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Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi and Valentine Moghadam

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Jennifer Skulte-Ouais
Assistant Professor of Political Science
Lebanese American University

The issue of women’s empowerment is one that is increasingly on the forefront of discussions about societal development in the Arab world. It is a topic that has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly in countries where the traditional role of women has been constrained by cultural and societal norms. Higher education has been seen as a potential agent of change in this regard, offering women the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that can empower them to participate more fully in society.

In a similar vein, Professor Tim Walters describes and analyzes the development of higher education for women in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. Using detailed survey data from Zayed University, Walters is able to combine the personal and societal dimensions of higher education for women.

Professor Abu Bakr Ahmad Ba Kader’s piece focuses on the role of female role models, particularly in high positions. “Women must be in leadership positions throughout the Arab world,” he says, in order for younger women to see that it is not only possible but necessary for women to be involved in all aspects of society.

In a keynote speech, Raida Al-Zubair from the Lebanese American University Alumni chapter in Dubai in December 2005. In fact, the idea of publishing the papers presented in the forum was suggested by LAU’s president, Dr. Joseph Jabbour, who attended the conference and whose speech is included here. In his speech, Jabbour champions the successes of women in higher education and calls for much more to be done for women to enjoy the same rights as men in the Arab world. The speech of vice president for academic affairs, Dr. Abdallah Sfeir, echoes Dr. Jabbour’s exhortations for higher education in general and LAU in particular to become even more of a force for the empowerment of women in the Arab world.

The tension between the desire for self-empowerment and societal development on the one hand, and the desire to retain traditions that make the Arab world unique on the other hand, comes up again and again throughout the speeches and articles, though how this tension balances out varies depending on the country of focus. What runs throughout, however, is how inescapably intertwined are the societal, economic, and political benefits of higher education with women’s aspirations for themselves, their families and their societies.

Culture is another concept that is brought up continually in the speeches and the articles. The writers note that the generally conservative culture of the Middle East makes it difficult for young women to break out of traditional roles. While higher education for men and women alike is increasingly valued in the region, the region’s conservative culture seems to limit the opportunities of women in particular. 

One of the challenges that women in the Arab world face in adding a public role to their traditional ones, Maha Kaddoura expounds on the virtues of higher education in Jordan. 

She notes: “No civilization can be complete without a university.” Yet Nasrallah’s speech also notes the challenge that women face in finding a balance between their role outside of the home, i.e., as career women, and their traditional roles as wives and mothers. 

Continuing the theme of the challenges that women in the Arab world face in adding a public role to their traditional ones, Maha Kaddoura expounds on the virtues of higher education in Jordan. 

As she notes: “No civilization can be complete without a university.” Yet Nasrallah’s speech also notes the challenge that women face in finding a balance between their role outside of the home, i.e., as career women, and their traditional roles as wives and mothers. 

Moving from the more personal to the public realm, the systemic to create a dynamic picture of the forces interacting in Abu Dhabi today and what this means for young women. His article is adept at describing the conflicting forces at work at the personal, familial, societal and international levels in a clear yet sympathetic way.

Through describing and critiquing women’s studies and women and higher education more broadly, Professor Sherifa Zuhur seeks to define strategies and theories that will better empower Arab women through higher education. She also includes a “Balance sheet” of successes and problems when it comes to women’s empowerment in the region and expertly discusses topical areas, such as violence against women, as they relate to women in the Arab world.

The article by young scholar Mayaia Hajj makes a significant contribution to research on the topic at hand bypositing and analyzing data that heretofore has not been accessible to non-Arabic speaking audiences as well as non-researchers. She also proposes a number of topics and questions that require further and deeper study.

It is fitting that a beautiful remembrance of higher education pioneer Rose Gharaybeh be included in this special issue. Gharaybeh died in spring 2006 after a long and productive life as a scholar and role model for women throughout the Arab world. Included is an interview with Arab Nasser. Through her experience the reader will be able to see a tangible example, indeed a role model, of an educated and empowered Arab woman.

To conclude the issue, excerpts from the transcript of a round table convened by IWSAW in winter 2006 is included. The round table highlights in a very concrete way both the hopes for and the challenges to linking women and empowerment through higher education in the Arab world.

The assembled women were of a variety of ages, ranging from undergraduates at universities in Beirut. They spoke powerfully about their commitment to higher education, what higher education means to them and their future as well as how empowerment does and does not come through higher education.

What was both interesting and quite surprising to me, as well as Dabbous-Sensenig with whom I co-chaired the round table, was how seldom it was noted. As positive female role models and, even more importantly, that for the most part, these young women were actually the only conscious of the concept of power and their own empowerment. This was a critical revelation as these young women are studying in Lebanon — arguably the most liberal and open of the higher education systems.

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Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa

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Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi is a policy analyst at the Population Reference Brief (PRB). Valentine Moghadam is the Director of the Women’s Studies Program at Purdue University.

Education is a key part of strategies to improve individuals’ well-being and societies’ economic and social development. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries and territories included in the Middle East and North Africa as defined here are listed in Table 1), access to education has improved dramatically over the past few decades, and there have been a number of encouraging trends in girls’ and women’s education (see Figure 1). Primary school enrollment is high or universal in most MENA countries, and gender gaps in secondary school enrollment have already disappeared in several countries. Women in MENA countries are also more likely to enroll in universities than they were in the past.

But great challenges remain. Many people — especially girls — are still excluded from education, and many more are enrolled in school but learning too little to prepare them for 21st-century jobs. Markets in some countries, access to the secondary and higher education that helps create a skilled and knowledgeable labor force continues to be limited; even where access is not a problem, the quality of the education provided is often low. “The most worrying aspect of the crisis in education is education’s inability to provide the requirements for the development of Arab societies,” according to the 2002 Arab Human Development Report.

This policy brief offers an overview of education’s benefits to women, families, economies, and societies and highlights the ongoing concerns about education in MENA countries. It also looks at education’s links with fertility and employment, two important elements in women’s empowerment.

**Education: A Social Right and a Development Imperative**

Education’s importance has been emphasized by a number of international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, recognized that women’s literacy is key to empowering women’s participation in decisionmaking in society and to improving families’ well-being. In addition, the United Nations has articulated the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which include goals for improved education, gender equality, and women’s empowerment (see Box 1). The MDGs emphasize education’s essential role in building democratic societies and creating a foundation for sustained economic growth.

Education contributes directly to the growth of national income by improving the productive capacities of the labor force. A recent study of 19 developing countries, including Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia, concluded that a country’s long-term economic growth increases by 3.7 percent for every year the adult population’s average level of schooling rises. Thus, education is a key strategy for reducing poverty, especially in the MENA region, where poverty is not as deep as in other developing regions. According to the United Nations Population Fund, countries that have made social investments in education are more likely to see reductions in poverty, fertility, and infant and child mortality fall and family health improves.

Increases in girls’ secondary school enrollment are associated with increases in women’s participation in the labor force and their contributions to household and national income.

Women’s increased earning capacity, in turn, has a positive effect on child nutrition. Children — especially girls — of educated mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school and to have higher levels of educational attainment.

Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them. Women’s increased earning capacity, in turn, has a positive effect on child nutrition. Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them.

### Box 1

**The Millennium Development Goals and Female Education**

The U.N. Millennium Summit, held in September 2000, produced a set of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) covering a range of development issues, including reducing child mortality, fighting various infectious diseases, eradicating illiteracy, and empowering women. The MDGs and their associated targets and indicators were designed as benchmarks for monitoring progress in developing countries and to provide a framework for sustaining development and eliminating poverty.

The international community recognizes that unless girls’ education improves, few of the MDGs will be achieved. Two of the goals deal specifically with female education and women’s empowerment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Achieve universal primary education: Ensure that, by 2015, all children, boys and girls alike, will have access to a full course of primary education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Promote gender equality and empower women: Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005; and at all levels of education no later than 2015.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The benefits of female education for women’s empowerment and gender equality are broadly recognized:

- As female education rises, fertility, population growth, and infant and child mortality fall and family health improves.
- Women’s increased earning capacity, in turn, has a positive effect on child nutrition.
- Children — especially girls — of educated mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school and to have higher levels of educational attainment.
- Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them.

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**In the increasingly open global economy, countries with high rates of illiteracy and gender gaps in educational attainment tend to be less competitive, because foreign investors seek labor that is skilled as well as inexpensive. Various global trends pose special challenges to women who are illiterate or have limited education. Economies’ export orientation and the growing importance of small and medium-sized enterprises create opportunities for women, but women need the appropriate education and training to take full advantage of these opportunities.**

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- Children — especially girls — of educated mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school and to have higher levels of educational attainment.
- Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them.

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Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them.
However, the situation in the region is slowly changing. Women activists, who generally come from the educated segments of society, are challenging the status quo; demanding equality in the family and society; and calling for women's economic, political, and social empowerment. The trend's intensity varies by country but is visible even in relatively conservative nations. In addition to facing political pressure for reform, countries are dealing with economic changes that are creating an impetus for women to become more active outside the home. As the region's cost of living rises rapidly, families are increasingly forced to depend on the additional income that female family members can provide.

Education's Effects on Reproductive Choices and Employment

Education helps women take advantage of opportunities that could benefit them and their families, preparing women for the labor force and helping them understand their legal and reproductive rights.

Fertility

Education is the single most important determinant of both age at marriage and age at first birth in MENA countries, since women in the region tend to give birth soon after marriage. Among married Egyptian women ages 25 to 29, for instance, those with no education had married at age 18, on average, and had their first child by age 20; those with a secondary or higher education married at an average age of 23 and had their first child by age 25. 2 Turkey's 1998 DHS showed that 22 percent of girls 5 to 19 who had no education or who had not completed primary school were already mothers or pregnant, compared with only 2 percent of girls who had completed secondary or higher education.

Educated women generally want smaller families and make better use of reproductive health and family planning information. Women with more education are also more likely to discuss family planning issues with their husbands. Women's ability to choose the number and timing of their births is key to empowering women as individuals, mothers, and citizens, but women's rights go beyond those dealing with their reproductive choices. Women should be able to fulfill their aspirations outside the home, to the benefit of themselves, their families, and their countries. Opening economic opportunities to women has far-reaching effects, but those benefits can be reaped only if women receive at least basic education.

Employment

As women's educational attainment in MENA countries has increased, more women have moved into the job market. But women's participation in the labor force is still lower. Only 20 percent of women ages 15 and older in MENA countries are in the labor force — the lowest level of any world region. The highest levels of native female labor force participation in MENA countries are found in Lebanon, Morocco, Turkey, and Yemen, where women constitute more than 25 percent of the labor force. But those rates are lower than rates found outside the region. In France, for example, women make up 45 percent of the labor force; in Indonesia, which is home to the world's largest Muslim population, women make up 38 percent of the labor force. 3 The lowest rates of labor force participation are seen among women native to the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, a group of six conservative monarchies; reported national rates are inflated by the large number of foreign female laborers in those countries.

The current high unemployment rates among men in MENA countries make it harder for women to compete in male-dominated job markets, and women's unemployment rates are higher than those of men in the region. In Saudi Arabia, where Saudi women account for only 7 percent of the labor force, the unemployment rate for women in 1999 was 16 percent, more than double the unemployment rate for men. 4 In 2000, the unemployment rate among urban Iranian women was 25 percent, compared with 16 percent for men; in rural areas of the country, women's unemployment reached 20 percent, versus 17 percent for men. 5 Improving the quality of life for women is key to empowering women as individuals, mothers, and citizens, but women's rights go beyond those dealing with their reproductive choices. Women should be able to fulfill their aspirations outside the home, to the benefit of themselves, their families, and their countries. Opening economic opportunities to women has far-reaching effects, but those benefits can be reaped only if women receive at least basic education.

Gender discrimination in the MENA region is sometimes codified and frequently in family laws or civil codes. In many countries in the region, women must obtain permission from a male relative, usually a husband or father, before seeking employment, requesting a loan, starting a business, or traveling. Such laws often grant women a smaller share of inherited family wealth. As a result, families tend to make greater investments in education for boys than for girls.

The results of Egypt's 2000 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) provide insights into families' preferences for investing in their children's education. Women with children ages 6 to 15 were asked, "If parents have one son and one daughter and can send only one child to the university, which child should they send?" While 53 percent of the women said that the decision should depend on the children's capabilities, 39 percent said that the son should go to the university, compared with only 8 percent who said that the daughter should go. The survey also found that mothers of children who had never attended school were more likely to cite the cost of education as a reason for not educating their daughters than for not educating their sons. 6

However, the situation in the region is slowly changing. Women activists, who generally come from the educated segments of society, are challenging the status quo; demanding equality in the family and society; and calling for women's economic, political, and social empowerment. The trend's intensity varies by country but is visible even in relatively conservative nations. In addition to facing political pressure for reform, countries are dealing with economic changes that are creating an impetus for women to become more active outside the home. As the region's cost of living rises rapidly, families are increasingly forced to depend on the additional income that female family members can provide.

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Educated women generally want smaller families and make better use of reproductive health and family planning information and services in achieving their desired family size. Moroccan women with at least some secondary education had, on average, half as many children as women with no education (see Figure 2). Women with more education also tend to have healthier families. In Egypt, for example, children born to mothers with no formal education were more than twice as likely to die as those born to mothers who had completed secondary school (see Figure 3). According to the 2000 DHS, Egyptian women with less education were less likely to receive antenatal care: Only 34 percent of Egyptian mothers with no education received antenatal care, compared with 75 percent of those with a high school or college degree. 4

Most women in the MENA region know something about modern contraception, but more-educated women tend to know about a wider range of available methods and where to get them. In Egypt, 69 percent of married women ages 15 to 49 who had completed secondary school reported seeing family planning messages in newspapers or magazines, compared with 32 percent of those who had completed only primary school. 5 Women with more education are also more likely to discuss family planning issues with their husbands. Women's ability to choose the number and timing of their births is key to empowering women as individuals, mothers, and citizens, but women's rights go beyond those dealing with their reproductive choices. Women should be able to fulfill their aspirations outside the home, to the benefit of themselves, their families, and their countries. Opening economic opportunities to women has far-reaching effects, but those benefits can be reaped only if women receive at least basic education.

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Women who live in countries with a large agricultural sector, such as Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Yemen, tend to work mainly in that sector, although some MENA countries have been more successful in getting women into nonagricultural occupations. Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey, for example, have been able to engage women in the countries' export-manufacturing sectors.

Most of the MENA women who work outside the agricultural sector are college-educated professionals employed mainly in government (except in Lebanon, where the majority of the female labor force is found in the private sector). A smaller share of women work in factories, but many lack the educational qualifications of factory workers in countries such as China, Vietnam, and the nations of the former Soviet bloc.

The current high unemployment rates among men in MENA countries make it harder for women to compete in male-dominated job markets, and women's unemployment rates are higher than those of men in the region. In Saudi Arabia, where Saudi women account for only 7 percent of the labor force, the unemployment rate for women in 1999 was 16 percent, more than double the unemployment rate for men. In 2000, the unemployment rate among urban Iranian women was 25 percent, compared with 16 percent for men; in rural areas of the country, women's unemployment reached 20 percent, versus 17 percent for men. Improving the quality of education, providing more vocational training, developing job-creating programs, and removing obstacles to women's entrepreneurship can help alleviate the high rates of female unemployment.

Ongoing Concerns

MENA countries have made significant strides in making education available over the past few decades, but chal-
Table 1

Selected Socioeconomic Indicators in the Middle East and North Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Population over age 15 who are illiterate, 2000</th>
<th>Number of People over age 15 who are illiterate (thousands), 2000</th>
<th>Percent of Population ages 15 to 24 who are illiterate, 2000</th>
<th>Number of People ages 15 to 24 who are illiterate (thousands), 2000</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td><strong>Middle East and North Africa</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50,057</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Algeria</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4,211</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bahrain</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Egypt</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>56</td>
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<td><strong>Iran</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6,966</td>
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<td><strong>Oman</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Syria</strong></td>
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<td>40</td>
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<td><strong>Tunisia</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Turkey</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Yemen</strong></td>
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<td>75</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3,525</td>
<td>1,444</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

— Data not available.
(a) Gross enrollment ratio is the number of students, regardless of age, enrolled in school, divided by the total number of people in the appropriate age range for that level of schooling.
(b) Data on labor force participation may include foreign workers.
(c) Data shown in this column might be different from those given in previous MENA policy briefs because new data have become available or different sources have been used.
(d) Palestine includes the Arab population of the West Bank and Gaza.

Lengths remain. Access to education has improved, and the illiteracy rate among the region’s young adults (people ages 15 to 24) is half that of the adult population (people ages 15 and up). More women are now pursuing higher education, reflecting their ability to graduate from secondary school. In some countries, such as the oil-rich Gulf states, women make up a larger share of university enrollment in part because many young men from those countries go abroad for college and graduate school.

But illiteracy remains high in some countries. There are still wide gender gaps in parts of the region, and the quality of the education is a major concern throughout the region.

Illiteracy

The MENA countries’ illiteracy rates are often higher than those of non-MENA countries with comparable or lower per capita incomes (see Figure 4). There are over 75 million illiterate adults in the region, more than half of whom live in Egypt, Iraq, and Morocco. Around 13 million young adults are illiterate; fully one-third of them live in Egypt, which has both a high illiteracy rate and a large population. As in other parts of the world, illiteracy rates in the MENA region are higher among rural than among urban populations (see Figure 5 for an example).

Although all MENA governments require that all children receive at least five years of schooling and all provide free education at least through high school, the rapid growth of:

- Gross Enrollment Ratio (%)(a)
- Women as a Share of University Enrollment (%)
- Public Education as a Share of Total Government Expenditure (%)
- Percent of People ages 15 and Older in Labor Force (%)
- Women as Percent of Labor Force (%)
- Total Fertility Rate (c)

Sources:


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**Figure 4**

Female Illiteracy Rates and per Capita Income in Selected Countries, 2000

**Figure 5**

Egyptians Who Have Never Attended School, by Sex and Residence, 2000
Gender Gaps

Women in MENA countries are twice as likely to be illiterate as men are and make up two-thirds of the region’s illiterate women. The gender gaps in education vary greatly across countries in the region but are generally wider in countries where overall literacy and school enrollment are lower. In Yemen, for example, the illiteracy rate among young women (54% is triple that of young men (17%). But countries that make political and financial commitments to reducing illiteracy, as Jordan and Tunisia have, generally see significant improvements in reducing illiteracy and narrowing the gender gap (see Figure 6).4

Figure 6
Closing the Gender Gap in Literacy in Jordan and Tunisia, 1970 and 2000

Gender sensitivity is a key aspect of the quality of education. Educational systems should be sensitive to the specific needs of girls and women. Yet the curricula and teaching materials — and the media, which has a powerful role in shaping people’s knowledge and opinions — in the MENA region often reinforce traditional roles that may deny women opportunities for full and equal participation in society. As radio, television, and the Internet reach more people in the region, it becomes even more important that students learn to analyze and judge the media’s messages for themselves.

The Need for Action

Efforts to improve female education in MENA countries need to go beyond rhetoric and should involve policies and programs with measurable results. Governments can start by making the MDGs part of national development plans and monitoring progress toward those goals (see Box 1). Governments also need to make an extra effort to ensure that education is more accessible to low-income families and rural populations, with special attention to the quality of the education provided and the need for girls to complete school.

Richer countries both inside and outside the region are encouraged to help resource-poor countries improve their educational systems and collect data on their progress. Improving access to and the quality of education is the most rewarding investment a country can make. Investing in female education will accelerate the MENA region’s economic and social development by enhancing human capital, slowing population growth, and alleviating poverty.

References


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PRB’s Middle East and North Africa Program

The goal of the Population Reference Bureau’s Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Program is to respond to regional needs for timely and objective information and analysis on population, socioeconomic, and reproductive health issues. The program raises awareness of these issues among decisionmakers in the region and in the international community, in hopes of influencing policies and improving the lives of people living in the MENA region.

MENA programs address a broad range of issues, including: education, health and nutrition, fertility, economic development, political participation, and environmental issues. The program’s work is aimed at improving the quality of data and the reliability of the information base. The program’s work is also focused on improving the availability of evidence-based policy and program information that can be used to inform decisionmaking in the MENA region.

MENA Policy Briefs

* Women’s Reproductive Health in the Middle East and North Africa (February 2003)
* Iran’s Family Planning Program: Responding to a Nation’s Needs? (June 2002)
* Population Trends and Challenges in the Middle East and North Africa (October 2001)

These policy briefs are available in both English and Arabic and can be ordered free of charge to audiences in the MENA region by contacting prborders@prb.org. Copyright 2005, Population Reference Bureau. All rights reserved.
Introduction*

The challenges facing women across the world are numerous and require hard and long-term effort. Adding to this burden are the unobserved obstacles latent in the minds of many women resulting from their need to develop contemporary lifestyles and identities. These mental barriers harbored by women repress, and even block, their ability to become self-actualized and achieve empowerment. In other words, a conflict arises within modern women’s psyches between the requirements innate in social progress and education on the one hand, and commitment to cultural and traditional values on the other. This study seeks to address the questions: What is the situation of the teaching staff, especially women, in Arab universities? Is there awareness about gender discrimination among faculty members of Arab universities? Moreover, if such discrimination is detected, what are its forms, aspects and degrees? By responding to these questions, the desire for a clearer understanding of women’s roles in higher education, and their effects, can be fulfilled.

The Situation in the Arab World: An Overview

Higher education institutions in Arab societies are relatively recent phenomena; their creation was motivated by national and economic factors. In modern history, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, the Arab world has had increasing experience with more developed countries, which has strongly influenced and largely shaped the Arab vision of how their universities should be defined and later developed. In 1996, the number of Arab universities reached 175, whereas in 1950 there had been about ten universities in the region. University construction started relatively slowly, but increased with each passing decade. An average of ten new universities opened each year throughout the 1990s. Subsequently, four-fifths of Arab universities were built in the last quarter of the twentieth century alone, and until the mid-eighties most universities (62 percent) had been in existence less than 15 years. At the same time, enrollment in secondary education institutions and higher education in the Arab world increased dramatically during this period yet varied significantly among Middle Eastern countries.

Deficiency and Modernization

Observers of higher education development note the increasing demand for “university reform” in all Arab countries, identifying that most higher education institutions are incapable of meeting current developmental demands. Researchers most often highlight obsolete instructional methodologies, and the growing gap between the insufficient numbers of professionals with higher educational qualifications and the continuously increasing need in the workforce for such qualified individuals as the most pressing problems. The Western paradigm of higher education manifests itself in its self-acclaimed liberal arts educational requirements, setting the standard of international accreditation, and therefore mandating that other nations follow suit if they desire worldwide recognition. In emphasizing conformity to such standardizations, Arab universities have adopted the Western model without carefully regarding the different and specific cultural and societal requirements of their particular region. Consequently, under a liberal arts educational system, with an overemphasis on the humanities rather than the theoretical or applied sciences, there is a lack of graduates specializing in fields that fulfill the needs of the employment sector of the Arab world. Some believe that the causes of these deficiencies are due to how and why the universities were first established and developed. By importing ready-to-use Western higher education models and not having a comprehensive understanding of the functions and goals of higher education, the higher education system was not fully compatible with the development and cultural requirements of Arab societies from the beginning. Consequently, calls for modernization have been made. According to a document released by UNESCO, the desires for modernization are rooted in the immense cultural diversity, economic disparities and social instability that one sees throughout the Arab region. Yet, since the large populations of these countries are predominantly young, there is a need to modernize to meet the increasing demand for higher education and assistance in developing and establishing more stability in these societies.

How is modernization to be implemented? Considering the inadequacies mentioned above, the renewal of higher education in the Arab world must be a process that aims at changing its intrinsic nature based on the more relevant needs and expectations of Arab societies. More pragmatically, some observers stress the importance of modernizing teaching and learning methodologies as well as educational technologies, and of implementing the beneficial resources of information technology. On the managerial level, others believe that “nothing can allow universities to regain their vitality, impetus and ethical and practical values, except the unchaining of their administrations and their supervision from bureaucracy and politicization.”

Women and Higher Education in Arab Countries

Female Enrollment

The number of women enrolling in higher education is increasing in many Arab countries, especially in the Gulf. Most of these women come from the middle or upper classes situated in urban areas. In 1995, higher education enrollment for individuals between the ages of 18 and 23 reached 24.5 percent for men and 16.3 percent for women, with significant differences between countries in the region. For instance, in Egypt, enrollment of women has decreased since 1970 from being nearly one woman to every two men to less than one woman to 10 men in 1995; whereas, in Yemen, the average woman to man enrollment ratio has remained less than two women for every 10 men.

Increased enrollment in higher education is mainly due to an increase in the number of women enrolling. In recent years, the average enrollment figures for women have surpassed those for men, reaching 1:18 women for every man in Saudi Arabia, 1:35 in Kuwait, 1:87 in Bahrain, 5:12 in Qatar, and 6:08 in the United Arab Emirates. However, it can be interpreted to show that Arab countries support the issue of women attending and achieving a higher education, this support remains conditional upon women acting in culturally acceptable ways, and maintaining their opportunities to advance socially. For example, governments have attempted to reduce the possibility of rivalry between men and women by supporting the integration of women in specific fields such as education and medicine, but not in others where men predominate. This means that despite the development of higher education and subsequent modernization in the region, existing policies largely strengthen prevailing gender and class norms and structures.

Women’s Academic Specializations

Women in Arab universities, as in universities worldwide, occupy positions of a lesser importance than those of their male colleagues, and often focus on teaching

In 1996, the number of Arab universities reached 175, whereas in 1950 there had been about ten universities in the region.
women’s self-images. This study adds credence to the widespread view that the higher educational sector as a whole, while witnessing the rapidly increasing enrollment of women on an almost equal basis to men, does not have women participating in the higher echelons of management, and suffers from continuing discriminatory practices which limit women from accessing such strata. These phenomena are also observed in the economic and political sectors of Arab societies as well.

Consequently, women’s status in higher education cannot be examined apart from their status in society or their development in Arab societies that share, despite their diversity, various cultural aspects and traditions that rule gender notions, women still suffer from inequality, and this diminishes their opportunity to contribute to the advancement of society in a qualified professional capacity.

A study conducted by Rafica Hammoud, “The Role of Women in Higher Education Management in the Arab Region,”17 reveals that women’s participation in administrative and academic positions is limited. Hammoud links this phenomenon to traditional views and social stereotypes, as well as economic factors, the political situation in the Arab world, the influence of the media, and Yahya’s link to traditional views and social stereotypes, as well as economic factors, the political situation in the Arab world, the influence of the media, and

The Background of the Study

As stated above, Arab higher education institutions exhibit inequality in promotion to upper administrative and managerial positions among male and female academics (such as university presidencies, deanships and department chairs), and in specialized academic fields that are supposedly open to women. However, the preservation of laws, rules or privileges related to the positions of the two genders in universities seems remarkably unchanged. The percentage of women in positions of leadership remains far inferior to their percentages as students and professors. It seems that hidden obstacles exist within the university structure, which hamper the promotion of women, and are not apparent in its formal laws. International research has shown that despite the appearance of non-discrimination in the Arab world, there is an invisible “glass ceiling” that female academics cannot rise above. There is also the belief that the obstacles facing Arab female academics are not only equal to, but are more than those facing women in Western universities, and that the glass ceiling in the Arab world is much lower than that in the West, considering the sympathy of the more complicated and powerful female professors. This belief is suffi-

One would expect, on a theoretical level at least, that academia, of all arenas of human endeavor, would be the most welcoming to women. This should be the case when one considers the criteria of competence and scientiﬁc knowledge used for peer evaluation in academia, as opposed to the criteria of gender, culture or political afﬁliation, especially since the latter are not the result of circumstances or will, while the former are a reﬂection of the structure of the higher education working environment. In the absence of such a welcoming spirit for the promotion of women to more elevated levels, a university’s staff and faculty would be working against their own standards of accepted academic practices. Speciﬁcally, a university professor or staff member cannot object to the ascension of his female colleague to the position of president because she is a woman if she meets the requirements since this would oppose fundamental academic criteria, the essential foundation on which academ-

The Hypothesis

There is apparent discrimination against women in Arab universities, which is especially visible in the discrepancies in academic status, and in gender awareness among male and female academicians.

How the Study was Done

To answer these questions and test the hypothesis, the researchers prepared two surveys. One was addressed to ofﬁcials in Arab universities and sought to collect statistical data related to the gender dimension of public university life: professors’ and students’ specializations, enrollment percentages, and the composition of academic teaching staff, union or representative committees and decision-making positions, among other issues. The second form,18 addressed to male and female academics with minor differences, sought to highlight the female academicians’ reality compared with that of the male academic, and the major obstacles facing female academics, as well as professors’ views on the issue.

UNESCO’s regional ofﬁce19 in Beirut took the responsibility of distributing the surveys to Arab countries and entrusting persons through UNESCO’s national committees to follow up on the collection of the surveys. However, relatively few forms were collected from various Arab countries, specifically from Egypt (where university education is the most ﬁrmly established), making description of Arab higher education possible but with signiﬁcant reservations. The major question to address is: What should academia do to offset such prejudicial phenomena? The priority for counteracting discriminatory practices in positions of leadership remains far inferior to their percentages as students and professors. It seems that hidden obstacles exist within the university structure, which hamper the promotion of women, and are not apparent in its formal laws. International research has shown that despite the appearance of non-discrimination in the Arab world, there is an invisible “glass ceiling” that female academics cannot rise above. There is also the belief that the obstacles facing Arab female academics are not only equal to, but are more than those facing women in Western universities, and that the glass ceiling in the Arab world is much lower than that in the West, considering the sympathy of the more complicated and powerful female professors. This belief is sufficient among factors that are relatively recent increase of Arab women entering academic fields and their consequent lack of academic experience in competition to male colleagues. Furthermore, customs, traditions and culture could not be a boundary between the two genders, burdening female academics and in turn affecting university life, as well as a low degree of awareness of university and staff members to the basic discrepancies between the genders.

The Questions of the Study

How are the obstacles that block the professional advancement of women in Arab universities created? What is the degree of awareness on the part of female academics of these obstacles? What are the personal factors that affect the reality of discrimination? How is discrimination manifested by male and female professors in Arab universities? Do these obstacles differ in form and type between Arab countries?

The Study

The study sample consisted of 450 male and female academics. According to the sample constitution (see Table 1 of the annexes), the greatest number of responses came from Iraq,10 followed by Lebanon, Tunisia, Yemen and Morocco, then the Emirates and Oman. As for Egypt and Syria, only 13 forms were received, whereas no forms were received from the remaining Arab countries.
More male professors responded to the survey than female professors, except in Lebanon, whereas, in Iraq the number of responses was equal. An interesting observation is that fewer women provided information about their experiences and opinions than their male colleagues. The relatively high response rate of male academics is noteworthy since the survey did not deny that its goal was to glean information concerning the reality of female academics and the discriminatory injustices from which they are suffering.

The Results

To reiterate, this study is more of a fact-finding exercise than an examination of the majority of female professors’ situation in the Arab world. Therefore, the study high-lights discrimination against women in higher education. A summary of the major results collected in the study follows.

The study showed that the percentage of young and single female professors is higher than that of male professors. The data also show that the number of children for both male and female professors is low. Male and female professors have different criteria for selecting their respective spouses. Female professors usually choose spouses from the higher social professional circles than their male counterparts, and most female professors require their partners to have reached a high educational level.

Although the majority of the male and female professors’ mothers are homemakers, and the overwhelming majority come from big families of more than five children, the socioeconomic level of female professors is higher than that of male professors. The educational level of the female professors’ mothers is higher than that of the male professors’ mothers, and the professional status and educational level of their fathers are higher than that of the male professors.

The data show that female professors choose academia as a profession at an earlier age compared to their male colleagues, mainly because the latter, who take time out from academia to pursue other interests, stop their educa-tional pursuits for that period of time. Furthermore, female professors have less total number of years of education compared to that of male professors. Although there is no significant difference between women and their male colleagues in academic performance as to the number of courses, the hours of teaching and supervi-sion, and time dedicated to research, their percentage in higher academic ranks and in university leadership posi-tions is inferior to that of their male colleagues. Perhaps this is due to the number of male professors who enjoy higher scientific competence and seniority due to more years of experience, as well as implicit gender discrimi-nation.

Male and female professors are generally satisfied with their relationships with colleagues. Although female pro-fessors are less content, they do not feel a sense of rival-ry with their female peers, whereas male professors com-plain about competition with other male colleagues.

In general, there is a remarkable level of participation by both genders in meetings, colloquia, specialized and diverse committees and seminars within university envi-ronments. However, male professors participate in such activities more often than their female peers, whereas both genders do not participate frequently in confer-ences and international academic associations.

In public activities, male and female professors’ participa-tion in publishing, the media, televised seminars and other such activities is limited. However, male professors participate more than female professors. Both genders seldom participate in local associations; perhaps due to limited time, lack of awareness of their importance and a sense of apathy towards certain causes. Participation in women’s associations remains very low, even though female professors participate more than male profes-sors.

Surprisingly, the overwhelming major-ity of both genders do not take part in political parties, perhaps because of the relative lack of democracy in Arab countries, the weakness of most political parties, and an apprehension of authority. The professors could have also refrained from replying affirmatively because this would have contradicted their profession’s culture.

Moreover, contending with professional and home responsibilities varied according to male and female profes-sors, especially when juggling both work responsibili-ties and household tasks at the same time. Male profes-sors resorted to self-organization, whereas female pro-fessors resorted to husbands, parents and hired help. However, both male and female professors did not feel that their household duties constituted an obstacle to their professional advancement.

Regarding awareness about discrimination against women, the results show that female professors are less concerned about the women’s movement for equality than their male colleagues, and that they are less con-vinced about the need for equality with male professors. However, those who are more concerned are more com-mitted to turning their convictions into practical applica-tions than their male colleagues. Both groups often raise the issue of equality for women with their students, although they tackle it more as an intellectual issue than as a political issue that requires committed action. The male and female professors did not seem to be noticeably affected by a gender perspective in their education, and both resorted equally to referring to gender issues in their courses.

Unexpectedly, female academics did not believe the educa-tional system was unfair to the extent that their male col-leagues believed. The latter believe injustice is caused by social and political considerations, whereas a few female pro-fessors did feel that privileges were granted more often to male professors. In general, female professors are satisfied about their profession, especially their social situation.

These are the main results related to discrimination against women in Arab universities. In summary, they highlight the generalized perception of gender disparities in positions, and the professional status and educational level of their fathers. These findings are consistent with the majority of the female professors, and the overwhelming majority of the male professors of the survey.

To substantiate these findings, a comparison was made between the status of female Arab academics and their civil status to determine if marriage, procreation and management of the household are major burdens. The results showed that these burdens were not major and did not affect academic status. Married female professors did not feel any injustice or resentment toward privileges granted to their male colleagues. Furthermore, they were more expressive about gender awareness than their sin-gle female colleagues, and had more interest in the women’s cause, and were more willing to participate in public affairs.

The female professors were generally positive regarding their social status because they are married to men of high educational and socio-economic levels who usually adopt less stereotyped gender behaviors. Moreover, the majority of female professors come from larger and wealthier families, enabling them to have the possibility of financial, moral and personal support, and the social value they give to academic status is high. All of these factors contribute to reducing the effects of gender dis-crimination.

As to the age variable, it seems to serve gender aware-ness. The results showed that with age professors tend to be more aware of the women’s cause, and to be more willing to participate in public affairs. Older female professors, who possibly have less household and social duties, can also participate more in public affairs.

Regarding the relationship between gender awareness and the social and political environment, the results showed that it is highest in Lebanon, Tunisia and Yemen. It is known that these countries have democratic political expe-rience, and therefore a correlation can be drawn where democracy may have a direct impact on gender awareness. Conversely, the weakest expression of awareness of the situation of women was found in Iraq, where political and social ten-sions and the domination of national-ism over public political awareness have marginalized the women’s cause, rendering it a secondary issue. Paradoxically, discussions about the women’s cause decrease at a time when debates about the situation in the country predominate.

Perhaps this weakness in Iraq regard-ing the lack of awareness of the Arab women’s cause largely explains this weakness throughout the Arab region. All Arab politi-cal systems suffer from instability, affecting the develop-ment of society. In addition to the burden of the Palestinian cause, which is dealt with as a collective Arab responsibility, there are other heavy social burdens, such as illiteracy and poverty, which reduce the importance of, and at the same time deflect attention away from, the women’s cause.

The results also show that a society that has a developed education system along with a democratic government has a high level of gender awareness. This awareness cannot be the monopoly of one gender; subsequently, awareness of the women’s movement for equality in a certain society is directly linked to the level of men's...
The percentage was counted for all squares where the spouse’s profession was mentioned according to the total number of married persons and only those who answered (i.e., 222 for the males and 116 for the females).

The results of the study also indicate that class awareness contributes to gender awareness which leads to taking a stand and acting against gender discrimination. This is why we note that class privileges enjoyed by many female professors did not prod them to take action against discrimination despite their expression of relative gender awareness. The elitist and individual considerations and conditions that often characterize women's academic status reduce their interest in struggling against gender discrimination. Therefore, there is a need for opponents of discrimination against women to work within associations or parties including various social affiliations where interaction promotes and stimulates socially responsible action.

Interaction is not only required on the personal level, but is also required on a societal level in order to promote awareness and enlighten opinions. In this study, it is obvious that female professors who enjoy a sufficient level of gender awareness are those involved in public affairs, and who participate in conferences outside their countries. From this it can be deduced that social isolation decreases the level of gender awareness.

In conclusion, Arab female professors are committed to their academic roles and they greatly approve of their working conditions. This study highlights their strenuous efforts to prove themselves on the academic level and their yearning to participate in decision-making in their respective universities. However, there still exists a gap in equality between their academic and their social roles as compared to their male counterparts.

Translated from Arabic by Nadine El-Khoury

Reprinted with permission from UNESCO and Bahithat: Lebanese Association of Women Researchers. For space purposes, the study is included here in abbreviated form. The study first appeared in Bahithat: Vol VII: 2000-2001 The Universities in Lebanon and the Arab World.
### Table 4: The Distribution of Male and Female Professors according to Academic Rank and Age

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<th>Rank</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<td></td>
<td>24-35</td>
<td>36-45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Director</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Dean</td>
<td>9.10%</td>
<td>13.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University President</td>
<td>5.70%</td>
<td>13.70%</td>
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<td>Director</td>
<td>5.70%</td>
<td>13.70%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Assistant Dean</td>
<td>9.10%</td>
<td>13.70%</td>
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<td>13.70%</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>86.70%</td>
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<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>66</td>
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### Table 6: Percentage of Female Membership in Higher Education, in Chosen Countries, 1980-1995

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Developed</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
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<td>Countries</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asia/Oceania</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arab countries</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America/Caribbean</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5: The Distribution of Male and Female Professors According to Rank and Countries

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<thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yemen</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
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<th>Rank</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Yemen</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 7: Percentage of Female Students Pursuing Higher Education in Chosen Arab and Non-Arab Countries in 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage of female students pursuing higher education (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djibouti</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United States of America</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 8: Percentage of Female Students Pursuing Higher Education in Sciences in Chosen Areas of the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developed</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td>63.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less developed</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab countries</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America/Caribbean</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Endnotes

1. Badran, Adnan; The Role of Higher Education and Research Centers in Preparing Arab Persons for Scientific Giving; Preparing Arab People for Scientific Giving, Beirut, the Arab Unity Center of Studies; 1985, p. 271.
3. The number of students in secondary school increased from 3 million (out of a total population estimated at 96 million) in the mid-sixties to 5.2 million (out of a total population estimated at 220 million) by the mid-seventies. There were noticeable discrepancies among countries, however: in 1995, there were 2,300 students for every 100,000 individuals in Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait, whereas there were 450 students for each number of individuals in Sudan, Yemen and Oman (according to statistics gathered by UNESCO).
6. Mazawi, Andre Elias; Gender and Higher Education in the Arab States; International Higher Education, Fall 1999.
7. Sallou, M’hammed; Homo Academicus Arabicus.
Publications in Social Sciences, No. 11 (Joensuu, Finland: University of Joensuu, 1988), 95-98.
10. Cf. the enclosed appendices.
11. Dr. Mona Fayyad participated in preparing the first version of the survey and apologized later for not being able to continue work. This survey was discussed by several members of the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers who introduced major changes to it.
12. UNESCO’s regional office represent a higher education expert Dr. Rami Salamah and Dr. Nahla Wehbe participated in the supervision of the study’s orientation, in the examination of the two surveys, and in all procedures.
13. Iraqis were very enthusiastic about answering our questions. We also received many responses that included remarks and opinions of male and female professors in the margins. This left us with the impression that the former found a lack of eagerness to inform the outside world once they were able to do so.
14. We find it interesting to note that a female professor from Lebanon categorically refused to fill in the form. She said: “I apologize for not filling in the form and I do not see a justification for your focus on the issue of women [sic]. I believe that women are fully enjoying their rights and that there are other more important issues to be raised.” Undoubtedly, our colleague was an example of many female professors who refrained from filling in the form, although no one forced them to answer in a way that would contradict their opinions.

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- Mazawi, Andre Elias; Gender and Higher Education in the Arab States, International Higher Education, Fall 1999. (in English)
- Sabour, M’hammed; Homo Academicus Arabicus, Publications in Social Sciences, No. 11 (Joensuu, Finland: University of Joensuu, 1988), 95-98. In ibid. (in English)
- Sabour, M’hammed; Women in the Moroccan Academic Field: Respectability and Power, Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1996): 82. In ibid. (in English)
Although liberal Islamic teachings stipulate that education is a mandatory right for all Muslims regardless of gender, and encourages the pursuit of education and wisdom from the cradle to the grave, and despite what is written in the hadith concerning the Prophet’s positive attitude towards education for both genders, some scholars and rulers in the past have not given importance to education for women. Historically, education for women has been restricted to the realm of religious matters. As a “means to an end” and “in fear of causing unrest,” some have endeavored to persuade Muslim communities to “deny” women the right to literacy and to discourage them from furthering their education.

According to written biographies, many women made considerable educational contributions during the time of the Prophet and the caliphs. This was also the case during the zenith of Islamic civilization when prominent writers such as Ibn Saad, the Baghdad Speaker Al-Sakhawiy and Ibn Asaker wrote about several of their contemporary Muslim women who excelled in all kinds of Arabic and Islamic sciences. However, the number of such women dwindled considerably over time. As true female intellectuals decreased in number a new kind of women emerged who were educated only to a certain extent.

They were slave girls and bondmaids who were only educated to be entertaining to their owners; they were required to be funny, witty, beautiful, and good companions as well as excellent dancers and singers.

Perhaps the slave girl, Tawaddud, mentioned in The Arabian Nights and popular Arabic literature is a pertinent example. Most free women were required to wear the hijab (veil) and were allowed to leave their homes twice in their lives; first, when they move into their husband’s house and, second, when they are laid to rest. In addition, they were “deprived” of studying science and literature so that they would not be a threat to men, and they were forbidden from learning how to write so as not to use this skill dishonorably, or write about matters of the heart. However, there were rare exceptions of women who acquired a certain level of education: usually the courts and high-class leisure places called for the presence of a few educated slave girls, who knew poetry as well as music to entertain “patrons.” The slave girl, or bondmaid, with such talents was regarded as “knowledgeable.” Usually, her training, skills and knowledge were the reason why she was in high demand for the fine company she could provide, and for which she commanded a high price. Most of these bondmaids were
The presence of these “women” — in spite of their extensive knowledge and education — was not regarded as a challenge to the hegemony of male authority in society. On the contrary, it most likely reinforced and helped extend the latter. The triumph of the slave girl, Tawaddud, in her debates with her educated rivals in a wide variety of arts and literature was not considered a threat to those scholars, but rather a means of entertainment and good company. Furthermore, Tawaddud’s knowledge was considered neither a threat nor an act of defiance, but rather a symbol of the existing family relationships between males and females. In any case, it was preferable that freeborn women not play the role of “Tawaddud” for it conflicted with the prescribed roles of women that forbade them from appearing in public places, from mixing with disrespectful men, and from being the object of flattery or compliments.

The education of slave girls, such as Tawaddud, was aimed at satisfying the male ego and asserting that a woman was a unique toy, despite her intelligence, sensitivity, and will. Furthermore, this sort of woman upheld the patriarchal structure since, according to her training, Tawaddud aspired to please those around her and not to resist. Women are capable of doing all that men can do. For this reason, women, would “deserve” to be treated as a human being who is the equal of man and could play roles and perform functions similar to his in his family or public life. These concepts simply did not exist. Thus, in spite of being highly knowledgeable and skillful, Tawaddud was meant to be subordinate and a means to maintain - and not undermine - patriarchal authority.

However, the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a new kind of educated woman who asserted that her education should essentially allow her to enter a man’s world, playing a role that is different but not inferior to that of men. This development would inevitably bring about radical changes in the relations between the two sexes, the results of which would threaten the patriarchal system that had previously dominated Arab culture.

It is important to note that this development was not prevalent — far from it. However, a few pioneers of women’s liberation from the constraints imposed by Arab culture have become leading and renowned figures in public life, such as Thuraya Al-Turky and Camila Al-Solh. Although the government’s decision to build public schools for girls was well received in some cities, it was fiercely opposed and at length by scholars and clerics (particularly in the Hijaz region) who regarded the decision as a threat to the values and structure of society. Nevertheless, King Faysal insisted on pushing forward, but at the same time bowed to tradition by delineating certain aspects of education, particularly at the university level, that would remain closed to women.

Even though some people reluctantly and cautiously approached the issue of women’s education in the early 1960s, the education of women throughout the kingdom soon became a popular demand. Reinforced by the government’s initiative to open new schools, even in remote areas, local authorities demanded that their daughters be afforded the opportunity to obtain a modern education. Today, Saudi citizens no longer oppose women’s education but rather persistently call for their daughters to acquire an education. The number of female students enrolled in universities reflects this clearly. In 1998, there were 138,000 female students compared to 134,000 male students. That same year, the number of female graduates reached 15,542 compared to 14,721 male graduates. These official statistics unmistakably show the extent of the social transformation with respect to women, particularly when it comes to university education.

Women’s pursuit of a higher education following high school is one of the most pressing matters for Saudi families, particularly progressive ones. While the number of high school graduates has increased considerably, universities only accept a limited number of applicants with the highest scores, which makes these girls’ families intent on not only having their daughters graduate from high school but also have high scores that would allow them to be accepted at one of these universities. Another option is to send their daughters abroad, and while many families find it hard to send their daughters abroad to pursue a college education, a growing number of families are following this path.

Women and University Education
University education for women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which was virtually nonexistent in the 1920s, has been on the rise. Medicine, biology, business, economics, literature, social sciences, education and home economics are fields open to women, although female students are still denied access to the disciplines of architecture and media since they are two fields deemed “unsuitable” for women. Nevertheless, Saudi women have strongly held on to their right to pursue university education field by field, and a good number of them have been able to acquire master’s degrees in these fields and have taken faculty positions in universities, consequently enabling future female students to pursue higher education in the kingdom.

As expected, women’s education has affected job opportunities, public life, and development in all areas. The concept of the ethos, identity, role, and social standing of Saudi women in the educational field, which is non-mixed and therefore does not conflict with most traditional customs and social norms, is the main academic discipline in which Saudi women are mapping. Their hard work and willingness to contribute to the education of their female companions in even the most remote regions has underlined the importance of their mission. Moreover, their contribution to the workforce is a remarkable success story.

Although Saudi women have had an effective and important presence in the field of education, they have not limited their activities to this field alone. Graduates from medical, nursing and paramedical schools have worked in public health and have established a strong presence in most government hospitals, particularly in big cities. It is important, however, to note that while Saudi women mix little with men, it is an issue of social and cultural contention. Furthermore, as enrollment in medical schools and institutes increases and competition among specialists intensifies, some women are finding it difficult to secure positions in the field of their choice.

Saudi women also have made considerable contributions to a number of other fields, such as social services. They have helped women’s philanthropic organizations increase awareness and strive to change the viewpoints of society with respect to several issues.

Thanks to their educational and managerial training and skills, several Saudi women have come to occupy leading positions in business and commerce. Several women have started their own successful enterprises. Yet, in spite of these successes, the number of women in the labor market compared to the number of graduates is quite low. Women and their families are continuously asking for more job opportunities in the fields open to women instead of being restricted to what current mares dictate. Still, one should keep in mind that even many of those who ask for an increase in the female workforce strive to maintain the essence of Saudi traditions and social standards.

The success story of women’s education in the Kingdom, and the increase in its scope and quality, should not over...
shadow the significant obstacles still inhibiting women, particularly the limited choice of specializations available in higher education. Overall, women still face basic structural inadequacies in which are institutions, values and practices that ensure the prolongation of the traditional patriarchal structure which, although it has given women the chance to pursue an education up to the highest levels, is still hesitant to share public life with them.

Impediments to Higher Education and Women

Although the number of male and female students as well as graduates is almost the same, the chances of pursuing a higher education and acquiring a master or doctoral degree are clearly in favor of males. Although many Saudi families are intent on having their daughters acquire a university education, they are more inclined to encourage their sons to aspire for a higher education than their daughters. Women’s chances of accessing higher education are negligible and limited compared to those of men. Most women pursuing a higher education are restricted to studying within the Kingdom, be it in Saudi universities or joint programs with European universities.1 In the past, women were forbidden from studying abroad, although this is no longer the case. However, this “openness” comes with several conditions that some girls may fail to meet, such as getting their parents’ approval to be accompanied by a male guardian when they travel.

Should females pursue a higher education locally, they mostly suffer from inaccessibility to educational centers and libraries dominated by males. For example, these centers, libraries or institutes are open to males all week long, whereas access to females is limited only for a limited number of hours, for instance on the weekend, which prevents them from acquiring needed information quickly. Furthermore, with the exception of medical schools, women are only allowed access to advanced institutes for a limited number of hours during specific times, which often necessitates more time to complete their studies. Due to the existing gender segregation, the process of checking references and looking for sources of information becomes a very difficult task. Thus, women, unlike their male counterparts, are only able to conduct specific kinds of research and studies that are limited to females.

Since supervision in graduate studies is paramount, particularly the limited choice of specializations available in higher education, women students are also required to submit their work. This is time consuming and may not help the student understand everything, as would a face-to-face conversation with the supervisor. In addition, this has caused real structural problems in the sense that female students benefited so little from such supervision, which in most cases undermined their training. Strikingly, when both the female student’s family and university policies demanded indirect supervision of female students by male supervisors, a few female students become less interested in pursuing their academic studies, and even for those who remain interested in furthering their education, the supervision period is prolonged.

Once women complete their higher education, professional development within academia becomes the new challenge. Although it is officially permissible — albeit only to a certain extent — to attend and take part in practical conferences and seminars, several female professors have to be chaperoned by a mahram (unmarriageable male person) and must have the consent of their families, be it fathers or husbands, to take part in such events. This further confines women and prevents them from benefiting from such practical experiences, which would otherwise enable them to climb the academic ladder. This also affects academic promotions since male professors receive easier access to facilities and libraries, institutes, seminars and conferences than their female counterparts, they generally make more scholarly progress and are promoted faster. Consequently, male superiority and hegemony within the college and university communities are maintained.

Furthermore, male professors can much more easily acquire new skills by occupying positions in the private sector, or working as consultants in the public sector, despite the equal administrative opportunities available to both genders. Rarely do female students become professors, or other professional women occupy consultancy positions, limiting their ability to influence their respective communities, in spite of the efforts of some pioneering women.

In general, Saudi women are torn between their traditional roles as wives, mothers, homemakers and social figures on the one hand and their new roles as career women and public figures on the other hand. Primarily, in most of Arab society, the roles women play are to nurture and caring wives and mothers, and failure in fulfilling these roles is considered a failure in all aspects of life.

Women’s success in their traditional roles often requires them to accept “slight variations” of their role and social standing by virtue of cultural mores. Within their family and in society, they are necessarily required to “submit” to and respect their husbands’ or guardians’ authority. Even though social mores may conflict or interfere with this, the majority of women respect this practice, often than not, women have to “submit” to the superseding socio-cultural requirements to be able to realize some of their aspirations.

As is the case in most traditional societies, both males and females in Saudi society still do not recognize women’s contributions beyond their legislated roles. Female Saudi doctors have revealed that some of their patients insist on being examined by male physicians in spite of the former’s high qualifications and noteworthy achievements. Leading women functioning in all fields sometimes face resistance from those they are trying to help.

Overall, educated women are expected to accept the socio-cultural conditions that traditionally define relations between the two sexes. It is true that the education and employment of women have led to the improvement of their family and social situations. It is also true that many women have earned independent financial incomes, which in turn have increased their decision-making abilities, at least those related to expenditures. However, women in much of the Arab world still have a long way to go before they become effectively represented as individuals with their own talents and experience. This requires far-reaching and radical changes within society that will lead to the improvement of the status of women and their traditional cultural identity.

Arab societies often criticize educated women because of their modern aspirations, which include having an education or a profession in such fields as medicine, education, or business, that are deemed “unnecessary” for women. Perhaps the hardest critics are the ones who claim that being exposed to such modern aspirations women neglect their “natural role” as mothers or females. Some highly educated women have told me that they have had to accept such traditional names as “dependents” (i.e., incapacitated and in need of the protection and support of a man), or they have been accused of being emotion-al, verbese, and courting the attention of the opposite sex. These women have become so accustomed to hear-ing such comments — be they from males or females — that they have acquired an ability to “ignore” and not engage in “enduring” discussions to change or correct such views or stances.

Despite the progress towards liberation and equality that some women are achieving in the Arab world, customary public perceptions continue to measure success in studies and work as the benchmarks of excellence in male achievements, whereas the standards for measuring female achievements are still assessed on how well a woman succeeds in the traditional female roles upheld by society. Perhaps her educational success is one of the reasons she is criticized and measured in relation to the extent that she succeeds in fulfilling her traditional duties. Arab society requires a woman to preserve her honor (her hymen to be exact), not to mix with men, and to make her husband or father happy. Should she not abide by these rules, even with the consent of her family, and to behave in a manner criticized and rejected both socially and culturally.

These views have propelled highly educated women to form their own communities, if they have enough time to interact with one another. However, when they do spend time with other women, in general, semi-traditional and customary roles are shared by women are often the subjects of conversation. In other words, women who have acquired a higher education have yet to become role models that will employ their newfound power to exact change in the social order. However, with time, these women may champion the cause for radical change in society.

Educated Women and Job Opportunities

Saudi women make up no more than 5% of the total workforce2 in the labor market in spite of the four million plus workers, most of whom are Saudi nationals. Education, fashion design, and medicine. Saudi women can work in these fields without having to interact with men, which conforms to their socio-cultural situation.

The educational and socio-economic conditions of the country require a radical reevaluation of the contribution of women to the labor force. It is surprising to see that women are not given the chance to pursue an education up to the highest levels, be it in Saudi universities or joint programs with European universities.

However, this “openness” comes with several conditions that some girls may fail to meet, such as getting their parents’ approval to be accompanied by a male guardian when they travel. Women’s success in their traditional roles often requires them to accept “slight variations” of their role and social standing by virtue of cultural mores. Within their family and in society, they are necessarily required to “submit” to and respect their husbands’ or guardians’ authority. Even though social mores may conflict or interfere with this, the majority of women respect this practice.
higher education for males so they are better equipped to enter the labor market, there is also a necessity to educate women. Many underline the importance of reevaluating and retraining the educational curricula to meet the demands of the labor market, not to mention the development of training programs that would improve the skills and capacities of female job seekers. As a part of the Saudi modernization programs, which encourage Saudi nationals to enter the labor force, are now involving and benefiting males and females alike.

However, it is a general requirement that women’s social aspirations be contingent on the consent of their guardian (father, husband or male relative acting as legal guardian), thus strengthening existing traditional laws and values. In addition, as expected, getting the consent of the guardian, the husband to be precise, is one of the major factors women have to take into account when undertaking outside work. Often families make sacrifices to afford women better chances for education. Many husbands request a leave of absence from their jobs in order to accompany their wives for a year or more when the latter is posted to a job in a remote region. However, this requirement of a chaperone has often prevented women from achieving their aspirations. Of course, this does not apply to males, as women are required to travel with their husbands wherever the husbands’ jobs may be located.

If the job involves a lot of stress, women have to leave these work related problems at the door when returning home to be able to “absorb” the problems and concerns of the husband and children; however, this does not mean that a growing number of female university graduates are seeking to enter the labor market. Moreover, this applies to both the public sector and private sector as the number of Saudi women working in the private sector jumped from 8,374 employees in 1989 to 11,257 in 1993. The number of Saudi businesswomen numbered more than 20,376 in 1991. This new data indicates how seemingly non-existent work for educated women is both a public matter and a social concern. Unemployment no longer only affects males and remains an urgent issue requiring an immediate solution.

Women’s contributions to the employment market and their subsequent independent sources of income are an undeniable aspect of Saudi life. In the past, a woman’s financial contribution to her family was viewed as unwarranted, but now, employed women have become economic partners that enable families to enjoy higher standards of living.

If there is a need to modify and improve the quality of education and the desire to climb the professional ladder might stand in the way of committing to the establishment of marriage for males and females alike. However, views vary concerning how educated women should in turn educate and raise their children. Some studies say that women have become more responsible in managing their time, and more committed to educating and raising their children. Learning from their own educational experiences, these women tend to raise and educate their children systematically. Additionally, because they command an independent income, they can better care for and educate their children by introducing more lessons, encouraging children to attend special courses, applying to clubs and choosing useful hobbies, and helping expand their knowledge by traveling or introducing them to other educated families. That is why educated women have become the brides of choice for eligible bachelors intent on getting married.

Educated and employed women tend to organize their time more reasonably. They use their free time to visit and attend parties of other female friends, provided they do not do so at the expense of their family time. Educated women also attend voluntary lectures and seminars that are very relevant to their work, and attend only visits and parties, and some even create their own unique social world. Coworkers are more often than not friends outside of work, which leads to the emergence of lifestyles linked to educational levels and employment positions.

The Cost of Higher Education for Women

Should women decide to pursue higher education and specialization, more often than not they find themselves forced to make very important decisions: to delay or forego marriage. It is common knowledge that the pursuit of higher education requires delaying marriage. Nowadays, the ideal marriage age for most members of society is either when a woman graduates from college or when she acquires a certain educational level that allows her to find employment. Perhaps the prerequisite of education and employment upheld by most modern families in marriage contracts is a confirmation of the necessity for the husband to provide his wife the opportunity to pursue a higher education and secure employment that would provide her with some financial independence.

However, most women who desire to pursue higher education and specialization might often postpone marriage, sometimes for a very long period, which may lead to “spinsters” (a woman who remains single all her life). This issue has become a social phenomenon in some fields, namely medicine, or similar higher studies that require many years of education, because those who pursue such fields need to continue studying, and they postpone marriage indefinitely.

This raises the issue of marriageability in the sense that education and the desire to climb the professional ladder might stand in the way of committing to the establishment of marriage for males and females alike. However, while males can count on the support from their wives, caring and serving them while the latter strive for a higher degree, females hardly get the same kind of support from their husbands. It is rarely accepted that a man makes sacrifices for a woman who pursues an education. The results of such a decision are not benign as they cause an unwanted disparity between the woman’s educational and social level and that of the husband’s. The marriage, where such a disparity appears is considered “marriages of convenience” whereas someone of very limited education marries a woman of higher social standing, which is often unacceptable socially as many men prefer that they have higher social standing than their wives.

Some men hesitate to allow their wives to keep their careers after marriage, which may lead to family problems or even divorce because of the field in which the wife works. In many cases, when the woman earns more than her husband, the job requires a certain amount of limited gender mixing, which is still problematic, particularly if the wife is extremely good at what she does. The professional scheming and begrudging may affect her family life, causing a great deal of trouble. Many women with higher education believe they must be excessively traditional and uphold society’s cultural constraints and mores in order to avoid any misunderstanding or improper treatment. Thus, educated women can fail to become pioneers and leaders affecting social change because they are conservative women who believe in the continuation of patriarchal authority, although paradoxically their very existence challenges this authority.

Over the course of this brief examination, we have determined that today’s educated women are not the embodiment of the “slave girl, Tawaddud.” Rather, they are employed women who are realistically involved with their society, and whose efforts contribute to the development of their community, not solely for the benefit and plea-
sure of the male ego. Even so, educated women in Saudi Arabia are rarely publicly critical of the existing patriarchal society, and rarely do they publicly endeavor to abolish and replace such societal relations in order to achieve and guarantee women a standing on par with men. The new wave of educated and employed women represents a transitional transformation. It may gradually bring about changes to the essence and basis of the patriarchal authority and, who knows, may eventually lead to the latter’s demise.

Translated from Arabic by Nadine El-Khoury

Endnotes

1. A written record of Prophet Mohammad’s sayings, within which education is considered one of the important religious duties of both men and women alike.
4. Saudi women who undertake to teach in remote rural regions and the problems they face makes for one of the hottest topics in the Saudi press, and it confirms Saudi women’s determination to retain their right to work.
5. However, this has not stopped them or their husbands from calling for their right to continue working.
6. See, for example, Al-Haji, Assaad Ahmad. (2000). Women’s Social Associations in the GCC Countries: A Documented Study. Kuwait: Published by the Author.
7. Some have risen to high positions within the United Nations and other fields; however, they are far from being role models for employed Saudi women.
8. In other words, they enrol and participate in doctoral programs offered at some British universities while staying in Saudi Arabia.

Forthcoming:

Arab Diaspora Women
The "Gen Zeds" of the title are female Emirati students in their early twenties at Zayed University who have one foot in the traditional Islamic culture of their families and another in a world that expects them to revolutionize economic and social life. Gen Zeds represent today's generation of Emirati students. Though they are from Zayed University, they could just as easily have been from UAE University or the Higher Colleges of Technology because their education has been the result of a big push for opportunity by the country's founding father, the late Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi. These students (the Gen Zeds) are highly educated, media literate, and intense users of the internet. Upon graduation, they are expected to assume leadership positions in the United Arab Emirates despite living in a society that until recently has not permitted women roles beyond motherhood and homemaking. This paper considers whether the lessons and experiences they encounter at university will equip them for life in a society radically different from that of their mothers.

Introduction

The students who walk the manicured paths of Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) speak with the still small voices that others of their gender do in society at large. Largely unrepresented in the halls of power and nearly invisible on the pages of print media, women remain unequal partners with men in society. Nonetheless, Zayed University students and their sisters at educational institutions across the country belong to a generation unlike any other. These "girls" who must become women are expected to become leaders of their nation.

In the last half century, the UAE has undergone a remarkable transformation. As late as 1950, Dubai was a city of huts lining unpaved streets. As late as 1970, literacy rates in the UAE hovered just above 20%. Only a fraction of the mothers of today's students graduated from high school. Only a fraction more of their fathers did too. Today, pressures on the cultural landscape are mounting as the country develops into a more diverse and modern economy with more educated citizens.

This movement toward integration into the global economy has not been happenstance. It has reflected the clear national priorities of His Highness Sheik Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, who was President of the country from its formation in 1971 until his death in 2004. Fulfillment of his priorities has produced change on many fronts,
The the country needs universities graduates. While it is small, the UAE is a unique place of perhaps 4.3 million that is unlike many other contemporary societies and even unlike many other Arab-Islamic states. Not only does it have one of the world’s highest economic growth rates (12.8% GDP growth in 2003, 7.4% in 2004, and 6.6% estimated for 2005 before the oil spike), but also it is a nation in which the indigenous population is a small minority. Current “official” figures estimate that UAE nationals constitute only 15% and 20% of the country’s total population (UAE National Report, 2006). The remaining 80% plus are expatriates. Though most of them have come to earn a living, they are disengaged from making the UAE their permanent home due to the country’s laws and customs.

Expatriates make up the bulk of the workforce, and they perform both the manual and intellectual tasks that keep the country running. The government hopes to replace expatriates with local people through a process called “Emiratization.” Most students expect jobs that give them management roles; it is unlikely that Emiratis would perform manual labor and many do not want “to work their way up the ladder.” Therefore, the country will continue to depend upon an army of workers from India and Pakistan to build the infrastructure projects sprouting in the desert. Earning less than $300 per month, these workers labor long shifts in temperatures hovering around 50° Celsius, erecting the air-conditioned shopping malls, apartments, and luxury homes of the favored few.

Today, as oil and gas revenues flow from the well-head, life is lived large with the Emirati equivalent of two cars in every garage. The state provides an easy life for nationals with free education and medicine, high-paying government jobs, short working hours, expensive pensions and inexpensive housing loans. The UAE has blossomed in the desert and recently has taken the first small steps away from oil dependence. The federal government has invested heavily in tourism, aviation, re-export commerce, and telecommunications. In doing so, the leadership has recognized that the country must make more of its human resources. Devoid of most natural resources except for petro-carbons, the UAE, particularly the Emirate of Dubai, has invested billions of dollars in high technology. The great dream is that educated and trained professionals will replace the thousands of foreign professionals now running the new technology economy (Walters, 2001, p. 82).

This new economy and a trained female [and male national] workforce are the twin pillars of hope for tomorrow’s UAE. Yet, these pillars could just as easily topple rather than prop up the future. As the new knowledge-based economy propels the society into an unknown future, that same new economy will enfranchise individuals, particularly women. As women are trained for the “modern” workplace, the roles of wife and mother in the current model of functioning family will collide with the role of an educated and empowered woman who wants (and is needed) to work outside the home. This transition will not be easy. In Western societies, such as the United States, a focus on the individual — isolated, independent and separated — is embedded in the values of the culture (Connard, 1996). To call these facts into question is “seemingly to question the value of freedom” (Gilligan, 1993, p. xiv). But these fundamental “facts” are different in Arabic-Islamic societies. Traditionally, women and kin, denounced as sectarian and nepotistic, and those responsibilities derided and abandoned in favor of capitalistic acquisitiveness or socialistic expropriations” (Lewis, 1993, p. 39). Many male Muslims are not keen to see their supremacy lost in their own homes “to emancipated women and rebellious children” (Lewis, 1993, p. 40).

**Method**

The survey was administered in class to students in the College of Communication and Media Sciences during the last two weeks of May 2006 at the Dubai and Abu Dhabi campuses. The survey was anonymous. Because Zayed University is both an English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language environment, instructions were explained. When necessary, words were defined. A total of 100 out of 250 students responded.

**Results**

Sixty-three percent of the respondents were from the Dubai campus; 37% were from the Abu-Dhabi campus. The survey was anonymous. Because Zayed University is both an English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language environment, instructions were explained. When necessary, words were defined. A total of 100 out of 250 students responded.

**Research Questions**

Patterned after a much larger survey routinely conducted at a major Midwestern university in the United States, Zayed University created a 187-question questionnaire exploring family and family life, how students conduct their lives both on and off the university campus, their educational and mental state, health and nutrition, the relationship of values to academic performance, and their media life. This questionnaire, “Towards a Culture of Honor and Merit,” will become part of the Transitional Women series, holistically exploring and benchmarking the life and times of these young women. Many of the results of this questionnaire and other studies have already been published or presented as part of a stream of research. The results are derived from the young women that we have affectionately labeled the “Gen Zeds.”

**Many male Muslims are not keen to see their supremacy lost in their own homes ‘to emancipated women and rebellious children’.”**

... students aged in their early twenties should be addressed as ‘girls,’ not women. A woman has had sex; a girl has not.
the circle was 3.9 friends while in Abu Dhabi that circle was 4.8 friends. These friendship groups were (and remain) critically important. They provide encouragement, a sounding board, and a sense of connection to the respondents. About 85% believed their friends cared about them. About the same number believed that friends listened to them and encouraged them to be the best they could be in everything that they did. When hard times hit, 95% went to their friends for advice. About 92% did so because they believed that these friends supported them during difficult times.

Several means of communication helped maintain these circles of friends. A primary one was the face-to-face communication associated with simply being on campus. When asked why they attended ZU, 27% agreed strongly with the statement “I like college for the academics” and 38% said they liked college for the social atmosphere. Even more enjoyed the relative freedom of the campus, where they were not responsible to a parent, a husband, or a brother, and where they could lead their lives relatively unfettered. The grounds have become a place where they can laugh and tell jokes and explore their lives. Though exploration may seem a non-sequitur, the “Lovelacean” nature of the internet means that the thin grey wire leading to the LAN connection and to the world at large allows them to go over the walls of the grounds and become free.

Technology has influenced how students communicate with their friendship circles and others in the United Arab Emirates. One device that has had a major effect on their interactions is the mobile telephone. One of every two people in the UAE had a mobile telephone in 2001, making it the highest per capita cell phone user in the Arab region and the 11th in the world (Castillo, 2001; for today’s figures see CIA, 2007). Three in four of the students had mobile telephones and most carried them on campus, despite the fact it was against university policy. Students circumvent the policy by putting their telephones on vibrate and using an earpiece, the wiring of which is hidden beneath their abaya and shilah (the traditional shawl and cloak). Some used telephones to communicate with the boyfriend or girlfriend they were not supposed to have. Students who used the mobile telephone more frequently seemed to be risk takers. Those who agreed with the statement “it is okay to break ZU’s rules” spent an average of 9.5 hours on the mobile during a typical week; those who disagreed spent an average of 4.4 hours.

Even more pervasive among the students was internet use. The data in this survey show that in a typical week ZU students spent as much time on the internet as they did in the combined total of activities: eating, attending classes, reading newspapers, and books. They also spent more than twice as much time on the internet as they did shopping, twice as much as they did watching television, and more than twice as much as they did in physical contact with friends.

Nielsen-like media diaries unconnected with this survey have shown that many students access the internet morning, noon, and night and maintain multiple e-mail accounts (see Walters, 2002). Data from this current survey reinforced those findings. About 80% of students checked their e-mail at least once daily and about 78% had a home computer in addition to their laptop. Students also had a special place to use that computer and to study. All students had access to the internet on campus during the school week, which runs Saturday through Wednesday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. They often used the internet in the library — where they gathered with friends — or in the cafetaria, which is wired as well. In these places, they congregated around the flicker of the computer screen much like the children of an earlier generation gathered around the glimmer of the television (Pulos, 1988).

Every student chatted or surfed, sometimes “talking” with people their parents don’t know about, and going to sites of which they might not approve. Some students fretted about getting caught. Risk takers among the group worried that their behavior might cause a problem. The more a student used the internet the more likely she was to agree with the statement “I worry that I will get into trouble due to my behavior here on campus.” Those who agreed with this statement spent an average of 7.2 hours weekly on the internet; those who disagreed spent about 5.1 hours on the internet.

Measures of emotion, mood, and self esteem suggested patterns of usage tied to feelings. Highlights of these findings showed that about 16% of the respondents reported often feeling unhappy, sad or depressed. Those who related less well to their peers spent about twice as much time on the internet as those who related well to their peers; respectively, these were 11.9 hours and 5.8 hours per week. Those who wanted to be left alone spent 14.9 hours on the internet; those who did not spent about 9.7 hours. The smaller the number of friends the higher the number of hours a respondent spent on the internet. Using the mean number of friends to divide respondents into groups, frequencies showed that Group 1 (below mean friends) used the internet for about 9 hours per week and that Group 2 (above mean friends) used the internet for about 4.9 hours. P equalled .065 for the two-tailed t-test.

Because of the large number of variables, the data can be divided in many ways. One straightforward, logical way to do so is to examine the similarities and differences between campuses. The cities and emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai are different in their physical as well as psychological and cultural characteristics. Abu Dhabi is home to the federal government, has extensive greenery and low-rise buildings, and is religiously conservative. Dubai is a city of high-rises with a fast-paced and big-city lifestyle more tuned to the hurly burly of a vibrant commercial center. According to at least one student, Dubai has become “the Bangkok of the Middle East.”

Besides adopting new devices such as the mobile telephone and the internet, other communicative habits such as the family eating an evening meal together may be changing. Only about half of the students gathered around the evening dinner table at home on a regular basis, and they only did so if they had carry-in food in the table. About half of the families ate meals at restaurants frequently. These are activities in which the grandmother of this generation most certainly did not participate.

Discussion

The results of this survey are several. They show patterns of exposure that might be compared to waves of usage among female college students at what might be described as a public-private university (like the University of Michigan — Ann Arbor in the U.S.). As children of the digital age, these students are more likely to use the internet than to read exercise. These electronic media are a bigger part of their average day than any other activity, even sleep. Results also showed that media usage was heterogeneous. Some students used the internet and the mobile telephone more than others. Heavy users of the internet tended to be sad or depressed and had smaller circles of friends than did lighter users. Some users of these two media might be called risk takers because they used the internet and the mobile telephone for activities that they knew might cause them trouble. Typically, these would include going to banned internet sites, chatting or Instant Messaging (known as “IM-ing”), and using the mobile telephone on campus. Such students clearly were probing the boundaries of authority.

In some ways, the findings describe typical college students anywhere in the world. In other ways, the findings describe fundamental differences between cultures within the UAE, both in terms of societal basics and communications patterns. Women in the United Arab Emirates are absent from the halls of power and have been almost invisible in the media (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldenberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 17; taken from Olsen, 1978). This caption from a wedding party picture illustrates this latter point. No women were shown. Though she was mentioned, the bride was not pictured.

Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Dubai Deputy Ruler and UAE Minister of Finance and Industry, and Sheikh Saud bin Rashid Al-Maktaa, Umm Al Quwain Crown Prince and Minister of State for Financial Affairs, attended the ceremony hosted by Abdullah AlMussawi, NFC Member, on the wedding of his son Faisal to the daughter of Saud Ghanem Al-Mari. Also present were senior officials, and prominent citizens. (Monday, March 3, 2003, Gulf News, p. 7)

Zayed University students will need to overcome such hurdles to win the race to make their voices larger. To date, progress has been mixed. Although some students are not silent, the majority remain so. A student protest to mark the anniversary of the Intifada in 2002 attracted perhaps 20 participants. Some students take risks; most do not. Some students note that they feel powerful; many feel powerless, and many feel that conditional rules “spent an average of 9.5 hours on the mobile during a typical week; those who disagreed spent an average of 4.4 hours.

Even controlling their own fertility is beyond the means of most – only perhaps a quarter of married women use birth control methods (United Nations, 2001). Virginity among unmarried women is a prized family possession. So concerned are these girls that most choose pads over tampons, fearing that tampons will damage their hymens. The vocabulary of address reflects the concern about virginity: Proper etiquette requires that students aged in their early twenties be addressed as “girls,” not women. A woman has had sex; a girl has not (see Gilligan, 1993, p. 70). In the UAE, it remains “illegal” to give birth without a father (Nazzal, 2003).

... attendance at Zayed University has become a form of birth control because many students postpone the inevitable by spending four years at university.
Many activities reinforce life roles and patterns, including the games that children play. For boys, karaba, ma’aski, and Qarajefi emphasize physical skill and gross motor skills. For girls, al tamBiha and turn-taking, protecting the young, and group communication. As both genders move from childhood into adolescence, that movement is marked by a change in dress. Where once they could wear Western-style jeans in public, boys acquire the agal, white dishdasha and biyaj, and girls don the black abaya and shilaj, even in the oppressive heat of the day.

Some childhood vestiges such as needing group talk carry forward into adolescence and early adulthood. Group talk, which contains the rhetoric of inquiry, does not carry with it the pejoratives associated with the Western notion of gossip (Spacks, 1982, pp. 33-34; Belenky et al., p.186).

Learned in childhood and practiced in social gatherings known as the majlis, this interconnected inquiry is fostered by e-mail, by instant messaging, and by the mobile telephone. This interconnected inquiry reflects the fact that these students have what has been described as “a literal faith that they and their friends share the same thoughts and experiences.” It also reflects the fact that they relish having the opportunity to talk (Belenky et al., 1997, p.38).

The path these girls will take will track the familial and educational environments in which each is reared. Sometimes the choices between forks in that pathway are unclear. That is because families and schools differ tremendously in the degree to which they either reinforce risk-taking or encourage conforming behavior among women (Belenky et al., 1997, p.79). It is also because allocation of life chances and advantages differs considerably by family and by society (Belenky et al., 1997, p.160).

In some societies, remaining dependent on the family is socially acceptable (Belenky et al., 1997, p.126). In the United Arab Emirates, that dependence is expected. By law, unmarried girls remain dependents up to the age of 26, and they usually do not live on their own. Women of this generation will struggle mightily to detach themselves from such expectations (Belenky et al., 1997, p.129) because society will continue to exert pressure upon them (Belenky et al., 1997, p.148). Even so, some examples of detachment can be seen. As this study, other surveys, focus groups, and interviews have shown, attendance at Zayed University (and others) has become a form of birth control because many students can postpone the inevitable by spending four (or more) years at university. Using the internet provides a momentary escape from familial and from the unwieldy but architecturally-separated and walled family compound. The mobile telephone and the internet provide a brief refuge from the tumult of their “connected lives.”

Whether the majority of these women will ever become truly independent (or actually desire to do so) is a serious question, the answer to which will shape the future of the United Arab Emirates. The assumptions that these young women make about the nature of truth and reality shape their value systems and the way in which they see the world and themselves as participants in that world. These assumptions also affect their definitions of self, the way they interact with others, their public and private personae, and their sense of control over life events (Belenky et al., 1997, p.3).

Conclusion

“The ‘Gen Zeds’ are different from those who came before them. These students have been reared with a constant flow of media imagery streaming from computers, televisions, and movies. Their reality is the temporary merging of their private lives in computers, televisions and movies creates. Remote control and mouse in hand, these students have fast forwarded into the mediated world.

The ‘Gen Zeds’ have developed an “interactive culture” exhibiting qualities increasingly divergent from the life routines of their grandmothers and mothers. Some Zayed University students are striving for independence and autonomy. Many have an emotional and intellectual openness generally not common to the society at large. Some post their innermost thoughts in a chat room or chat with strangers late into the night. Perhaps a greater social inclusion will come with the new technologies of communication. Whatever else is true, the immediacy, interactivity, and speed of the internet has already greatly accelerated the process of communicating and opened up previously unheard of worlds of knowledge and interaction (Walters, Quinn, and Walten, 2005).

They have become the “bulge” in the python for the United Arab Emirates. They are the leading edge of a groundbreaking generation of highly trained citizens, many of whom have been educated in an English-speaking extended family networks wield enormous power in all aspects of life. This creates a system in the UAE that is antithetical to modern, transparent economies that generally require that the best—not the best connected—rise to the top in the major societal institutions.

Even the under-25 generation attends school, many young people lack the motivation either to work hard or to excel. Students learn at an early age how to play the system, spending time and effort haranguing teachers or plagiarizing instead of studying. Many are averse to working for a private company, preferring the comfort of traditional top-down ways of managing in government-run enterprises.

Endnotes

1. Nielsen media diaries keep track of who is viewing what at what time in American television-viewing families. These records are kept in diary form.

References

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References

Role of Higher Education in the Empowerment and Achievements of Arab Women

The Lebanese Consulate in Dubai and the Northern Emirates in collaboration with the Lebanese American University Alumni organized a forum on the “Role of Higher Education in the Empowerment and Achievements of Arab Women.” The forum was held at the Murooj Rotana on December 3, 2005. It hosted a number of regional and international experts and educators, in a bid to raise the profile of Arab women in the leading industries in the Middle East region. The forum was split into three sessions consisting of politics and media, business, and women in a socio-cultural context, with each session composed of two speakers offering differing views on the subject being discussed.

Women in the Arab World: Challenges and Opportunities

Address by Dr. Joseph G. Jabbra, President of the Lebanese American University to the Dubai and Northern Emirates LAU Alumni Chapter at the Gala Dinner, Dubai, Friday, December 2, 2005

Distinguished guests, colleagues and friends,

First, I’d like to take this opportunity to thank you for inviting me to speak to you tonight on this happy occasion. Second, I’d like to salute you for choosing for your forum such an important topic, The Role of Higher Education in the Empowerment and Achievements of Arab Women. Third, I am grateful to all the participants in this conference whose contributions, I am sure, will add significantly to improving the life of women in the Arab world, and fourth, I’d like to extend my most sincere gratitude to the organizers for working so hard to make this event most productive and most enjoyable.

In Road to the Future, Mustapha Al-Barghouti says that in the Arab world women are still marginalized, and that human development may not take root unless women become active participants in Arab society. He goes on to say: “It is quite clear that the dilemma of Arab development will not be solved without focusing fully on human development, the development of the citizen and his/her role in economic, social and political life.”

In its general volume on human development, the UNDP states: “Promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment in its broader scope is a key objective of the Millennium Declaration” (UNDP, 2003b, p. 7).

In my talk tonight, I will address four women-related issues: the role of the Lebanese American University (LAU) in the education of Arab women, the contributions of LAU’s Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World to Arab women and their concerns, and I will conclude with a challenge to both LAU and the Institute.

Women-Related Issues

There are four women-related issues I’d like briefly to elaborate on. They are women and education, women and empowerment, women and health services, and women and inequality.

Women and Education

In today’s world, education is important because it is the only way to the good life that the Greek philosophers spoke about in glowing terms millennia ago. With education we can chart a suitable career path for ourselves, enjoy the delights of the modern world, realize our highest aspirations, contribute to society, and find self-fulfillment. With education, we can have better health, be more productive members of society, have a better income, and provide more amenities for our families. Without education, none of these can be realized (UNDP, 2003b, p. 7).

Therefore, it behooves every society to make sure that not only men but also women have the opportunity to get a good education. As we well know, women are strong agents of change because they are the primary care givers of children and are effective agents of social-
and governments must support women’s basic requirements to live comfortably, provide them with the opportunity to reexamine their status at home and in society, and protect them from violence, both physical and mental (UNDUP, 2003b, p. 86).

Violence against women is a world-wide phenomenon and the Arab world is no exception. In the last week of November 2005, one of the television stations in the Arab world related the story of a 25-year-old woman, six months pregnant, who was beaten, almost to death, by her husband. She was taken to a hospital where she lost her baby; her teeth were broken, and she was incapacitated, yet she refused to say that she was beaten by her husband because of the shame (‘ab) factor. This is what you call double abuse: first by her husband and second by the customs and traditions of her society.

There is no doubt that there is a women’s empowerment deficit in the Arab world. For example, in terms of gender empowerment measures, the Arab region ranks next to last — only sub-Saharan Africa has a lower score.

Women and Health Services
Part of the gender crisis in Arab society results from women’s poor access to good health services, which contributes to a significant mortality gap between men and women. Despite women’s biological and religious attitudes of Arab men who, on the whole, still regulate women’s role and place in society. As a result, and despite a noticeable improvement, more than half of Arab women are still illiterate. Arab governments should realize that while education is very expensive, the cost of ignorance of half of Arab society can be staggering (UNDUP, 2002a, p. 3).

In Lebanon, the system of education is the most advanced in the Arab world and men and women have equal opportunity in education (UNDUP, 1997). In fact, women’s enrolment is now a lot higher than men’s. But women are not transferring their education into the labor market; models of appropriate gender roles keep them at home and prevent them from progressing after they start to have children. Moreover, international experience has shown that the entry of women into the labor market will not by itself free them from the social shackles of society.

Women and Empowerment
It is not enough to educate women; it is essential that they be empowered. Education and empowerment give women the opportunity to become active members of society and effective contributors to its well-being. Further, empowering women means that Arab societies consider their role and contribution essential to socioeconomic development.

Even in Lebanon where women have progressed considerably over the past two decades, they still do not participate effectively in all aspects of Lebanese life. Lebanese women are still subject to the “glass ceiling” phenomenon and don’t occupy many important decision-making posts. As a result, they don’t participate actively in the modernization process (UNDUP, 1997, p. 112).

This situation is not unique to the Arab world. Although women in developed societies have made significant strides in the areas of employment and holding public office, their drive has met numerous difficulties. In her newsletter, Your Guide to Women’s Issues (October 20, 2005), Nikki Katz speaks of the “glass ceiling” phenomenon which has been debated and discussed for the past 20 years without much success. In this regard, Katz speaks of the paucity of women in leadership positions, and the pay inequality between men and women.

Although women in developed societies have achieved a great deal in the business and political arenas, they continue to experience serious difficulties in realizing their full aspirations. Progress by women in the Arab world has certainly been slower. As explained above, many obstacles stand in their way, ranging from socio-cultural to educational challenges. Many argue that the answer to these challenges lies in making education fully accessible to both men and women.

Education is a key to a paradigm shift in the way Arab males understand and defines the role and place of women in Arab society.

Lebanese American University
I will now focus on one institution of higher education that is providing a golden opportunity for men and women to earn an advanced degree in the Arab world and men and women have equal opportunity in education (UNDUP, 1997). In fact, women’s enrolment is now a lot higher than men’s. But women are not transferring their education into the labor market; models of appropriate gender roles keep them at home and prevent them from progressing after they start to have children. Moreover, international experience has shown that the entry of women into the labor market will not by itself free them from the social shackles of society.

What is needed is a paradigm shift, a change or adjustment in society’s social, cultural, and economic dimensions (UNDUP, 1997, p. 106).

Women and Gender Inequality
One of the goals of the Millennium Declaration calls for the improvement of women’s representation in the political, cultural, economic, and social arenas. Moreover, gender equality is at the core of whether some of the most noble human aspirations can be achieved: “from improving health and fighting deadly diseases, to reducing poverty and mitigating hunger, to expanding education and lowering child mortality, to increasing access to safe water, and to ensuring environmental sustainability.” (UNDUP, 2003b, p. 50).

Providing women with the opportunity to get a good education is important but not sufficient. It is equally important to create jobs for women that are commensurate with their education and talents, and assure for them a sustainable and dignified existence. Arab societies must open the door for women to participate in politics, and occupy visible positions and positions of authority in the private as well as the public sectors. Arab societies must realize that gender inequality is so serious because it prevents half of the population from being fully productive (UNDUP, 2002a, p. 98). It is unconscionable that half of Arab women are still illiterate and not prepared to participate in nation building. It is unacceptable that Arab women continue to suffer from “unequal citizenship and legal entitlement often evident in voting rights and legal codes” (UNDUP, 2002a, p. 3).

Moreover, the participation of Arab women in the political arena (legislative assemblies, cabinets) remains extremely low, perhaps the lowest in the world. Arab women, on the whole, are not normally employed, and if they are, their wages are lower than those of men. There is no open door for women to participate in politics, and occupy visible positions and positions of authority in the private as well as the public sectors. Arab societies must realize that gender inequality is so serious because it prevents half of the population from being fully productive (UNDUP, 2002a, p. 98). It is unconscionable that half of Arab women are still illiterate and not prepared to participate in nation building. It is unacceptable that Arab women continue to suffer from “unequal citizenship and legal entitlement often evident in voting rights and legal codes” (UNDUP, 2002a, p. 3).

As with political participation, Arab women’s formal economic participation remains low as well. This is unacceptable. Although women’s formal economic participation in society has increased in a number of Arab countries, it still leaves a lot to be desired. Arab women’s ability to contribute to society and to gain from their work experience remains hindered by customs, habits, conventions and legal restrictions (UNDUP, 2002a, p. 11).

There has been no serious discussion about gender and globalization in the Arab world. In fact, globalization may have its winners... However, in the Arab region, their numbers are relatively small and highly stratified. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these winners are mainly males. On the other hand, there are discernible numbers of losers, both males and females. Evidence suggests that, among the losers, female groups tend to be worse off in terms of economic exploitation and unemployment in situations where cost-cutting and flexibility are of paramount concern. (CAWTK, 2001, p. 15)
In her 1967 book, Pioneering Profiles, Beirut College for Women, Dr. Marie Aziz Sabri wrote:

In the last forty years, Beirut College for Women has been the main continuous force which has supplied the Arab World with large numbers of women pioneers who, through knowledge, have found the key to freedom. When the Arab World has been changing at a great pace, Beirut College for Women (BCW) graduates have made a unique record in professional life and in services to their countries.  

Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World

In 1973, the university (then known as Beirut University College, BUC) established the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World with five clear objectives: strengthening women’s curricular offerings at the university; carrying out research on the role, status, and place of women in Lebanon and the Arab World; advocating positive change regarding the rights of Arab women; serving as a clearing house for individuals, groups of individuals, and institutions who are concerned about women’s issues in the Arab world and beyond; and empowering Arab women through engagement and education (Sabri, 1967, p. 1).

Inspired by these objectives, the Institute immediately engaged in three important types of activity: academic, special events, and action and development. Although the Institute does not offer a degree program, it has persuaded departments in the humanities and social sciences to offer courses related to women’s issues to interested students. Moreover, the Institute, through sponsored research, began to address the role and status of Arab women in education, the environment, literature, economic development, management, the media, and history. Furthermore, the Institute has, since its inception, hosted a number of conferences, seminars and workshops focusing on important women’s issues.

In regard to special events, the Institute hosts annual film festivals that focus on women’s images and profiles, the veil, women in cinema, and women’s sexuality. Since 1988, it has organized celebrations of International Women’s Day. Highlights of such events have included photographs of and by women, with special emphasis on Lebanese pioneer women, music, concerts, and other cultural and social activities.

Third, the Institute has promoted action and development programs, with the goal of promoting women’s literacy and increasing their social and political awareness. These action and development programs include a basic living skills program, written in Arabic and used by social workers and educators to help literate Arab women acquire literacy. Another important program focuses on empowering Arab women through 12-second-level literacy booklets that contain stories involving women and civic education, empowerment of women, violence against women, women’s health and the environment, and rehabilitation of women in Lebanese prisons.

To its credit, the Institute has many publications, in English and Arabic, centering on women’s issues. Chief among these is Al-Raida, a quarterly journal which was established in 1976 with the objective of strengthening Arab women, promoting research on Arab women, and reporting on the Institute’s and the University’s activities. My observation is that Al-Raida has been carrying out its mission admirably.

The Challenge

It is clear that the Institute has been engaged in researching women-related issues and advocating the improvement of the status and role of women in Arab society and beyond. While this is important, I believe that the Institute has not been given the opportunity to live up to its potential, especially at an institution that was first established for the education of women.

From this podium, and with your support, I’d like to challenge LAU to support and strengthen the Institute so that it may become a major force, meticulously researching women-related issues in the Arab world and beyond, and advocating a significant improvement in their condition.

More specifically, I’d like to see the Institute fully supported by the University on the basis of a well thought out strategic plan prepared by the Institute, in consultation with top-notch experts in the field of women and gender studies. Such a plan should tell us how the Institute can become a major research and action center, where the four issues I have already mentioned, namely: women and education, women and health services, women and empowerment, and women and inequality, are fully researched, and, in light of that, solutions proposed to address the challenges that stand in the way of improving women’s role, status, and effective participation in Arab society.

Moreover, the Institute should become a repository of significant sets of data relating to women’s issues, a resource center professionally maintained, and to which scholars, practitioners, and government experts can have access and consult for the purpose of learning and pursuing women’s equality in Arab society. Achieving this goal would make the Institute a place where scholars, practitioners, and government experts can gather for defined periods of time to do their research and learn from what the Institute will have to offer.

Further, I am of the opinion that Al-Raida should become a refereed journal, publishing excellent research articles on women’s issues. My reason for taking this position is that nothing can put a center or an institute on the regional as well as the global map except well-researched, scholarly, and peer reviewed articles on important topics. And nothing is more important than the fate of half the population of the world.

Finally, in all the research done on women in the Arab world, and in an effort to collect and store reliable and useful data in that regard, I would recommend the use of the Gender Related Development Index (GDI), and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). The first helps us understand the inequality of achievement between men and women, and the second helps us account for the proportion of women in decision making across all levels of society (UNDP, 1997, p. 106).

All allow me, colleagues and friends, to conclude by saying that even women who achieved a great deal in developed societies continue to experience major difficulties in their drive for equality at all levels between men and women. The achievements of and remaining challenges for women in developed societies clearly point to how much work Arab women will have to do in order to gain their proper role and rightful place in Arab society. Let LAU and the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World lead the way. Let both become a shining beacon of hope for improving women’s condition and role in the Arab World. And let both help Arab men and women complement each other in the exciting task of building a better Arab society for ourselves and for future Arab generations.

Thank you.

References


Katz, N. Can women break the glass ceiling? Available at: http://www.allinfoaboutwomensissues.com/can_women_break_the_glass_ceiling.html


Endnotes


2. Ibid., p. 11.

3. North America, over 0.6; Oceania 0.5; Europe 0.5; Latin America almost 0.4; Arab countries, not even 0.3; and sub Saharan Africa, a little over 0.2. Arab Human Development Report 2002, p. 28.


5. For details, see Orientation Program, Lebanese American University, Board of Trustees Meeting, May 12, 13 and 14, 2005, and Lebanese American University, Academic Catalogue, 2004-2005, p. 3-4.

6. See a document entitled The Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University, no date given.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.
I would like to point out the fact that the forum plays a critical role in emphasizing the dynamism of the academic environment in Lebanon and enhancing its impact on Arab women. This will be made clear through different statements made by an elite group of Arab women who have excelled in many political, social, and business arenas.

Lebanon has established itself as a main center for education in general and higher education in particular. The multiplicity and diversity of universities has created a dynamism which has allowed equal educational opportunities for both men and women, spreading knowledge among people that has:

1. Reduced social discrimination;
2. Developed both private and public higher education, and opened local university branches; and
3. Promoted academic knowledge through scientific research, which is extremely important due to its vital role in enhancing the quality of education.

One of the key purposes of higher education is to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional, and national levels. While many institutions are national and international in their outlook, they have also developed an important role in the local and regional contexts. This importance is not only due to the centrality of higher education to the future economic and social well-being of the communities in which they are located, but also to the role that higher education plays in changing the very structure of the economy.

In recent years there has been a growing emphasis on the local and regional roles of higher education, to the extent that over three-quarters of such institutions now refer to local and/or regional objectives in their strategic plans. At the same time there have been a number of attempts to measure the impact of higher education at the local and regional levels. These studies have shown that, simply by their existence, higher education providers make a significant economic contribution in a locality — whether or not they adopt an explicit mission to generate local or regional economic activity or to play a part in the cultural life of their locality or region. The range of their role is in fact very wide, extending to support through research and consulting, attracting investment and providing new sources of employment, meeting labor market needs, supporting lifelong learning, and as centers of culture contributing to the quality of life in their localities.

Indeed, in spite of the often-inevitable difference in the purposes and timelines of research in higher education institutions and in the world of commerce, there has increasingly been a mutual recognition of the advantages of partnerships, and a will on the part of the higher education institution to seek them.

Because of established relationships between values, language, culture, economics, and education, there is a uniqueness of education in Lebanon and this I will now discuss.

The Components and Characteristics of Higher Education in Lebanon

Understanding the components requires defining the tasks or objectives:

The first objective is to provide vocational education through academic learning that is related to the needs of the society, and characterized by a certain margin of freedom and independence.

The second objective is to provide a civil and political education; in fact, universities develop the human resources of individuals who will later take on positions in the state, civil society and public sector, and this is achieved by the acquisition, through debate and discussion, of those principles guiding civil, cultural, and human identity.

These two objectives, though distinct, are yet complementary, and contribute to build an active citizenry — free, responsible, having enough insight and perception, and capable of formulating a judgment and opinion about themselves and their political society. Having said this, the question is why did we choose Lebanon? What are the characteristics of higher education in Lebanon?

At the beginning of history, Lebanon was one of the pioneers of the alphabet, and from its shores the alphabet spread throughout the world. The first two ministries to be established were the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, and the Ministry of Vocational and Technical Training, to enrich the Lebanese educational system. In 1946, after independence, the Lebanese government replaced the old curricula, coming from the French Mandate, with new ones, and the Arabic language was imposed upon all schools as the primary language of instruction. The government also left students the freedom to choose a second language or more (French, English, et cetera). Then the curricula were changed again. Each step of the educational process was specified with a defined goal.

In Lebanon, the educational levels after high school are university, college, professional institute, or high technical school. Lebanon has 23 universities, of which the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Lebanese American University (LAU) are internationally known. AUB was the first English-language university to open in Lebanon, while the first university to open was the French-language Université Saint Joseph.

The Lebanese educational system has been a bilingual/trilingual system for a long time, teaching, besides Arabic, French and English as basic languages. A former minister once said that we make good use of this polyglot feature of our society: English is a practical language, French is a refined language, and Arabic is the mother language that molds the national cultural identity. In this context, the Lebanese American University stands out. LAU was the first women’s college in Lebanon, which later transformed into a college that admitted both young men and women. It is also the seat for the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, which engages in academic research aimed at the study and support of women’s issues and conditions in the Arab world. LAU offers its students new perspectives and prepares them to be dynamic elements capable of introducing change into their society.

It is imperative that our young men and women continue to be anchored in the cultural values and religions that are only available in our part of the world. In short, if you want to attain the best progressive education within a mosaic of cultural celebrations and established history, while preserving our conservative religious and family values, your destination must be Lebanon.