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# **The Role of Education and Gender Biases of Women in the Arab Society**

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If we look at ancient history, many important facts related to the position of woman at home and in society will be revealed but the changes affecting her status and role are ultimately related to the way in which the social and economic structure of a society evolved (Saadawi, 91).

A woman's role as wife and mother is the greatest meaning. Their role of Arabs as mothers is associated with protective maternal nurturance. The mother is gentle, affectionate, and compassionate; she is constantly present and involved in the children's daily activities. She also serves as a buffer or mediator between the father and the children and as a result, the children develop a stronger emotional attachment to the mother (Abudi, 39).

Gender roles have been a dominant focus in the last few decades among different societies and countries around the world. Whether these gender roles and biases have come from traditional values, cultural norms, patriarchal domination or because of religious beliefs, evidence shows the gap between genders is closing. Taking a deeper look into Arab society, this research will focus on current Arab gender biases and the views of women in Arab society. This research will focus on historical context of female roles in Arab society and assess equality or inequality of gender. The research will take a look at gender roles both from the past to present state, as well as views of Arab women in today's Western society. Arab women are often viewed as being controlled by men and religion and are uneducated. Focusing on the increase of education among women, the goal of this research is to discover if gender biases and inequalities of the past still exist today and how education has been the vehicle toward equality. The research will examine if preconceived notions of Arab gender biases exist in Western societal thinking, and if Arabs themselves believe they have biases or inequalities in the Arab World. This research will also illustrate what the role of women in the Arab world is in various aspects of the public and private sectors, such as at home, the workplace and education.

In order to analyze gender biases in the Arab world, research will come from media newspaper articles, scholarly journals and papers, as well as from text books. Some input will come from female Arab organizations that are actively seeking the quest for equality among their nations.

The quest for gender equality has been seen on the global scale and has had significant success within the twentieth century. Female social scientists from the Arab world have been seeking to address inequality issues to create equilibrium among both genders. (Hopkins and Ibrahim 2012). Many Westerners believe in the misconception that this inequality is due to the strict religion of Islam. Many non-Arabs and non-Islamic people have a belief that Muslims oppress women based on this religion and its sexist constraints. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Based on the writings in the Quran, Islam paved the way for equality of Arab women. Islam has stipulations which state the rights and obligations of the husband, wife and children. These outlined responsibilities provided a guideline for both sexes, which included a fairer respect and autonomy for women, compared to other religions. This is attributed to Prophet Mohammed's first wife, who owned her own business and continued with the business even after she married. (Yaseen, 2010) "It is important for women in Islamic society to balance her duties and responsibilities at home and in the workplace" (Yaseen 2010). Khadija (prophet Mohammed's wife), wasn't the only influential woman married to an influential man; In the late 1970s, the first lady of Egypt, Mrs. Jihan Sadat, passed a law that allowed women deputies into the people's assembly. According to the *Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality Organization*, she continued to advocate for women in spheres of education and human rights. (Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality 2013).

What inequalities do Arab women experience in Arab countries on a day-to-day basis and how are these factors working together to create an oppressed gender in that area of the world? This is a common question that many sociologists come upon when discussing gender inequalities throughout the world and more specifically, when they discuss Arab and Muslim women. Because today's society tends to mainly be dominated by males, it is often difficult to discuss flaws in how a society function as a whole, for there is always going to be an opposing opinion.

Due to the negative mutual attitudes and common practices towards women that are shared amongst the Arab countries, the way in which women have been treated throughout history has not changed. This has resulted in the inability to reach equality amongst the two genders. This paper asserts that Arab women who are living in Arab countries experience an unacceptable amount of inequality in their lives through educational and employment

discrimination, through their inability to participate politically in their communities, and their lack of legal and personal rights within a marriage, which when all factors are combined, cause the severe oppression of women in the Arab world. The first argument that will be discussed is how females are treated unequally in terms of education and employment due to the socialization they receive while growing up, as well as current social forces pushing them to engage in domestic work and raising a family rather than receiving education and pursuing professional careers.

The second argument that will be examined is how women are not given equal opportunity to participate politically in their community, therefore oppressing them by not allowing their voices to be heard as individuals and as citizens of their country. Before discussing these points, however, an understanding of current policies and practiced religions must be established to receive a full understanding of the problems associated with how Arab women are treated.

According to Luciani (1990), an Arab is an individual whose native language is Arabic and is born in an Arab country. Though not every Arab individual is Muslim, the role of Islam in all Arab societies is highly prominent (Sidani, 2005). According to the Quran, Islam is the only acceptable religion. It holds that we are completely dependent and indebted to God. Because God is the true owner of the universe, we cannot interfere with fate (Reynolds, 1998). Islam has provided detailed instructions on how one can lead a good life in the eyes of Allah. However, the interpretation of these instructions or guidelines has led the Arab society to a point of disarray. At the present point in time, Arab societies are in a state of disorder. These societies in particular are always in search of preserving their past and living with the same customs as their ancestors and predecessors had, as well as living life the way that has been instructed to them by Allah through the teachings of the Quran (Reynolds, 1998). However, with the rise of Westernization all over the world, Arab societies are having extreme difficulty finding a midpoint between the past, present and the future of their culture.

Throughout the years, there have been a number of influential Arab women who have fought for the rights and freedoms of women, and a number of them have been found successful. However, because this does go against what has happened in the past and due to the strict control over many Arab women in particular countries, women often never touched these newfound freedoms. Fundamental changes have occurred, yet the hard grasp on the past has

caused women to avoid change and uphold their position as the providers of households, raisers of children, and often a slave to their significant other. There are currently still high levels of illiteracy among Arab women, for some women are unable to attend school because their parents will not allow it, as well as high pay discrepancies for those women who are allowed to work among professions when compared against male earnings (Sidani, 2005).

With regards to education, employment, and Arab women, inequality is always present, specifically when discussing a women's place within the Arab world. In the 1900's, most Arab women were prohibited from the right to receive and earn an education as well as share in public life (Sidani, 2005). Though this is not currently the case in a number of Arab countries, there is still a very limited amount of female individuals who receive a full education and move on to having careers. This is mostly due to the socialization that they receive while growing up. Sika (2011), discusses how social norms affect a child's schooling, for most Arab families decide to send the males to school and keep the females at home to help with the household chores.

Another aspect that affects the schooling of young females in Arab countries is the origins of their parents. According to Sika (2011) many schools deny access to certain individuals based on the ethnicity of the parents, more specifically, if the mother is Arab but the father is not, the child will be denied an education. According to Sika (2011), in most cases, poverty is a key factor in which women are unable to afford and receive the education that they need in order to support themselves. This causes women to drop out of school at a very young age and marry, so they have a support system (husband) to survive. Also, with the women who do marry, a majority of them are prohibited from going back to school to receive an education, due to the opinions and beliefs of their new husbands.

Arab women also have one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the world. They also possess the world's lowest rate of labour participation by females (Sika, 2011). Since the introduction of westernization and the push for modernity, aspects that had once been a primary part of the average Arab woman's life have changed dramatically. The process into a more modern society has made room for new roads towards education, as well as delaying the age of marriage for many women (Lewin-Epstein & Semyonov, 1992). These factors alone increase the likelihood of an Arab women entering into the workforce. Though opportunities have been made for women to enter into the workforce, it is often more difficult that it appears for

women to maintain a job.

Reasons for this are often that a majority of Arabs in Arab countries reside in the more rural areas away from urban centers, meaning that often women would have to commute to their place of employment. This is an unlikely task for females considering social norms and traditions forbid interaction with men who are not family members and also they are limited in mobility due to family values (Lewin-Epstein & Semyonov, 1992). Many employers are also more inclined to hire a male over a female, for females in this culture are viewed as homemakers and unable to make decisions and choices on their own (Lewin-Epstein & Semyonov, 1992) Again, it is the culture as a whole that has a significant impact on whether a female enters into the workforce. The lower percentage of women participating economically is due to the culture restraints against women entering the labour force (El-Safty, 2004). Many women choose to stay and work within the home to prevent shame being brought upon her family as well as the strict prohibition of women accepting wages (El-Safty, 2004). Another aspect where women experience inequality is through their inability to participate in political arenas in their community and country.

With regards to voting in Arab countries, women do not have the same rights and freedoms that come so easily to women of the Western World. Though women's participation in economics and politics were present in the past, their place in these areas has decreased significantly throughout the years (Sidani, 2005). In the mid-1900's, there were women who received educations and continued on to achieve great careers, however, this only occurred in very limited areas throughout the Arab world and is currently almost non-existent. In a country such as Egypt, strict control was maintained over the participation of women in economic and political arenas (Sidani, 2005). According to Mostafa (2003) women living in the Arab world, though more prominent in some countries in comparison to others, continue to suffer greatly from unimaginable limitations, which control their participation in political arenas and economic forums, as well as decreasing opportunities to employment, high levels of illiteracy, and a very prominent wage discrimination (Sidani, 2005). As stated previously in this research work, women in the Arab world are most commonly viewed as being inferior to men in all aspects of life. According to AbuKhalil (1993), women are often excluded from politics in the Arab world because Arab women tend to be under the impression that they are often attacked by their counter-parts, men, causing feelings of hatred towards males and towards male-led organizations, not to mention this causes females to completely disagree

with laws and reform, for they are often created and enforced by men and are often on the side of the men as well.

Voting is one area in which Arab women are treated unequally in comparison to men. Regardless of whether a woman is granted the right to place a vote in an election or not, this right may not be exercised because either the woman's father, brother, or husband may interject, for feelings that women cannot make free decisions because of outside obstacles (referring to other oppressive factors that would weigh in on a woman's opinion) (AbuKhalil, 1993). Another aspect of voting that affects a women's ability to vote is the discrepancy in rates of adult literacy between both men and women (AbuKhalil, 1993). If women feel that they are unsure as to what they are doing or even cannot read the ballot, this will deter all women from wanting to vote. The final factor associated with voting and a woman having the right to vote is that in some countries it is mandatory for males to vote where it is only suggested that women do so. AbuKhalil (1993) states that in Egypt in 1956, only 1 percent of the total number of individuals registered to vote were female. Again, because it is not viewed as mandatory for females to vote, the males in the family make the decision to not allow them to do so (Al Maaitah et. Al).

On the other hand and stereotypically, Arab women are viewed as meek, subordinated and unintelligent compared to their male counterparts. In the past, Arab women have been under much control of males, but today many barriers have been broken that have allowed for the progression of equality among females. The most emphasized and important factor is the increase of education among women. Statistical data shows the more educated the woman, the more likely she will not accept authority from males. As women in Arab societies focus on academia, it is less likely they will follow restrictive societal norms. And as they increase their education, they also increase their autonomy. The focus shifts from traditional thoughts of getting married and starting a family to fulfilling their life's purpose through meaningful work (Hopkins and Ibrahim 2012). By gaining independence and contributing to the socio-economic status in their respective countries, they earn societal respect and contribute "honour" to the family name (Pryce-Jones 2002). "To this day, the Arab female is the sole individual in the Arab family who can grant or destroy the honour of the family." Women's reputations are always being tested (to avoid shame) but as families and females are modernized and educated, traditional restrictions have been stretched in some Arab societies (Nashef 2012). If we can abolish these traditional ways of thinking, we can move toward

balance of the sexes. The measurement of success in males is regarded as their own victorious quest, without attribution or recognition from their wives or family members. Women are “persons” in the eyes of the law, so they should be considered “persons” in society; her choices, successes, failures or misfortunes should not be shamed on the entire family because the result is subordinated females without any independence. In the family structure, males are mostly encouraged to go to school and according to United Nations Report; encouragement of equal education for women results in “centuries-old structures of discrimination to be dismantled.” (UN News Centre 2006)

Traditionally males have dominated women by using controlling strategies to be the authoritative figure in the family. When Arab women educated themselves, they too learned strategies, not necessarily to control men, but to take charge of their civil rights to create equality and autonomy. Women benefit from education by not only choosing their own careers but by taking control of decisions most valued by men, such as sex, children, honour and a content well-functioning family unit. “Women have an advantage, when family is central to a society that has been overlooked by those focusing on authority patterns. They are the central figures in the central institutions of the society.” (Pryce-Jones 2002)

Significant progress has been made toward societal improvement as literacy rates among the Arab nations have grown. The United Arab Emirates has been ranked the highest in literacy among the Arab countries. The literacy, education and political progress made by UAE women is tightening the gender gap. "New data shows that literacy rates for women are now higher than those of men, there are small gains in primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment data, and the proportion of women holding ministerial-level positions has increased," as stated in annual Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum. (Constantine 2010). In the UAE, three quarters of college and university students are female. Women in this country are now dominating the education sector contributing to their successful movement of gender equality.

Although women have progressed in academia, success in leadership roles has been growing at a slower rate. Ironically as women become more literate in UAE, they lack participation in movements to overcome gender inequalities. This is also true for the women of Bahrain and Kuwait. Progression of more female leadership roles in government and nonprofit organizations have been seen in nations such as Egypt and Jordan. (Yaseen 2010). The findings are contradictory: advancements in literacy do not necessarily translate to

advancements in leadership roles. There is still work to be done to close the gap, and the need for balanced movements within women's groups.

In western societies, the misconceptions about women in the Arab World seem to be unfounded, yet they still are portrayed in a traditional sense in movies, and in North American media. Moreover, these misconceptions are also seen in Arab media and television. The American University of Sharjah in the UAE conducted a study of Arab television representation of females and uncovered that female characters were presented in stereotypical roles. These televised roles are either untrue or exaggerated compared to the realities of women in today's modern Arab world. This gives false sense of reality that does not depict the female liberty and autonomy in current Arab Societies. (Nashef 2012). This misrepresentation results from "government controlled media, independently owned broadcasting stations with ties to ruling bodies, and the mushrooming of little private ventures owned by businesses or religious/sectarian groups, transmitted globally." (Nashef 2012). Many Arab groups have opposed certain social reforms which have also resulted in regression of equality and return to gender biases, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Egypt, which has been regarded as one of the first Arab countries to advocate for women's rights, has also been responsible (certain groups) for reverting women's equality by trying to take some of their rights and freedoms away; similar to the University of Sharjah study that unfolded stereotypical roles of Arab women on television, and stereotypical roles of their own citizens (Lack and Megahed 2011). The hand responsible for advancements in liberalization can also be the hand responsible for destroying it.

Dissecting the thoughts and realities of Arab Muslim women in Canada, evidence shows that gender roles are in a state of transition. Canadian Arab women want to respect their faith but as they become university educated, they are more confident to speak up about the issues they face. They acknowledge that male superiority of their culture is an outdated way of thinking yet they work within it to accomplish equality amongst Arab women. As Arab women come to Canada for education, or become Canadian citizens, they see different roles of women that were once thought to only be carried out by men (Hamdan 2007). These observations have been critical in women's movements. In Saudi Arabia, women began advocating for the right to drive once they observed female American soldiers driving tanks and vehicles on their land. The Gulf Crisis of the 1990s opened the eyes of females to a world that they never really considered could exist for them. Women in Saudi Arabia still do not have the privilege

to drive, but women today are still active in trying to change this gender bias. (Hopkins and Ibrahim 2006). This transitional stage shows much progress has been made, but more equality policies and practices are needed to balance gender fairness.

“Full participation and empowerment of women, as citizens, as producers, as mothers and sisters, will be a source of strength for Arab Nations and will allow the Arab World to reach greater prosperity, greater influence and higher levels of human development,” states the Arab Human Development Report 2005: Toward the rise of women in the Arab world. (UN News Centre 2006)

Women’s struggle for equality has been an uphill battle due to societal/political controls and misconceptions about Arab women in current society. Arab females have been able to break the religious, patriarchal and education barriers and historically have been the drive behind human development in the Arab world.

While there are many misconceptions about gender biases in the Arab World, the belief in these biases by certain authority figures and power houses such as the USA, actually hinder the advancements of the equality progression; this in turn, could affect the progress made thus far. As stated by Edward Said, by believing these gender biases, the rights and freedoms of Arab women are restricted. From a sociological perspective, controllers of Western and Arab media have led to Orientalism. This misconception of the Arab societies has affected the way in which women can progress in the developed world. The gender biases within Orientalism are not factual; Arab women are not controlled by religion, women are not illiterate, and women are not controlled in excess by their husbands. Arab women are autonomous, intelligent, educated and have progressed in the workforce.

Sociological feminist theorist Dorothy Smith would commend the Arab women of the twentieth century because they have been successful in changing the subordinate female role. Arab women of the past, were conditioned to a life from the perspective of the dominate group. They were once viewed as the inferior sex; but by being independent, proactive and increasing their education, Arab women have pushed through traditional societal norms and broken outdated barriers. Hopefully, freedoms and rights will increase and the dominate group will cease to exist; abolishing gender biases to treat all humans equally.

One of the main issues that hinder equality are the influences from outside the Arab world. If we look at the World System through the eyes of theorist Immanuel Wallerstein, the world economy is based on economic changes. International relations, with the USA and western countries, have affected the dynamics of gender biases and inequality in the Arab world. While Wallerstein focuses on the world as a whole, aspects of the “core” controlling the “periphery state” result in misconceptions about the roles and abilities of Arab women. As the “core”, Western media has been able to present the misconceptions about Arab gender roles as the truth, hindering progression from “the subservient of global capitalist”. Arab women not only have to fight and struggle within their current society, they have to break through biases on a global level.

In conclusion, “Perceptions of women’s roles and rights have changed over time ... due to the political and socio-economic transformation shifting the country from a socialist- to a capitalist-oriented society and the re-emergence of Muslim (radical and non-radical) fundamentalist groups.” (Lack and Megahed 2011). When assessing women’s roles, we can see that stereotypes, media, and patriarchy are the “bourgeoisies” controlling proletariat Women in Arab societies. The progression of liberal women is not as slow as it is portrayed. “Throughout history, reform movements have sought to garner the support of women through policies of gender reform.” (Lack and Nagwa 2011). Misconceptions have come from traditional values, cultural norms, patriarchal domination, and religious beliefs. Evidence shows the gap between genders is closing.

Arab women have persevered to garner the right and recognition of breaking through their cultural and societal norms. With education, comes confidence and independence to pursue goals they have for themselves. While huge advancements have been made for women, there is still the struggle to honour their faith and overcome some of the outdated thoughts. The future is exciting for Arab women as they become a stronger force. They have proved to be a vital and important part of work and home life. Finding balance between the two worlds will be ongoing, but at least the Arab women of today have more than scratched the surface.

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