



THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE ARAB MIDDLE EAST

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Although recently much attention has been paid to signs of reform and liberalization in the Arab world, there is also considerable evidence of trends in regressive social transformation. One such manifestation is the prevailing attitudes and social policies that continue to deny women their fundamental human rights and freedoms. Arab women continue to suffer major deficiencies in both oil-rich and poorer Arab countries.

There are growing forces of resistance in the Arab world to one of the major factors of progressive social transformation, the human rights of women. Two interrelated variables account for such resistance to the incorporation of women's human rights into domestic agendas: (1) the ideological and attitudinal variables; and (2) the empirical realities.

The ideological/attitudinal-based resistance¹ is due to two factors: first, to a dangerous trend observable in the Arab/Islamic world toward extreme regression, as opposed to progression. The second factor has more to do with cultural and nationalistic attitudes, which engender a degree of suspicion towards, and perhaps outright rejection in principle of, anything perceived as Western-modeled human development programs. Such suspicious attitudes are particularly aimed at women's human rights issues.

The empirical realities are mostly derived from the groundbreaking *Arab Human Development Report 2002* (AHDR)² and the

AHDR 2003. Specifically, the empowerment of women, one of the three deficiencies³ that the *AHDR 2002* identifies in the Arab region's overall human development diagnosis, is closely examined. The analysis of women's empowerment focuses on general health and nutrition indicators, education, employment, political participation, human welfare, and domestic policies and whether or not they address the rights and freedoms of women. Egypt serves as a case study, while other Arab countries are also given as examples.

It is important to note that the empirical realities reflect the glaring deficiencies in the human rights of women in the Arab world often because of the ideological/attitudinal resistance to women's empowerment. Hence, the two levels of analysis (i.e. ideological/attitudinal variables and empirical realities) are interrelated and interdependent. Clearly, without ideological and attitudinal changes regarding women's rights, there cannot be positive empirical changes in the status of women. Moreover, without positive

empirical changes in the status of women, there can be no progressive social transformation for the societies as a whole.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: TRENDS OF EXTREME REGRESSION

Social transformation may involve changes in social structures, labor relations, urbanization, attitudes, beliefs, views, and values, freedoms and rights, the quality of education, competitive and comparative advantages, and effective governance. The process may also involve political transformation. According to Samuel Huntington, political transformation correlates with modernization: "Modernization in practice always involves change in and usually the disintegration of a traditional political system."⁴ Moreover, modernization can be defined as "a change in the attitudes, values, and expectations of people from those associated with the traditional world to those common to the modern world."⁵ This process requires economic development and social mobilization. Huntington asserts that social mobilization refers to "changes in the aspirations of individuals, groups, and societies," and economic development refers to "changes in their capabilities."⁶ Most of the Arab/Islamic world is characterized by coexisting religious and political authoritarianism, rendering socio-political changes in traditional systems more difficult. In fact, traditions are deeply entrenched, as reflected in the region's social policies.

Ideological Trends

Usually, a country's social policies represent the prevalent attitudes and ideologies of that society. Generally, the

social policies of the Arab/Muslim world are based on religion (Islam) in one way or another. The religious influence on social policies can be subtle or clearly identifiable, depending on the country's national political ideology. If it is a theocracy, like Saudi Arabia or Iran, then religion plays a far more prominent role in social policymaking.

The Arab/Muslim world finds itself in a struggle in dealing with change. There are forces trying to pull society in the historically traditional direction, hence rejecting those elements that are deemed by them to be "un-Islamic." Such unacceptable elements are usually perceived to be from Western origins. There are also the opposing modernists, referred to as reformists. These elements generally aspire to secularize and modernize political and social systems. Then there are various moderate elements found in between. They would like to harmonize the two opposing forces: the orthodox and the reformists. The idea is to be progressive and modern without compromising one's socio-cultural heritage, beliefs, and identity.

Post-Cold War trends in the Arab/Muslim world indicate one of three directions of transformation: regression, stagnation (or a static situation), and progression. These directional trends are illustrated in Figure 1: The Transformation Spectrum.

Figure 1: The Transformation Spectrum (See page 158)

Progressive social transformation is imperative for making adjustments to the changes and challenges of modernity. Stagnation is a motionless state, in other words, there is no movement toward any direction. However, some traditional societies have opted for *regressive* transformation in

reaction to the demands and forces they face, hence going in the *reverse* direction, instead of moving forward. Regressive transformation involves an attempt to return to the past in an effort to preserve one's cultural, linguistic, religious, and socio-historical heritage. In that case, an appeal is made to stimulate cultural and religious irredentism in order to persuade the masses sharing a common ethnic or religious identity that their identity and beliefs are being threatened, and the only way to preserve and protect them is by reverting to the beliefs and practices of the past. This is the way proposed to conquer the challenges and pressures of globalization.

Such has been the trend in the Islamic world, epitomized by the fierce ideological competition among Islamists in response to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which unleashed an orthodox Islamic militancy that, aside from accepting modern military technology, has wholly rejected symbols of modernization. The Islamic religious establishment has adopted similar positions, preaching to the masses ideas and principles that are marked departures from the true spirit of Islam, as well as from the spirit of tolerance and learning observed during earlier Islamic history by prominent Muslim jurists, scholars, and institutions.

What the traditional Islamic establishment calls for today is more reminiscent of the patriarchal attitudes, practices, and beliefs that actually *predate* Islam, in many cases rendering to contemporary Islamic societies an anachronistic medieval aura, totally incompatible with modernity. Intellectual discourse and rational thinking or reasoning are discouraged, even reviled by the ultra-orthodox establishment. In this case, such

societies may be headed toward extreme regression.

In Figure 1, the *ulama*, or body of Islamic scholars, in the Arab/Muslim world are shown to have been largely static. The early 20th century marked the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. As post-colonial nation-states evolved in the Middle East, the institution of the *ulama* had to be suppressed and controlled by the new governments. This marks the beginning of the stagnation of what once was progressive Islamic discourse. This stagnation constitutes the suppression of intellectualism and religious revival in the form of progressive reinterpretation of Islamic principles and laws. The status quo established by the newly formed governments, which were typically dictatorial at least in this regard, precipitated this stagnation. In fact, economies stagnated along with socio-cultural, religious, and educational institutions. The leader's whim was the rule of the day, which proved detrimental to the region's development. Consider the alarming statistic in the *Arab Human Development Report 2002* (AHDR): the GDP in all Arab countries combined stood at \$531.2 billion in 1999--less than that of a single European country, Spain (\$595.5 billion).⁷

During the era between the coming of Islam and the 20th century there were many times when Islamic history was imbued with the spirit of tolerance, greater scrutiny of religious laws and of leadership, profound scientific and intellectual achievements, and interfaith dialogue. This period of Islamic history was very progressive in the context of its time, but it did not last.

Although many Islamic movements in the modern era claim that they are trying to

reinstate this seemingly progressive segment of Islamic history, in reality they propose extreme regression in the direction of the *pre-Islamic* era. Ultra-orthodox Islamic movements and ideologies, such as Wahhabism, the Taliban, Salafiyya, and branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic Jihad, Deobandism, and their offshoots, try to replicate pre-Islamic social structures and apply them to the modern era. These social structures encompass a male-dominated authoritarianism entrenched in an ultra-orthodox, literal implementation of socio-religious policies.

Despite their supposed passion for "justice," wherein the weak and oppressed would be rescued by the strong and virtuous following the laws of religion, such groups and ideologies see nothing wrong with the use of force against even the downtrodden in order to exact their compliance and/or achieve political goals. Furthermore, their attitudes and behavior towards women and religious minorities have been nothing less than disgraceful. In reality, then, they are not far from resembling the pre-Islamic pagan Arab societies, characterized by fierce authoritarianism and victimization of weaker tribes and of women. The only difference now is that these groups and ideologies have been using Islam as a pretext for their socio-religious authoritarianism. Figure 2 illustrates examples of groups and ideologies classified as extremely regressive.

Figure 2: Examples of Extreme Regression
(See page 158)

According to Figure 2, there are numerous examples of Islamic groups and ideologies that are in extreme regression, such as Wahhabism, the Salafi movement, and

various Islamist militant groups.⁸ In comparison, those individuals, groups, and institutions promoting progression are typically marginalized and suppressed. Therefore, a new contemporary Islamic renaissance, which would strive to reconcile the challenges of modernization and globalization with Islam, has yet to take place. The religious authorities in the Arab/Muslim world are hard at work resisting the pressures for reform, reinterpretation, and liberalization by promoting authoritarianism in religion. The public appears to be reinforcing these beliefs and practices.

Especially since the September 11th attacks against the United States, the Muslim world has experienced a strong sense of insecurity, affected by the perception of being under siege because of the "war on terrorism." The siege is often interpreted as not so much a war on terrorism as it is a war against Islam and the Muslim world. The fundamental beliefs and principles of the Muslim world are perceived to be threatened, which also means, since Islam prescribes the believers' way of life, the Muslims' entire lifestyle is perceived under threat. Add to that the fact that Islam is a very visible faith, in terms of dress code, congregational prayers, and the like, which fuel the Muslims' sense of being vulnerable targets to racism, prejudice, and racial profiling by the authorities, especially in the West. The end result is a resurgence of—and further entrenchment in—one's Islamic beliefs and lifestyle, in order to secure them from the looming threats the modern world poses to them.

Authoritarianism in Arab/Islamic Societies

Although the psychological impact of the September 11th attacks and subsequent "war

on terrorism" on Arabs and Muslims has been severe, these developments were not the primary catalysts that precipitated this trend of authoritarianism. Throughout the twentieth century the Arab/Islamic world has faced a major challenge in adjusting to the forces of modernization, and more acutely globalization. The more traditional societies have wed many of their traditional tribal and/or cultural customs and practices with Islam. These societies have been particularly resistant to the forces of modernization, especially involving the empowerment of women and certain judicial processes and penal codes. At the same time, the Arab Middle East has long been characterized by political authoritarianism that has traditionally excluded not only women, but any opposition groups.

Religious Authoritarianism

The spread of religious authoritarianism can be attributed in no small part to Saudi Arabia. Despite its vast oil wealth and high-tech conveniences, Saudi Arabia remains the most draconian society in terms of Islamic social policy. Saudi practices and beliefs resemble the primitive *pre-Islamic* Arab customs and mentalities more than mainstream Islam. The Saudi interpretation of authoritarian Islam, then, is actually an example of extreme regression towards pre-Islamic times, far from embracing the real spirit and essence of Islam which promote tolerance. The Taliban of Afghanistan took this approach to such extremes that even the Saudis had to ask them to tone down their excessively violent enforcement of Islam.

Like Marxist movements in the West, radical Islamists have developed the concept of cultural hegemony as a way to seek control

over societies. By gaining control of schools, media, clerical circles, social networks, and the overall direction of discourse, they seek to impose their respective versions of Islamic ideology, which they are totally convinced constitutes the only true and accurate interpretation of Islamic law. Other ideologies that differ from theirs or even open debate are wrong and must be purged.

The Saudi effort to export Wahhabism is an international version of this struggle, which was called a cultural war (*kultur kampf*) in nineteenth-century Germany. Saudi Arabia's oil wealth gives it the means to gain enormous influence and to fund mosques, schools, and other institutions which spread its version of Islam. The result has been a regression in countries as widespread as Nigeria, Sudan, and Afghanistan, among others. Even in the West, within each Muslim community, this struggle is going on with the Islamists and especially Wahhabi groups having a powerful effect on these evolving societies. In all these cases, the effect is particularly pronounced on matters concerning the rights, freedoms, and available choices possessed by women and girls specifically.

Take France as an example of this struggle in which regressive forces often seem to be determining the direction of events. By April 2004, France had expelled five Muslim clerics spreading extremist interpretations of Islam. In the most recent case, Abdelkader Bouziane was deported "for advocating wife beating, stoning, and other medieval Islamic views at odds with the principles of the modern French state."⁹ Even in this case, there is a common link between Bouziane and Saudi Arabia, as he had spent six months in the kingdom before settling and preaching

in Venissieux, France. According to a report in the American news program "60 Minutes," "In the [poorer areas where Muslims live], the fundamentalist voices are growing stronger. They are now targeting the disaffected youth in the ghettos. Many of the mosques there are filled with fundamentalist preaching."¹⁰ French-Muslim relations have been further exacerbated due to the recent government ban of Islamic headscarves worn in public schools. But for this to happen there must be in the first place a prevailing view of normative Islam in which women must wear such garments.

The problem that many Western countries, like France, are facing stems from the paucity of well-trained clerics who can properly relate to Muslims living in Western cultures. Many mosque congregations in the West must rely on importing imams from Islamic countries. Numerous such imams espouse "fundamentalist beliefs that grate against Europe's more tolerant societies."¹¹ Muslim congregations in America and Canada often have the same problems. The current struggle in both Western and Islamic societies is to confront the forces of religious authoritarianism and ideological hegemony, both of which seriously threaten the human rights of women.

In the Muslim ghettos of France, crimes against women have been on the rise. Gangs of young men may rule the streets, in communities where male-dominated Arab traditions and growing religious fundamentalism dictate social policies. According to the "60 Minutes" report, "It's gotten so bad that, today, most of the young women only feel safe if they are covered up, or if they stay at home. Girls who want to look just like other French girls are

considered provocative, asking for trouble."¹² Rape and gang rape have become common, and the victims are usually ostracized due to the stigma of dishonor upon losing one's virginity. A descendent of Algerian immigrants, Samira Bellil, was gang raped in one of the French ghettos. According to the report, "When Bellil's family discovered that she had been raped, they weren't sympathetic. They threw her out onto the streets."¹³ Moreover, statistics show that "at least 70,000 young women have come under pressure to accept arranged marriages, according to France's Commission for Integration."¹⁴ Consequently, there exists a growing dichotomy between the male-dominated traditions among the Muslim population in France, and secular, modernist Western social norms and policies that characterize French and European culture.

As a result, the image of male-dominated Arab societies in and outside of the Middle East region continues to be perceived as anachronistic and grossly authoritarian. This is the case not only in terms of socio-cultural policies, but also in the area of politics. Aside from the damage suffered by the image of Muslims and Arabs as well as the possibility that such norms might be imposed on the local communities, there is the danger that the West might accept such practices as proper, normative, and traditional Islam.

Political Authoritarianism

Political authoritarianism has been entrenched in the Arab region, and in most cases continues to exclude women from fair and free political participation. Although a handful of Arab countries recently have made some adjustments to their political systems so as to allow women and opposition groups to

participate, the Arab Middle East as a whole is still a long way off from democratizing. Politics remains a male-dominated profession, and the ratio of women politicians to men is significantly small, especially compared to other developing regions.

Bahrain and Morocco have made some positive changes in terms of including women in politics, and in January 2003 Egypt appointed the first woman judge. In Qatar, the first woman cabinet minister has been appointed. However, the all-male Kuwaiti parliament still opts to exclude women from political processes. Indeed, only about 15 percent of Kuwaiti citizens can vote.¹⁵ The Kuwait Information Office states that "on May 16, 1999, the Amir unexpectedly issued a decree allowing women the right to vote and to hold public office."¹⁶ But it does not mention that the Kuwaiti parliament rejected the decree and women still do not have the right to vote. Although on May 16, 2004, the Council of Ministers approved a new women's suffrage bill, in May 2005 the plan to approve women's suffrage was postponed. The Islamist and conservative elements in parliament abstained from voting, which led to the postponement of the vote on the bill.

The struggle for democratization and enfranchisement across the board in the Arab Middle East is ongoing. In each country the political competition between ruling parties and various opposition groups representing diverse ideologies and platforms has been fierce, and at times violent. In such a scenario, women's human rights and empowerment issues become marginalized. It becomes the task of individual activists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working for women's human rights issues, along with occasional external pressures for

reform, to bring respective governments to make appropriate policy changes. Hence, the process has been very gradual. As long as the plight of women remains out of public view, the regimes in the region proceed with business as usual. Once the plight of women is publicized, often dramatically, then the governments try to make what are usually cosmetic changes.

Yet this strategy is very damaging for their societies. The 2002 *AHDR* elaborates on this issue of the "freedom deficit":

While de jure acceptance of democracy and human rights is enshrined in constitutions, legal codes and government pronouncements, de facto implementation is often neglected and, in some cases, deliberately disregarded. In most cases, the governance pattern is characterized by a powerful executive branch that exerts significant control over all other branches of the state, being in some cases free from institutional checks and balances. Representative democracy is not always genuine and sometimes absent. Freedoms of expression and association are frequently curtailed. Obsolete norms of legitimacy prevail.¹⁷

Very seldom do governments in the Arab/Islamic world try to go against the religious establishment. Overall, since there is no separation of religion and politics in Islam, issues like social transformation and reform will almost always be politicized and "religionized" in varying degrees. But restrictions on freedom also suit the interests

of the regimes themselves. This combination of pressure from the religious leadership, a highly conservative society, and regime interests has a devastating force that is very hard for any internal force to compete with or even counter.

Islam versus Liberalism

It is not in the scope of this paper to examine the inherent contradictions between authoritarianism and individualism in Islamic theology and law.¹⁸ What warrants investigation here is the incompatibility of the current authoritarian trends observable in Arab/Islamic societies with modernization and progress. The current trends indicate a clash between Islam and liberalism, that is, individualism. Liberal democracy and ideals seemingly have secured a predominant position as the modern global ideology since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the countless emphases on individualism and individual accountability in Islamic theology, the religious establishment in Islamic societies has called for authoritarianism, orthodoxy, and greater social compliance. More often than not, the voices of the liberal reformists in the Islamic world have been marginalized, and in many cases those advocating progressive reforms have faced threats from religious zealots.

Such behavior of the religious establishment, which usually attempts to assert its own authority in order to maintain the status quo of the power hierarchy, undermines individualism. This results in the denial of liberal ideals like tolerance, and especially that of individual choices and freedoms. The pressures of social compliance and conformity are exerted zealously, at the behest of the religious establishment. These

pressures are also enforced at the familial level, usually in the context of a patriarchal authority. This authoritarian framework allows parents to impose decisions on their children in matters concerning what would normally be the individual's personal choice.

The trend in Islamic societies that has been most harmful to individualism seems to be institutionalized totalitarianism enforcing compliance with religious obligations, such as prayers, fasting, dress codes, gender segregation, and the like, all of which further erodes individual choices and freedoms, and only promotes intolerance. The most dangerous manifestation of this extreme authoritarianism is the institution of the so-called religious police, better known as the department of the "Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" (*Amr Bil Maruf wa Nai Al Munkar*) employed in Saudi Arabia and Iran, and in Afghanistan during the Taliban era.

Exclusive versus Inclusive Policies

The socio-political policies of most countries in the Middle East region have been policies of exclusion rather than inclusion. The former (i.e., exclusive policies) coincides with regression. The latter coincides with progressive development. By exclusion it is meant that a number of laws and policies exclude certain social groups from benefiting from rights that are granted to others in society. For example, citizenship, residency, and immigration laws in various Middle Eastern countries continue to be exclusive. In particular, they penalize women for marrying non-nationals, even Arab men from other countries in the region. Only recently Egypt changed its citizenship laws to recognize the children of women married to

non-Egyptians as Egyptian nationals. However, the bureaucratic procedures for this status change are so taxing that the print media have questioned whether it is even worth the trouble.

A great deal of exclusive policies stem from religious influences on policymakers and political institutions. For example, screening books and the media by censors, and banning items, are often decisions made by religious institutions on the grounds of religious sensitivities. Consequently, religious authorities decide what is included in and excluded from public access. Political authorities do the same with regard to the print and broadcast media. State-run newspapers and TV channels are subject to the decisions of the political authorities regarding what to include and exclude in the dissemination of news and information. Governments have also been trying to control the flow of information on the Internet. Exclusive policies, then, tend to predominate within the region.

REJECTION OF WESTERN IDEAS

Surprisingly, resistance to progressive change does not come from only the mullahs and orthodox religious establishment. Many highly educated intellectuals in the Arab/Islamic world have succumbed to their inherently suspicious attitudes and mentalities regarding social reforms. For example, in December 2002, a panel discussion was held at an American university in the Middle East. The topic was the 2002 *Arab Human Development Report* (AHDR), and two of its authors served as the panelists in addition to two scholars who critiqued the report. The authors of the AHDR concluded that the Middle East region

suffers from three major deficits: (1) a deficit of knowledge, (2) a deficit of women's empowerment, and (3) the suppression of freedoms and rights.

One of the panelists who critiqued the report responded to the findings with a suggestion that women's empowerment is not a priority, since wealth and power can trickle down to them once there is sufficient economic growth and prosperity by means of implementing economic reforms and liberalization. Quoting him directly:

It could be argued, for instance, that the question of women's empowerment should not have been included... [as a problem] calling for priority action. For improving the status of Arab women is better regarded as an outcome rather than as a condition of human development. Women's empowerment is bound to increase [from]... improvements in general economic, social, and political conditions rather than [through] women's solutions, political decisions, or legislation.¹⁹

The audience also reacted to the report's UNDP sponsorship. Some in the audience felt that this was Western-sponsored research, and it gives Western-modeled advice for progressive change in the Arab Middle East, and therefore, should be rejected. Specifically, a renowned Egyptian economist, Galal Amin, remarked that: "the [AHDR] adopted criteria for human development which are directly copied from the West," while disregarding cultural sensitivities.²⁰

The two authors of the AHDR responded to these reactions by pointing out that the

formula for human development is *universal*, not Western per se. Responding to Galal Amin, Nader Fergany, the lead author of the AHDR, said, "Human rights are the crowning achievement of the human race," adding that the cultural issue should not be taken too far.²¹

Moreover, Rima Khalaf-Hunaidi, a co-author of the AHDR, challenged the suggestion that economic growth will take care of women's empowerment, and therefore the latter need not be a priority for development in the Arab world. She retorted:

On women's empowerment...Dr. Issawy said that maybe it shouldn't be a priority, and maybe economic growth will solve it. Ladies and gentlemen, look at our region. You'll see that countries with the highest per capita income are countries where women suffer most. They are countries who have voted to deprive women of their rights. They are countries where women do not have even citizenship, and women are deprived of the basics. So I do not think that economic growth and development in and of itself will solve the women's disempowerment issue, and I actually believe that it is something that we should give priority for, not only because it's a human rights issue,

and because women should be entitled to equal citizenship, because I actually believe that a society deprived of half its citizens will find it extremely difficult to move forward²²

Table 1: Life Expectancy (years), the Arab Region

Males		Females	
1950-55	1990-95	1950-55	1990-95
40.5	62.6	42.6	65.2

Source: *The Arab Human Development Report 2002*

What is ironic is that women's rights were in fact a priority in the early Islamic period, as the first legal injunction in the Qur'an protected females from infanticide (see Surah 81:1-14).²³ It seems that this is conveniently overlooked by many in the region who feel threatened by women's empowerment. Today, the promotion of women's empowerment is often viewed as a Western cultural import that threatens to demolish the male-dominated power structure. Furthermore, those societies that are in extreme regression do not hesitate to use violence to exact compliance. They are examples of *coercive* social transformation in the reverse direction. In such scenarios, women are usually the first to be punished, and the last on the priorities list, if listed at all.

EMPIRICAL REALITIES

Some of the afflictions that continue to plague women in the Arab Middle

Table 2: Infant Mortality (per thousand) in Egypt

Year	Males	Females	Urban	Rural	Total
EGYPT 2000	55	54.5	43.1	61.8	43.5

Source: *The Arab Human Development Report 2002*

East include poverty, illiteracy, poor health and nutrition, inequality and discrimination in various spheres of life, and serious deficiencies in human development in general. This is especially the case for

women in Arab countries not endowed with oil wealth. The *AHDR 2002* provides some statistics with regard to women's human development. Table 1 illustrates the life expectancy figures for females and males in the Arab region.

According to Table 1, the life expectancy of males in the Arab region rose by 22.1 years over a period of 40 years. The life expectancy of females in the Arab region increased by 22.6 years for the same period. According to the *AHDR 2002*, the global average increase in the difference between the life expectancy of males and females is by 4 years.²⁴ This indicates room for improvement for women's life expectancy in the Arab world since, according to the figures, the gender difference in the increase is only 2.6 years [i.e. 65.2 years females -- 62.6 years males for the 1990-95 period]. One way to do so, as the *AHDR* mentions, is by reducing maternal mortality rates in the region [see Table 3].

Looking at our case study, Egypt, the life expectancy of males for the period 1950-55 was 41.2 years, and for the period 1990-95 it was 62.4 years, an increase by 21.2 years. For Egyptian females, in the years 1950-55, the life expectancy was 43.6 years, and for 1990-95, it was 64.8 years, an increase by 21.2 years.²⁵ The gender difference for life expectancy in Egypt is 2.4 years for the 1990-95 period. Table 2 provides Egypt's infant mortality rates per thousand.

Although Egypt has seen some improvements in reducing infant mortality rates over the last few decades, by development standards its rates still appear relatively high, in two-digit figures. For the year 1998, Qatar had the lowest figures for male and female infant mortality, at 10.2 and

8.2 respectively. Kuwait's 1996 infant mortality rates were surveyed at 11.9 for males and 10.6 for females. Thus, Qatar and Kuwait had the lowest rates for male and female infant mortality for the period covering the survey analysis, according to the *AHDR 2002*. Yemen had the highest infant mortality rates for the year 1997: 98.4 for males, and 80.0 for females.²⁶

The *AHDR 2002* says, "High maternal mortality is a key health challenge facing most Arab countries."²⁷ The *AHDR* explains that more than half of the countries in the Arab Middle East indicate maternal mortality ratios (MMR) higher than 75 per 100,000 live births, and "as many as a third have an MMR exceeding 200 per 100,000 live births."²⁸ Given the vast oil wealth of the Gulf Arab countries, the MMR should be much lower than they stand today. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait are the only two Arab countries that have reduced their MMR to global standards: a maximum of five per 100,000 live births.²⁹ Table 3 provides the MMR figures for the Arab region.

Table 3: Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) per 100,000 live births, 1985-99

Country	MMR
Bahrain	46
Kuwait	5
UAE	3
Qatar	10
Libya	75
Saudi Arabia	N/A
Lebanon	100
Oman	14
Tunisia	70
Jordan	41
Algeria	220
Syria	110

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Egypt	170
Morocco	230
Sudan	550
Yemen	350
Djibouti	N/A

Source: *The Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*

From Table 3 we can see that Sudan and Yemen have the highest figures for MMR, at 550 and 350 respectively. Also, out of fifteen Arab countries for which we have data, seven have 3-digit MMR figures, and six have double-digit MMR figures. This is a reflection of the major deficiencies in women's health care, especially concerning reproductive health. Five of the countries listed (Bahrain, Qatar, Libya, Oman, and Algeria) have substantial oil wealth, yet they have double-digit MMR figures, except for Algeria's alarming 3-digit MMR (220), which may be due to its ongoing civil war.

Women's health deficiencies are further reflected in nutritional data, which are related to the MMR status described above. Nutritional data are important, because, as George Kent points out, "Women have special nutritional vulnerabilities. For example, iron-deficiency anemia is widespread among women in developing countries, and it leads to high levels of maternal mortality."³⁰ Women also play a primary role in providing nutrition, care, and health to children. According to Professor Kent, "There is much empirical evidence that societies in which women have status closer to men are likely to suffer less malnutrition, and that women as active agents can have profound effects. Thus far, the Arab Middle East has not met such standards of development, particularly because of the

unequal status of women. Analyzing nutrition levels of women and children is one way to measure the status of women. Table 4 examines malnutrition in infants in the Arab countries.

Table 4: Malnutrition in Infants, 1990-97, and in Children under Five Years of Age, 1995-2000

Country	Infants with Low Birth Weight (%)	Severely Underweight*	Wasting Moderate & Severe*	Stunting Moderate & Severe*
Algeria	9.0	3.0	9.0	18.0
Bahrain	6.0	2.0	5.0	10.0
Egypt	10.0	3.0	6.0	25.0
Iraq	15.0	6.0	10.0	31.0
Jordan	10.0	1.0	2.0	8.0
Kuwait	7.0	3.0	11.0	24.0
Lebanon	10.0	0.0	3.0	12.0
Libya	7.0	1.0	3.0	15.0
Morocco	9.0	2.0	4.0	23.0
Oman	8.0	4.0	13.0	23.0
Occupied Palestinian Territory	8.6	6.2	1.7	9.1
Qatar	--	--	2.0	8.0
Saudi Arabia	7.0	3.0	11.0	20.0
Sudan	15.0	11.0**	13.0**	33.0**
Syria	7.0	4.0	9.0	21.0
UAE	6.0	3.0	15.0	17.0
Yemen	19.0	15.0	13.0	52.0

*Percentage of under-five children.

**Data for a year or period other than those specified in the heading, or differ from the standard definition, or refer to only part of the country.

Source: *The AHDR 2002*

Yemen has the highest percentage of infants with low birth weight, at 19 percent, followed by Iraq and Sudan, both 15 percent. Egypt has 10 percent of infants with low birth weight. The UAE and Bahrain have the lowest percentage, both 6 percent. Yemen again leads in the category of severely underweight children of less than five years of age, comprising 15 percent. Lebanon records zero cases of severely underweight children under five. Yemen has the highest percentage of children under five suffering from stunting malnutrition, standing at 52 percent. Jordan and Qatar have the lowest rates of stunting malnutrition among under-five children, both 8 percent.

These figures are very telling. Why is it that such a wealthy country as Saudi Arabia has failed to eliminate malnutrition in the form of severely underweight children? In fact, Saudi Arabia and Egypt share the same percentage, 3 percent, in this category, whereas Lebanon, which has suffered a vicious civil war, is showing no cases of severely underweight children. One can argue that Lebanon has allowed more freedoms and empowerment of women, compared to Saudi Arabia and to some extent Egypt. Also, Lebanon does not share the same levels of poverty and population dilemmas as Egypt.

Table 5 provides data for pregnant women with anemia.

Table 5: Percentage of Pregnant Women with Anemia

Country	Percentage of Pregnant Women with Anemia 1975-1991
Algeria	42
Bahrain	--

Egypt	24
Iraq	18
Jordan	50
Kuwait	40
Lebanon	49
Morocco	45
Oman	54
Qatar	--
Saudi Arabia	--
Sudan	36
Syria	--
Tunisia	38
UAE	--
Yemen	--

Source: *The AHDR 2002*

From Table 5 it is evident that the percentage of pregnant women with anemia is considerably high, especially in the oil-rich country of Oman (54 percent). Iraq had the lowest percentage (18 percent) prior to the 1991 Gulf War. Egypt has 24 percent of pregnant women with anemia. Lebanon and Jordan have very high percentages, 49 percent and 50 percent respectively. This is an indication of inadequate nutrition of women. There may be numerous reasons for this, among them educational deficiencies, poor health care, lack of awareness about the nutritional value of foods, and lack of awareness about health and nutrition during prenatal, pregnancy, and postnatal stages. Education is a major factor, and, in fact, some Arab countries have high female illiteracy rates.

For example, Egypt suffers from terrible illiteracy rates. Table 6 shows the illiteracy statistics in the Arab region.

**Table 6: Education in the Arab Region:
Adult Illiteracy Rates (%), 1999**

Country	Number of Illiterate Adults (million)	Males	Females	Both
Egypt	19.4	33.9	57.2	45.4
Bahrain	0.1	9.5	17.8	12.9
Jordan	0.3	5.5	16.6	10.8
Arab Region	57.7	26.9	51.0	38.7

Source: *The AHDR 2002*

Looking at the data in Table 6, we see that Egypt has a considerably high illiteracy rate, particularly among females, in fact, more than half of the female population. Bahrain and Jordan have comparatively lower illiteracy rates, but for an oil-rich country like Bahrain, the 17.8 percent female illiteracy rate is excessively high. In addition, *none* of the Arab countries has single-digit percentages for adult illiteracy of females. That is an alarming statistic! The gender-based employment ratio is also rather unbalanced, as Table 7 indicates.

**Table 7: Employment: Labor Force
Participation Rate in Economic Activity
(%), 1997**

Country	Males	Females	Both
Egypt	51.4	22.1	37.0
Qatar	72.0		
Mauritania		39.9	
Oman		8.6	
Libya	43.0		

Source: *The AHDR 2002*

From Table 7 it is evident that Egypt has a serious discrepancy in the male-female labor

force ratio, a difference of 29.3 percentage points, and this most likely does not account for females who are considered heads of households and those involved in the informal economy. Qatar has the highest male labor force percentage, 72 percent; while Libya has the lowest male percentage, 43 percent. Mauritania has the highest female labor force percentage, 39.9 percent; Oman has the lowest female percentage, 8.6 percent.

Rounding up what has been assessed so far, we see that the Arab region has failed to empower women. In 1998, the Human Development Index (HDI) ranking of the Arab region was 0.64; Egypt's rank was 0.62.³¹ Kuwait earned the highest rank, 0.84; while Djibouti, Mauritania, and Yemen all ranked 0.45, the lowest in the region.³² In comparison, what is considered high ranking of the HDI is 0.91, and the world rank is 0.71.³³

Moreover, although a considerable number of Arab countries have signed major international human rights conventions, many have failed to ratify them, and/or they have not implemented them. The *AHDR 2002* does not provide a gender-based analysis of political participation in the Arab region, but it does provide a list of countries that have signed/ratified human rights conventions. For instance, Egypt is a member state (MS) for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Clearly, the empirical realities pertaining to women illustrate that the articles and conditions of these conventions have not been implemented in Egypt.

Oman is a member state for the CRC, but none of the other conventions. The Occupied Palestinian Territories are not signatories to any of the conventions. Qatar is a member state for CERD and CRC, but that is all. Saudi Arabia is a member state for CERD and CRC, and, according to the *AHDR 2002*, it ratified the CEDAW in September 2000. However, Saudi Arabia ratified only certain portions of CEDAW, rather than all of it. The Saudis rejected any part of the CEDAW provisions that they perceived as conflicting with Islamic law. In any case, with its repressive social policies still in place, Saudi Arabia is unequivocally and grossly violating the CEDAW provisions. Syria and the UAE are member states for CRC, but not for CEDAW.

There is one more item of empirical evidence that must be examined, and it involves the *AHDR 2003* survey which compares Arab attitudes towards the three main deficiencies that were ascertained in the 2002 *AHDR*. Four Arab countries--Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco--were targeted for field surveys measuring their attitudes towards the three deficiencies. The survey results show that "Arabs value knowledge and good governance strongly but *take an ambivalent stand on gender equality*"³⁴ (emphasis added). Furthermore, the results of the survey indicate the following:

Arabs... expressed the highest level of rejection of authoritarian rule (a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections).

On the empowerment of women, the Arabs came third in rejecting that 'a university education is more important for a boy than for a girl'

while expressing the highest approval that 'when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women'

In other words, Arabs stood for gender equality in education but not in employment. In human development terms, *Arabs expressed support for building the human capabilities of women but not for their utilization*.³⁵ (Emphasis added)

These empirical realities about the Arab Middle East show that there is substantial reluctance to fully embrace the empowerment and human rights of women.

CONCLUSION

Progressive social transformation is what the Middle East region needs to undertake in order to adjust accordingly to the dynamic global and regional changes of the modern era. Regressive social transformation, especially cloaked in religion, is wholly counterproductive and not conducive to the modern world. No change at all, or stagnation, is defeatist. It precludes a given society from keeping up with the pace and scope of change in the world, and hence, the rest of the world will pass it by and leave the stagnant society in the dust.

The Middle East region contains a variety of classifications for social transformation. In fact, there are even variations at the regional, national, and grassroots levels. Two things the Arab countries in the Middle East region have in common--with a few exceptions--are the following: (1) coping with change is an extremely gradual and complicated process; and (2) social transformation is highly "religionized" and politicized. The reasons for this are

multifaceted, but mostly pertain to ideological/attitudinal factors and pervasive authoritarianism.

Prevailing attitudes, even among many of the educated classes, indicate strong suspicion and rejection of any ideas perceived to be Western-modeled. In fact, many in the Arab region even exhibit forms of denial regarding the poor status of women. Mention of the disenfranchisement and disempowerment of women in the Arab Middle East is often dismissed as Western propaganda to give the region, and Arab culture in particular, a negative image. There are also many within the Arab region who simply do not consider women's empowerment and human rights as important. Other priorities take precedence, and, as some have suggested, once these priorities are fulfilled, the status of women would automatically improve.

The empirical realities illustrate serious deficiencies in the status of women, even in the oil-rich Gulf Arab countries. The health, nutrition, human welfare, education, employment, and general human development indicators reveal startling contradictions, wherein their wealth should not render such poor results pertaining to women's health and development. The empirical realities are even worse for women in the poorer countries in the Arab region. As the AHDR 2002 has emphasized, the Arab Middle East ranks among the lowest in the development spectrum of developing countries. In certain areas of human development, only South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa rank lower than the Arab world.

Arab and Muslim women, as well as conscionable and supportive men, now face

the unenviable tasks of reversing the ideological trend of extreme regression; persuading their respective societies that women's empowerment and human rights are important for overall human development and should be top priorities; and working to significantly improve the human development indicators that specifically pertain to women. It is evident from the current ideological, attitudinal, and empirical realities that the struggle to empower women and realize their human rights in the Arab world will continue to be a formidable, complicated endeavor.

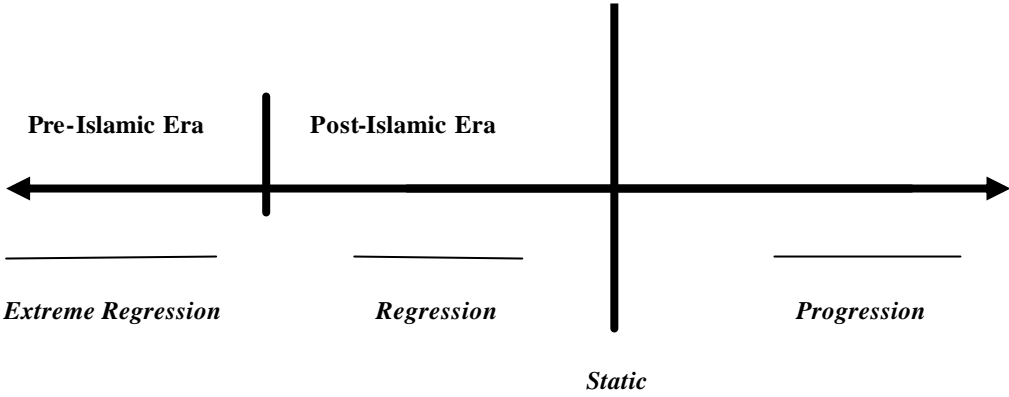


Figure 1: The Transformation Spectrum

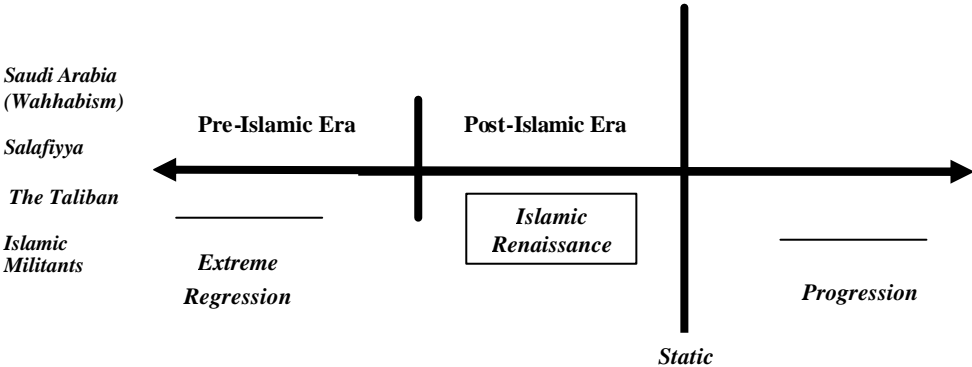


Figure 2: Examples of Extreme Regression

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NOTES

¹ The ideological/attitudinal level of analysis is based on general observations and inferences drawn from classroom discussions with Egyptian students, public lecture series in Cairo, the Arab press and media, and analyses of current ideological trends in the Islamic world.

² The *AHDR 2002*, published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), is the first ever UNDP Human Development Report that focuses specifically on the Arab Middle East, and it is written by Arab scholars.

³ The other two deficiencies are the knowledge deficiency and the freedom/human rights deficiency.

⁴ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 35.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *The Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2002), p. 85.

⁸ Depending on the circumstances, a number of Islamic militant groups are also suppressed

and under tremendous scrutiny from law enforcement authorities, mainly to keep political opposition in check, as well as to protect countries from potential terrorist threats. Egypt, which relies heavily on its tourism industry, is an example of a state that closely monitors and suppresses the activities of Islamic militants, who have in the past killed not only tourists, but also Egypt's former President Anwar Al Sadat.

⁹ Craig S. Smith, "France Wrestles with Radical Islam," *The International Herald Tribune* online, April 30, 2004, accessed from <<http://www.iht.com/articles/517806.html>>.

¹⁰ Christiane Amanpour, "The New French Revolution," *60 Minutes*, CBS News, May 16, 2004, accessed from <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/05/13/60minutes>>.

¹¹ Smith, "France Wrestles with Radical Islam."

¹² Amanpour, *The New French Revolution*."

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Democratization*, The Kuwait Information Office, accessed from <<http://www.kuwait-info.org/democratization.html>>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *The AHDR 2002*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁸ For more information about this topic, see Khaled Abou El Fadl's book, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001).

¹⁹ Dr. Ibrahim El Issawy, panel discussion: "The 2002 Arab Human Development Report," *English Public Lecture Series*, December 16, 2002, The American University in Cairo, Egypt.

²⁰ Dr. Galal Amin, panel discussion: "The 2002 Arab Human Development Report," *English Public Lecture Series*, December 16, 2002, The American University in Cairo, Egypt. Written question from Galal Amin asked by panel moderator to the panelists in his absence.

²¹ Dr. Nader Fergany, panel discussion: "The 2002 Arab Human Development Report," *English Public Lecture Series*, December 16, 2002, The American University in Cairo, Egypt.

²² Dr. Rima Khalaf-Hunaidi, panel discussion: "The 2002 Arab Human Development Report," *English Public Lecture Series*, December 16, 2002, The American University in Cairo, Egypt.

²³ Surah 81 "*Takwir*" or "The Folding Up" (early Meccan), verses 8-9 say: "When the female (infant) is buried alive, is questioned - for what crime she was killed."

²⁴ *The AHDR 2002*, p. 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ George Kent, "A Gendered Perspective on Nutrition Rights," *Agenda*, 51, 2002, p. 43.

³¹ *The AHDR 2002*.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *The Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society* (New York: UNDP, 2003), p. 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*