Occasional Papers

Education, Human Development, and Arab Women: Progress, Dilemmas, and American Discourse

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will first speak briefly about the human development perspective and the critical links that have been drawn between education—the acquisition of knowledge—and development as freedom or the expansion of choices. I move then to consider the increase in formal education in the Arab world and the implications for human development, particularly for women, in that context. I then relate this account of educational development in the region to some of the current discourses and debates about Arab women in the United States, and address the implications of the continued politicization and misrepresentation of women's status for development efforts from both within and without the region.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

In the 1980s, after a decades-long emphasis on economic growth as the primary engine for development, a number of prominent economists and development practitioners heralded a new era in the conceptualization of development as primarily a human endeavor, with improved life chances and quality of life as the proper end. Thus was coined the term "human development," followed by subsequent efforts to delineate its essential dimensions and the appropriate measures of a development endeavor that no longer had increased income as its primary indicator, but also sought to measure human ends, capabilities, and opportunities.

Proponents of this perspective argue that, at its core, human development is about expanding people's choices through the development of human capabilities. Capabilities are essentially people's ability to live the way they want to live. As such, the freedom to develop is not limited to the legislation of rights or the provision of resources, but rather, the ability to make choices among a multitude of desirable and achievable alternatives. According to Amartya Sen, one of the principal scholars to promote the capabilities perspective, "Capability is a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom . . . to achieve various lifestyles."[1] In addition, Sen argues that the "persistently deprived" or historically oppressed and excluded, such as women, have over time come to limit their own field of choices or conceptualization of what

is feasible. Hence, human development is meant to expand the field of available choices—not just materially, but mentally.[2]

In a human capabilities perspective, education, and particularly formal schooling, is a fundamental capability. Thus the acquisition of knowledge, or education, is critical for the expansion of one's choices and the freedom to develop. Along these same lines, Martha Nussbaum, in her book on women and human development, argues that the capacity for thought, reason, and imagination—provided in part through "adequate education"—are central for both illuminating what desirable life choices might be, and for realizing them in a "truly human way."[3] This is crucial background and context for understanding what progress has been made in development through education in the Arab world, and for unpacking some of the ways in which the development of Arab women is represented in development discourse.

EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARAB WORLD: TRENDS

Since the 1950s there has been remarkable progress in providing access to formal education throughout the Arab world. Between 1960 and 1985, the Middle East and North Africa saw the greatest gains in average years of schooling of any region in the world.[4] By the 1990s the majority of the region's children were in primary school.[5]

In many respects, the lives of my own family in Jordan are a testament to the dramatic changes the Arab world has witnessed through education. My father, the son of Jordanian farmers, left school in the sixth grade in the early 1940s because his labor was needed on my grandfather's land. At the time, for most families, this was still the preferred path to stability and potential prosperity. In fact, most of my father's peers received less schooling, if any.

But my father's relationship with education did not end there. He badgered and begged to return to the classroom, and when a boy's preparatory school opened in a distant town, he persuaded his family to let him attend. He eventually completed secondary school and became a literacy teacher. Later, he taught children in the new schools that began to crop up around the country. His generation was the first in Jordan to catch the "education bug"—the belief that education held the key to independence, progress, and enlightenment, and that educated young men and women would provide the backbone for a new Arab nationalism.[6] My father's teachers were the messengers of this promise and the hopes for a new Arab nation.[7]

The expansion of education continues. In eight Arab countries, including countries as varied as Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, primary school enrollment exceeds 90 percent, and several others are close behind.[8] Secondary

school enrollment is also on the rise in all Arab countries, with net enrollments over 75 percent in seven countries and several others approaching this mark.[9]

Despite assumptions to the contrary, the gains have been just as significant for females as for males, if not more so. Literacy has increased throughout the region, particularly for young females; if one looks at the literacy rate for Arab youth between the ages of 15 and 24, the gap between the sexes is only about ten percent—significantly lower than that among an older generation. In some countries, such as Bahrain and Qatar, literacy among young females is higher than that of males.[10]

Furthermore, according to the 2005 Arab Human Development Report, more girls are enrolled in secondary school than boys in at least nine Arab countries, including such diverse nations as Algeria, Bahrain, the UAE, and Jordan.[11] In higher education, twelve Arab nations have achieved gender parity.[12] Two years later, the World Bank reported that in most Arab countries, females outnumber males in institutions of higher learning, exceeding the goal of parity.[13]

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My own research in Jordan with high school girls and their families, in 2002 and again in 2005, alerted me to the dramatic changes across generations. Mothers who had little or no formal education were watching their daughters go on for higher learning. I am reminded of Um Samir,[14] a mother of two high school students whom I came to know well, who, when speaking about her father, said: "God forgive him. He never let me get an education." She lamented having been forced to leave school in the fourth grade. Options had changed considerably for her own children. Her oldest daughter completed university and became a teacher, and two of her other daughters were at the same university, one studying child development and the other computer science. Her generation, like my father's, has moved from taking children out of school to work, to selling whatever assets they have and incurring substantial debt to finance their children's education. (Of course, for those countries in the region that are significantly poorer, child labor is still a necessary reality. Even in Jordan today, economic circumstances still force some children to begin earning a living. I will return to the variety of experiences in the region below.)

Yet, the marked progress in providing access to education in the region, particularly for women, is often underestimated and underrepresented—clouded by categories and structures endemic to development discourse in many respects.[15] I will now examine some of the reasons for the disparity between the real progress outlined above and the prevailing discourses about the Arab world.

On a very basic level, the persistent employment of regional averages is deceptive; it obscures regional disparities, rural/urban differentials, and socioeconomic status, and thus presents the region's accomplishments in a more negative light. For example, a number of Arab countries, such as Mauritania, Djibouti, and Yemen, continue to face significant challenges in providing educational access, and these unique challenges limit the usefulness of regional averages. These are the poorest countries in the region—Yemen is one of the poorest in the world—and they are also countries that have suffered from much instability and, in some cases, protracted and devastating conflict.

Also, while enrollment of girls in secondary schools is low in Mauritania, Djibouti, and Yemen,[16] it is often not acknowledged that the obstacles to expansion of secondary education cannot be exclusively defined or understood in terms of gender. Boys' access to schooling is just as problematic in each of these countries, which also brings regional averages down significantly. In Mauritania, 17 percent of males and 14 percent of females are enrolled in high school, while in Djibouti, the numbers are only slightly higher: 27 percent of males and 18 percent of females. Primary enrollments are low in Djibouti as well, with 37 percent of boys and 30 percent of girls enrolled.[17] Essentially, both male and female enrollment is significantly lower in these three countries in comparison to other Arab countries.

Yemen has a more significant gender gap, however. Gross enrollment for boys at the secondary level is at 62 percent, double that of girls. Girls' primary enrollment has increased significantly over the past decade, but the gap in youth literacy between males and females is the highest in the region with a 30 percent difference between the sexes.[18] Much of this gap can be explained by rural/urban disparities and poverty, compounded by the lack of female teachers in rural areas and the persistence of early marriage. However, the situation in Yemen is quite distinct from that of other countries in the region.

When one looks at the reality of educational attainment for women in the Arab world on a country-by-country basis, a clearer picture of significant progress emerges than the employment of regional averages can explain. Furthermore, barriers to educational attainment rarely center solely on gender in countries that, as a result of poverty and conflict, struggle to provide basic services. Additionally, substantial within-country inequalities (class, rural/urban, and at times ethnic) are rarely captured with such data.

Ironically, despite the employment of regional and even global averages to depict

the overall educational picture in the Arab world, no global contexts are provided for other conclusions about the status of women's development in the region, resulting in equally misleading representations. For example, two reports published in the past few years about women and development in the Arab world by mainstream development agencies (the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme [UNDP]) have argued that although women enjoy equal access to higher education, they still tend to enter "traditional fields,"[19] such as education, and are underrepresented in traditionally male fields such as engineering. However, a closer look reveals that, for instance, there are significantly more women entering engineering in several Arab countries than there are in the United States.

In 2003, over 20 percent of engineering students were female in Bahrain, Djibouti, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine.[20] In the United States in 2000, female enrollment in engineering reached a high point of 20 percent; five years later, women made up only 17 percent of undergraduates enrolled the field.[21] Similarly, some Arab countries have proportionally more women entering the sciences than the United States does. If one accepts the standard of educational progress for women that assigns greater value to male-dominated fields, many women in the Arab world are actually doing better than women in the United States.

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The effects of the decontextualization of such empirical realities are not insignificant. Progress in providing educational access to women—dramatic by many accounts—is minimized, which inevitably leads to explanations and interpretations that cite culture and/or religion as problems, i.e., barriers to transcending gender boundaries. This line of analysis would not be possible without the persistence of a human capital perspective that measures the worth of education in terms of narrow economic returns, despite at least two decades of lip service to other development ends and desires. This bias is particularly pronounced in the literature on females and education, and is a function of both this monetization of educational worth as well as discourses about women's empowerment through education that are founded on particular assumptions, namely the necessity of waged labor and the

superiority of certain forms of work, particularly fields that are viewed as more lucrative and, often by default, those that are dominated by men.

Indeed, recent development reports on Arab women acknowledge the progress in their educational attainment, particularly in higher education, but always with the qualification of low labor force participation rates. Thus, the region is painted as "paradoxical" because women have not entered the labor force in numbers comparable to their educational attainment.[22]

This raises the question: To what ends should education be aimed? Is the provision of education, a key human capability in the human development perspective, intended to expand people's choices or to lead to particular pre-determined outcomes—in this case, work outside the home? If some women are choosing not to work, does that diminish the significance of educational attainment as a critical human development endeavor? Most writing on this topic does not grant women this agency. It assumes that this is not about women's choices, but rather the persistence of traditional female oppression and dependency. Such analyses are often devoid of serious attention to class differences and the actual limits of job opportunities available to young women as well as young men, let alone their desires and expectations. Situating the conceptualization of development as providing choices within a class and structural analysis would serve to highlight the material realities that severely constrain choices about educational and economic activities.

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My own interactions with women in Jordan illuminated ambiguities and conflicting pressures surrounding work outside the home. Consider the experience of Nur for a moment. Nur had already retired from a low-level civil servant position as a typist when I met her. In several conversations we had about the desirability of work outside the home and her own experiences as a working woman, she expressed conflicting sentiments. She was the mother of seven children and only entered the workforce when her oldest child entered university, as she and her husband could no longer make ends meet with the university-related expenses. So, in her perspective, she was forced to work.

In many respects, Nur felt frustrated and disempowered by these circumstances. She was no longer able to care for her children in the way that she wanted. Until

she came home, they would be out in the streets playing. Furthermore, exhausted from the long hours of sitting at a typewriter, she found it challenging to be the great hostess she had prided herself on being when family and friends came to call. She also missed the time she used to have with the women in the neighborhood. As a result, she at times resented having to work. However, on other occasions, she conveyed that the ability to make decisions about purchasing items without having to go to her husband was valuable. She believed it gave her some independence.

Although Nur found that work isolated her from her social networks, many of the teachers I spoke with in the course of my research found that working outside the home gave them the opportunity to socialize with peers and colleagues whom they would not otherwise have enjoyed. Asked if she would like to retire, Mariam, a science teacher, said "No. I would become too isolated if I stayed at home." For Mariam, who did not have her own family nearby, this was particularly significant. However, there were other teachers, especially those with young children and, again, no family nearby to help, who wished they did not have to work.

The assumptions that underlie development discourse about gender, education, and development lead to conclusions that are too simple to capture the complexity of Nur and Mariam's experiences. There are real conflicts between economic pressures that force women to work, and women's own perceptions of what is valuable and/or powerful. Many women do not have choices about waged labor. But given the choice, not all want to work, and many do not find the existing jobs desirable, but exploitive and disempowering.

This analysis points to a major tension in the human development perspective, specifically the education for women's empowerment formula. On the one hand, education is meant to expand people's choices. However, we clearly expect women to make particular choices. When they don't, answers are sought elsewhere—frequently in the arenas of social norms and cultural traditions—and not enough attention is paid to economic and labor market dynamics, or to different women's own conceptions of what is desirable.

DEVELOPMENT, GENDER, REFORM, AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ARAB WORLD

It is critical that we consider the implications of the ways in which gender development issues are represented, as they have pronounced political and material implications and shape the discourses in the United States about the need for reform and development in the Arab world.

When we continually look to cultural, religious, and civilizational reasons to account for why others are not developing as we expect them to, or not making the choices we assume they should make, we participate in a process of "othering" that

hinders our comprehension of the multifaceted and contextualized experiences and choices of those who differ from us. It also leaves us blind to the more difficult analysis of power, hegemony, and global economic forces that are more significant determinants of human development potential than cultural "traditions."

Some trends in the prevailing or "official" U.S. discourse about the Arab world are particularly troubling. For example, a number of conservative organizations, core among them David Horowitz's "Freedom Center," declared the week of October 22-26, 2007, "Islamo-Fascism Awareness Week." Among other activities, these organizations called on college students to stage sit-ins at women's studies programs to protest the silence of feminists about the oppression of women in Islam.

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Former mayor of New York City and Republican candidate for president Rudolph Giuliani raised similar questions about the oppression of Muslim women in a speech he gave on October 16, 2007. Using terms like "Islamic terrorists" and "supporters of terrorists" he declared:

> I mean, they're attacking us for the good things about us. I mean, why are they doing it? They're doing it because—my wife and the wives of the other candidates addressed a women's breakfast this morning. You think they have women's breakfasts with political candidates speaking in Islamic terrorist countries or countries that support Islamic terrorism?
>
> Imagine if they showed up for a breakfast. Maybe they'd get stoned. They don't want women to have rights. Let's just deal with it. I mean, that's just the reality. They don't want to allow them to have rights...I mean, there's no room for compromise on these things.[23]

Here we have a former presidential nominee making sweeping generalizations about the Arab/Muslim world. Giuliani uses gross misrepresentations of women's status to argue that "these" people cannot be negotiated with and that they want

to attack us for the "good things" we have—most significantly the freedom of our women.

The representation of the Arab/Muslim world as backward, uncivilized, and unable to change or negotiate is not new. Nor is the deployment of images of oppressed women to legitimize this misrepresentation rare. It served as a rationale for the British colonizers in Egypt and for the French in Algeria over a century ago.[24] The status of Afghan women, particularly as symbolized by their attire, was the most dominant preoccupation in American public discourse when the United States was preparing to invade Afghanistan in 2001. We hear little about the state of Afghan women today. However, as a number of scholars pointed out at the time, the most troubling aspect of the focus on Afghan women was what was not being said about the plight of these women and their families, the large majority of whom were suffering from extreme poverty, insecurity, prolonged displacement, and deprivation brought about by years of conflict during which their country was made into a Cold War battleground—a human catastrophe in which the U.S. was deeply implicated.[25]

That former Mayor Giuliani should deploy such a discourse is, to those familiar with the history of representation of Arab women, perhaps no surprise. However, it should be troubling for those concerned with development and reform in the region. First, it is a gross misrepresentation of the reality of most women's lives in the Arab world (not to mention an incorrect representation of women in this country, the great majority of whom could never imagine having access to the kind of power and clout that would give them the opportunity to meet with wives of presidential candidates). Furthermore, the persistence of such images and an ethnocentrism that fuels a "clash of civilizations"[26] perspective taints genuine reform initiatives, both external and internal. Local reform efforts of various kinds are persistently stymied by the limited terms or parameters for discussion that are constructed through such representations that promote only defensiveness and extreme position-taking on all sides.

The impact of this rhetoric is not limited to the arena of women and their development. External pressures for curricular reform have been the subject of intense debate in both the Jordanian and Egyptian parliaments, as they have been in the press of other Arab countries. But women's issues have been consistently manipulated by the West to make distinctions between civilized/uncivilized or modern/backward, to the detriment of efforts to improve women's lives. Such politicization and "othering" of women often prevents a serious analysis of the full range of development obstacles confronting the region.

Indeed, some human development challenges in the region never enter U.S. public discourse: issues surrounding unemployment, the brain drain, and, more dramatically, the emerging development crises in Iraq and Gaza—both in which the

United States has a direct role. In the case of Iraq, for example, massive population shifts are the direct result of the American occupation. Internal displacement is now measured in the millions, and an estimated two and a half to three million Iraqis are now refugees.[27]

Clearly the concept of human development, particularly when it emanates from institutions situated in the West, cannot escape association with geopolitics and the global economic policies that shape and constrain real life chance and choices. Indeed, a discourse about human development as choice, and the purported shift toward a human development perspective, at times serves to mask the power of these hegemonic forces.

CONCLUSION

I began by speaking about human development, attending specifically to the empirical realities of educational attainment in the Arab world, especially for women. I have endeavored to link the ways in which this development is represented in U.S. public discourse, and even in the Arab world within certain circles. In particular, I have elucidated how the very limited and often inflammatory discourse in this country as well as the policies of our government limit and at times deliberately skew our understanding of development and de-development in the region, thus hindering efforts to address human development challenges. Furthermore, our understanding of these phenomena is clouded by a two-dimensional lacuna in this discourse. One is the failure to acknowledge that the policies of the United States as well as the international institutions closely tied to U.S. power largely shape both what constitutes development and what development choices are actually available to people. The other shortfall is in the failure to understand what development as it is currently constituted does to people who are powerless to define what their own progress should be. Both gaps require a much more rigorous interrogation of what development is and does in the region.

ENDNOTES

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1. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Random House, 1999), 75.
2. Ibid., 62.
3. Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 78.
4. World Bank, *Jobs, Growth and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa: Unlocking the potential for prosperity* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2003).
5. See UNESCO Institute for Statistics, available at http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=143&I; World Bank, *Middle East and North Africa Gender Overview* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2007).
6. Although this "education bug" was still new to Jordan in my father's youth, the belief in the power of "modern" education had already been circulating in the region since before the turn of the century. For example, see Benjamin Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
7. See Betty Anderson's account of the emergence of an Arab nationalist movement in Jordan in the 1940s and 50s that gives us new insights into the critical role of teachers and schools in the Arab world, especially those who flocked to universities and colleges in Lebanon and Palestine, in developing a new vision of what the Arab world might become. Betty Anderson, *Nationalist Voices: The Street and the State* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005).
8. UNESCO Institute for Statistics.
9. Ibid.
10. World Bank, *Middle East and North Africa Gender Overview*, op. cit.
11. UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2005: Towards the Rise of Arab Women* (New York: UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, 2006).
12. Ibid.
13. World Bank, *Middle East and North Africa Gender Overview*, op. cit.
14. All references to individuals in this paper are pseudonyms.
15. Since this paper was delivered in October of 2007, the World Bank released a new report on education in the Middle East and North Africa in February of 2008 entitled "The Road Not Traveled: Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa," (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank). Despite the title and

the press coverage that surrounded the release of the report, which reaffirmed educational failure in the region, the report was one of the most positive in its assessment of educational progress in the region, particularly in terms of providing access to the large majority of the population in a relatively short time period.

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18. Ibid.
19. World Bank, *Middle East and North Africa Gender Overview*, op. cit.; UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2005*, op. cit.
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22. World Bank, *Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women in the Public Sphere* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2004), 1.
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25. See Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002), 783-790; Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (2002), 339-354.
26. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
27. See the Fall 2007 issue of the *Middle East Report* for more details on the humanitarian situation in Iraq, particularly for those internally displaced and those who have left the country. "Displaced," *Middle East Report* 244 (2007).

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