86.83
GDP per capita	781	12856.7	16473.52	210.45	81608.57
Unemployment	791	10.74	6.76	0.1	31.84
Military Spending	645	4.900	5.541	0.871	117.349
Democracy	543	-3.46	5.79	-10	9
GII	583	0.46	0.19	0.03	0.84

Table 3: Estimation Results

	FE			SUR			SEM (3SLS)		
VARIABLES	Growth	GII	Milex	Growth	GII	Milex	Growth	GII	Milex
Lngdppc		-0.167***	-0.269***		-0.059***	0.234***		-0.108***	0.233***
		(0.031)	(0.083)		(0.008)	(0.023)		(0.020)	(0.023)
Milex	-7.846***	0.109***		-1.115*	0.023		-1.944	0.260***	
	(1.277)	(0.025)		(0.624)	(0.017)		(1.676)	(0.086)	
GII	12.190***			2.606			-11.375*		
	(2.626)			(2.002)			(6.029)		
Democracy	0.032	-0.002	0.024***	0.024	-0.009***	-0.007	-0.109	-0.007***	-0.007
	(0.121)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.062)	(0.001)	(0.004)	(0.085)	(0.002)	(0.004)
unemployment	-0.206*			-0.116*			-0.046		
	(0.105)			(0.065)			(0.075)		
globalmilex			0.073***			0.173***			0.171***
			(0.009)			(0.035)			(0.034)
Constant	13.275***	1.790***	1.441**	7.228***	0.927***	-1.532***	13.709***	1.050***	-1.512***
	(2.116)	(0.293)	(0.564)	(1. 508)	(0.065)	(0.279)	(4.214)	(0.095)	(0.279)
Observations	343	353	462	343	343	343	343	343	343
R-squared	0.06	0.11	0.76	0.09	0.18	0.27	0.06	0.34	0.27
Hausman (Fixed effect vs random effect)	$\chi^2(5) = 18.13$***	$\chi^2(3) = 23.03$***	$\chi^2(3) = 22.52$***						
Breusch Pagan Test				$\chi^2(3) = 9.259$**			$\chi^2(3) = 173.835$ ***		
Haussman test for endogeneity							$\chi^2(5) = 52.81$***		
Hansen-Sargan overidentification statistic							$\chi^2(4) = 3.700$ pval = 0.45		

Note**:** Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.

Table 3 presents the empirical findings from three models. The first panel shows single-equation fixed effects (FE) estimations. The second and third panels present system estimations using Seemingly Unrelated Regression (SUR) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) estimated via Three-Stage Least Squares (3SLS), respectively. These specifications aim to capture both the direct and indirect relationships among economic growth, military spending, and gender inequality.

The Hausman specification test clearly rejects the random effects model in favor of fixed effects, confirming that unobserved heterogeneity is correlated with the regressors. Therefore, the FE model is preferred for initial analysis. The Breusch–Pagan test confirms that cross-equation error terms are correlated, justifying the use of the SUR approach. Furthermore, the Hausman test for endogeneity supports the use of the SEM (3SLS) framework, which allows for potential simultaneity among the endogenous variables. The Hansen–Sargan overidentification test fails to reject the null hypothesis, confirming that the instruments used in the SEM model are valid and the specification is robust.

Determinants of Economic Growth

Across all specifications, the coefficient for military spending (milex) on economic growth is consistently negative. It is statistically significant in the FE and SUR models, but not in SEM. While the loss of significance in SEM may be due to higher model complexity and instrument use, the persistent negative sign supports findings in the recent literature suggesting a detrimental impact of military spending on growth when more sophisticated econometric methods are applied (Dunne and Tian 2020; Elveren 2025). Interestingly, gender inequality (GII) shows a positive and significant effect on growth in the FE model, which turns insignificant in SUR and becomes negative and significant in SEM. This shift indicates the presence of endogeneity bias in simpler models, reinforcing the need for simultaneous equation modeling to identify the true structural relationship. Other control variables behave as expected. Unemployment is negatively associated with growth in FE and SUR models. Democracy is statistically insignificant across all specifications, while GDP per capita (included in GII and milex equations) significantly reduces gender inequality and increases military spending in all models.

Determinants of Gender Inequality (GII)

The results strongly support the hypothesis that military spending increases gender inequality. The coefficient of milex on GII is positive and highly significant in both FE and SEM models, although it loses significance in SUR. This finding is consistent with earlier research (Elveren and Moghadam 2022; Elveren et al. 2022; Elveren 2024a, 2024b; Jilani 2025) and reflects how militarization disproportionately affects women by reallocating resources away from social sectors and reinforcing patriarchal structures. Democracy, in contrast, significantly reduces GII in the SUR and SEM models, aligning with established literature that links democratic governance to gender equality (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Tripp 2013). GDP per capita also consistently reduces GII, reaffirming the developmental perspective that economic growth improves access to education and social services for women.

Determinants of Military Spending (milex)

In the military spending equation, GDP per capita has a consistently negative effect in FE and a positive effect in SUR and SEM. This reversal likely reflects different model assumptions: while the FE model isolates within-country variation, SEM incorporates structural feedbacks. Global military spending (globalmilex) is highly significant and positive in all specifications, confirming the global contagion or peer-effect in defense expenditures.

The SEM results allow us to decompose the total effect of military spending on economic growth into direct and indirect components. The direct effect of military spending on growth is negative but statistically insignificant. However, the indirect effect, operating through GII, is both substantial and statistically meaningful:

Military spending → Gender Inequality: 0.260 ($p < 0.01$)
Gender Inequality → Growth: −11.375 ($p < 0.1$)
Indirect effect: 0.260 × (−11.375) = −2.958

Thus, the total effect of military spending on economic growth is:
Total effect = Direct effect + Indirect effect = −1.944 + (− 2.958) = − 4.902. This implies that a 1 percent increase in military spending leads to an approximate 4.9 percentage point reduction in economic growth, highlighting that the indirect impact via gender inequality is more powerful than the direct effect.

Overall, the results offer robust evidence that militarization not only fails to stimulate economic growth but actively undermines it through its detrimental impact on gender equality. Conversely, democracy plays a protective role by reducing gender inequality and, indirectly, supporting economic growth. These findings underscore the importance of understanding gender inequality as a key transmission channel through which military spending affects development. Policy efforts aimed at economic resilience must therefore account not only for the fiscal costs of militarization but also its structural gendered consequences.

5. Conclusion

This paper provides novel empirical evidence on the detrimental role of militarization in impacting gender inequality and economic growth in MENA countries. Using a three-equation Structural Equation Model (SEM) estimated through 3-Stage Least Squares (3SLS), the analysis identifies both direct and indirect effects of military spending. While the direct impact of military expenditure on growth is negative but statistically insignificant, the indirect effect—transmitted through increased gender inequality—is significant. The total effect of military burden on growth thus emerges as strongly negative.

The results underscore the idea that militarization, by reinforcing patriarchal institutions and diverting public resources away from civilian and social sectors, exacerbates gender inequalities. In turn, these inequalities reduce human capital investment and labor productivity, especially by limiting women's economic participation and decision-making power. The analysis also confirms that democracy plays a mitigating role, reducing gender disparities and potentially counteracting some of the negative consequences of militarization.

The findings suggest that policies aiming to promote economic growth in MENA countries must go beyond traditional macroeconomic tools and incorporate gender-sensitive strategies. Reducing military expenditure and reallocating public resources toward education, health, and welfare (particularly for women and marginalized groups) would not only improve gender equity but also stimulate inclusive economic development. In contexts where militarization and authoritarianism co-exist, breaking the link between security spending and patriarchal control is vital for building sustainable growth. This study thus provides both empirical and conceptual foundations for rethinking the role of militarization in development economics through a gendered lens.

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