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**Social Status and Change:
The Question of Access to Resources and Women's Empowerment
in the Middle East and North Africa**

By Elhum Haghighat¹

Abstract

Women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) do not face a single social ideology that opposes change. It is incorrect to conclude that Islam per se is predominantly responsible for limiting women's access to resources, employment, reproductive health, and social services. It is critical, however, to understand how Islam is used as an instrument of control in the hands of the governing elite; when expedient, Islam and historical traditions of patriarchy supply a framework and a justification for impeding or limiting women's progress. At times, it has also been used in concert with government aims to slow population growth or secure female workers. Islam plays a role in regulating women's social status, however, a multi-dimensional approach that assesses demographic changes, economic and political realities, and regional instability offers a broader insight into the issue of women's status in the MENA region.

Key words: Women's Social Status, Empowerment, Political & Social Transformations, Demographic Changes, Modernization Process & Its Effect on Women's Social Status, Middle East, Middle East & North Africa

Social status equates to a recognized social position within a society's hierarchy. It is one way individuals define who they are and their relationship to others and gender plays a large part in defining an individual's social status. When it is considered within a socio-cultural context as well as structural, gender inequality is influenced by class, religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and age.² This paper focuses on gender inequality in the MENA region primarily in terms of women's status, religion, and the intersection of politics and religion on structural inequalities.

Multiple factors contribute to women achieving an elevated social status including access to material resources such as land, wealth, jobs, and health care, and non-material resources such as knowledge, reproductive control and prestige (e.g. bearing sons in patriarchal societies). Under patriarchal family and social systems, men in general control the resources and therefore maintain control over the family (and control of social opportunities) (Mason, 1986, 2001). In the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, women have been gaining access to resources such as education and reproductive health, however, as I will explain in this paper,

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² Risman (2004) and Lorber (1994) argue that gender is a social structure and is embedded in everyday social institutions. In modern societies, gender is institutionalized to justify social stratification and the subordinate position of women to men. Risman (1994:437) illustrates different dimension of gender structure on individual level (e.g. socialization), international level based on cultural expectations (e.g. status expectations), and institutional level (e.g. legal processes and regulations, distribution of resources, ideological expectations).

access to resources is only one requirement for acquiring control and a more equal standing in the society. To acquire and exercise influence and control one needs to have choices and the authority to make decisions. Access to resources *plus* choices and the ability to make decisions and influence decisions in the familial/kinship realm and the socio-political realm ultimately confer power and elevated social status.

Status Measured by Empowerment

Kabeer (2000), in her thought-provoking article on women's status and empowerment, describes empowerment as the purview of people who have been shut out of power but who then acquire the ability to exercise choice:

One way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices: to be disempowered, implies to be denied choice . . . the notion of empowerment is that it is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability . . . empowerment entails a process of change. People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very powerful, but they are not empowered, because they were never disempowered in the first place. (pp. 436–437)

According to Kabeer, access to resources is only one of three criteria that enable women to advance their social status and power. She identifies three dimensions of choice that define empowerment: *resources, agency, and achievement*.

- *Resources* (i.e., education, health-related services) are an essential precondition for exercising choice and acquiring a greater level of power and social status.
- *Agency* is the process that defines individual goals and continues to act upon them.
- *Achievement* is the desired outcome where individuals receive the rewards for their achievements (e.g. better employment due to higher education).

Women's empowerment cannot simply be defined in terms of being able to perform specific activities or benefiting from propitious outcomes. It results from a process whereby women can freely analyze, develop, and voice their needs and interests without them being predefined or unwillingly imposed by religion, government, or social norms and where their influence and control extends beyond women's familial/kinship circles. Therefore, access to resources is an important aspect of women's access to power and a higher social status, but without the ability to choose what to do with those resources and the ability to exercise autonomous control of the new skills power is limited. Consider the following two examples.

In a study of Lebanese women, Lattouf (2004) examines women's social status in modern Lebanon. Despite their improved educational attainment, there is a lack of advancement in their social status. Lattouf argues that economic stagnation and regional political problems led the government to enforce traditional roles and values on women and institute campaigns to legitimize discrimination against women. A similar study by Shavarini (2006) reveals the same concerns for contemporary Iranian women's social status. Despite decades of impressive

advancements in their educational attainment at the secondary and college levels, there has been no commensurate increase in their social status, or opportunities in the job market (the unemployment rate for women is as high as 20%, whereas for men it is about 12%). Both Shavarini's and Lattouf's observation of why families support their daughter's higher educational attainment, despite the questionable rate of economic return, has to do with family status: A family will support their daughter's higher education as a way to improve her chances of finding a husband of similar or higher social status, which, in turn, adds to the family's collective social status. Iranian women's social status, as is the case in many other societies, is often determined by their relationship to a male relative or husband. Shavarini states that many of the women she interviewed were aware of societal discriminations in finding jobs even with their high level of credentials and qualifications. In an economically deprived country such as Iran, with a high inflation rate and a high unemployment rate, men are given priority in the job market (an implicit and explicit affirmation of their higher social status and relative worth to society). Therefore, many highly qualified women with college degrees are unable to find suitable employment (as a result, they are unemployed or under-employed). Shavarini (2006) discusses the paradox of women's higher education in Iranian society:

What good is their higher education, then, if society cannot utilize women's education? What are these women supposed to do with that education that has been training them, supposedly, for a job that will never materialize? The answer to these questions is the paradox of women's higher education in Iranian society. (p. 207)

Kabeer's three dimensions of choice, explain why women's access to higher education (resources) is not enough to empower them in Iran and Lebanon. If women are educated but not given much access to political and economic power, the process of empowerment is not complete; their status remains low despite a greater investment in their human capital.

In Kabeer's framework, agency and achievement must follow resources. Iran and Lebanon are two examples of countries where the government has been offering resources, but tapping into and capitalizing on deep-seated notions of traditional family values to keep women out of the labor force and overall political involvements. What could be spurring this strict adherence to traditionalism? Is it absolute devotion to Islam? In reality, their stagnant economies have led to a desperate shortage of jobs, and high inflation and unemployment rates. Men are given priority and the society justifies this process with the rationalization that it is not an economic problem, but rather it is preserving traditional and Islamic family values. The educational opportunities are welcomed by women and their families, but women are left with limited options for gaining social status other than vicariously through the men in their lives (husband, father, or brother). Although women may receive familial/kin support to improve their social status, outside of their family/kin circle they face limited choices and many obstacles to improve their status.

On a familial/kin level, if women's status within their families is a function of their attachment to male family members, they can gain some control and influence through an exchange of resources (Kandiyoti refers to this as "bargaining with patriarchy"). Kabeer offers an example from her study of Hindu and Muslim women in India. Hindu women do not inherit property (inheritance of property is collective and is often passed to sons), whereas Muslim women according to Sharia law are entitled to an inheritance (a woman's share is equivalent to

half of her brother's share). Kabeer finds, however, that both Hindu and Muslim women are equally property-less. Even though Muslim women are given property rights, this does not necessarily mean they exercise them, but they might use them as a bargaining chip (see explanations of neo-patriarchy and Kandiyoti's "bargaining with patriarchy" later in this paper). Kabeer's explanation (2000) is as follows:

Although Muslim women do waive their land rights to their brothers (and may be under considerable pressure to do so), they thereby strengthen their future claim on their brothers, should their marriage break down. While brothers have a duty under Islam to look after their sisters, the waiving of land rights by sisters in favour of brothers finds a material basis to a moral entitlement. The necessity for such an exchange may reflect women's subordinate status within the community but the fact that women's land rights are in principle recognized by their community gives them a resource to bargain with in a situation in which they have few other resources. (p. 444)

However, while this does confer some control and influence to women, it is still in a very limited domain.³

Conventional Measures of Women's Status

The status of women in political and social demographic studies is often measured according to how they rate, relative to men, on the following criteria (this not an exhaustive list):

- access to reproductive health services;
- access to education;
- female mortality, infant mortality, for example, male versus female life expectancy (ratio of male to female);
- age at first marriage (the higher her age at marriage, higher her autonomy and decision-making ability);
- preference (as well as men's) for sons;
- political participation (i.e., percentage of women in the parliament); and
- paid employment (i.e., women's share of the labor force participation).

Among other types of measures commonly used are the systematic measures calculated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP; see table 1 for these measures). The two measures of gender status are (i) Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) and (ii) Gender-related Development Index (GDI). Here is how UNDP describes these two indices:

³ In traditional patriarchal settings, one important way for women to gain higher status and have more decision making power within their families is by bearing sons and eventually becoming the senior female when sons marry. Daughters-in-law then take the lower status and the mother-in-law gains more power because of her age and status in the family.

Table 1.
Political leadership indicators and GDI in the MENA region compared with other regions

Country	Percentage of women in parliament (1995–2004)		Percentage of women holding ministerial and sub-ministerial ranks (1998)	GDI rank (2003)
Algeria	7	6	5	107
Bahrain	—	0	1	37
Egypt	2	2	5	120
Iran	4	3	1	106
Iraq	11	8	0	—
Jordan	1	6	1	90
Kuwait	0	0	5	46
Lebanon	2	2	0	83
Libya	—	—	5	61
Morocco	1	11	6	126
Oman	—	—	4	79
Qatar	—	—	0	44
Saudi Arabia	—	0	0	73
Syria	10	12	3	110
Tunisia	7	23	8	91
Turkey	2	4	13	96
United Arab Emirates	0	0	0	48
Yemen	1	0	0	148
Region				
World	12	16	11	—
More developed	14	20	14	—
North America	14	17	32	—
Europe	15	20	12	—
Less developed	11	14	9	—
Less developed (excluding China)	9	13	9	—
Africa	9	13	9	—
Northern Africa	4	9	—	—
South America	10	15	12	—
Western Asia	5	6	—	—
South Central Asia	6	9	4	—
United States	11	14	32	7

Notes: Data for Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) are not available for most of the MENA countries. The top ten countries with the highest Gender-related Development Index (GDI) rank are: Norway, Iceland, Sweden, Australia, U.S.A., Canada, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, and Finland.

MENA: Middle East and North African region.

Source: *Women of Our World. 2002, 2005. Population Reference Bureau*, Washington, D.C.; United Nations Development Fund: http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2003/indicator/pdf/hdr03_table_22.pdf. Retrieved on August 30, 2007; 2005 World Development Indicators, Women in Development, World Bank.

1. Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) is a “composite index measuring gender inequality in three basic dimensions of empowerment—economic participation and decision-making, political participation and decision-making and power over economic resources.”
2. Gender-related Development Index (GDI) is a composite index measuring average achievement in the three basic dimensions captured in the human development index—a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living—adjusted to account for inequalities between men and women (UNDP, Human Development Indicators, 2003).

A low number indicates a high GDI rank. For example, the United States’ GDI is 7, which translates to it having a high GDI (women have access to more resources and exercise more decision making in the United States) compared with a GDI of 148 for Yemen or 126 for Morocco indicating a low access to resources and limited choices for women. Most of the MENA countries rank low according to this index. The four Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates) rank under 50, while countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen, rank over 100 (indicator of low access to resources, limited choices and high level of gender inequality).

As useful as these measures appear to be, they have been criticized as not being an accurate measure of gender inequality. Also, these measures are not available for all countries, particularly many of the MENA countries. The main critique of these measures comes from Pillarisetti and McGillivray’s study (1998) of the indices. Although they acknowledge the importance of these indices to measure gender empowerment and equity from a cross-cultural perspective, they list problems with the measurements as follows:

- These measures of the treatment of inequality aversion are insensitive to differential cultural and social norms across countries (especially between industrialized and traditional developing countries).
- They do not consider some important empirical realities concerning the size of the manufacturing sector in developing countries and the reliability of developing country databases.
- They ignore some fundamental variables relevant to empowerment. (p. 202)

A Multi-dimensional Approach to the Conundrum of Women’s Status in the MENA Region

There is no uniform evidence throughout the MENA to back up the mainstream view that the low status of Muslim women and the injunction with “out of the norm” demographic patterns such as low participation of women in the labor force, low participation in politics, and so on, is a consequence of Islam to the extent it is perceived to be. Granted, religious doctrine can be used in a more totalitarian fashion by those in power to justify and rationalize the subjugation of women, and limit their access to opportunity—the Taliban in Afghanistan offer a prime example—but these more extreme interpretations of Islam do not reflect the broader community any more than the practices of Christian fundamentalist reflect the overall practice of most Christians.

Jeffery and Jeffery (1997), Iyer (2002), and Bose (2005) in studying South Asian communities, find a stronger link between women’s autonomy in decision-making with their

social class, accessibility to family planning programs, educational attainment, regional and residential differences than with their religious affiliations to Islam, Hinduism, or any other religion.

Obermeyer (1994), in studying the impact of Islam on fertility behavior in Iran and Tunisia, concludes that changes in the reproductive behavior in these countries is a consequence of governmental policy changes with the expedient support of the religious community rather than the population's intrinsic religious beliefs. By addressing economic, social, and cultural barriers through the educational system and the media and in conjunction with religion, governments have played an important role in facilitating the use of health and family planning services in Muslim countries. In Egypt, for example, religious leaders sent out messages of *fatwas* (religious rulings) in favor of modern contraception. Government health care facilities distribute contraceptive devices and made them available to couples from all levels of economic and social classes. (Obermeyer 1994; Roudi-Fahimi 2004; Roudi-Fahimi & Kent 2007)

The success of family planning programs supported by the Iranian government and the cooperation of the religious leaders is progressive in that the sole focus is not on a woman's responsibility for reducing fertility, they also place a great deal of importance on the man's roles in reducing fertility. Larsen (2001) states:

One of the strengths of Iran's promotion of family planning is the involvement of men. Iran is the only country in the world that requires both men and women to take a class on modern contraception before receiving a marriage license. And it is the only country in the region with a government-sanctioned condom factory. In the past four years, some 220,000 Iranian men have had a vasectomy. While vasectomies still account for only 3 percent of contraception, compared with female sterilization at 28 percent, men nonetheless are assuming more responsibility for family planning. (p. 2)

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Yemeni government has made limited effort to control and prevent the country's high fertility rate, high child mortality rate, and high maternal mortality; in fact, they deploy ideologies in the name of Islam to reinforce the rule of high fertility. Yemen has the least favorable demographic record (high fertility, high mortality, low women's status, low level of industrialization, low women's employment, no participation of women in politics) compared to other MENA countries. A large percentage of Yemeni women believe that Islam does not condone use of contraception. Therefore Yemeni women and men are reluctant to use birth control methods as it is considered "un-Islamic" to do so. Since Yemen has such a poor record on health care and high mortality rates, a high rate of fertility is necessary to replace the population.

Demographic studies comparing Muslim and non-Muslim communities in India, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines ask whether there is a religion-based difference between those communities regarding fertility related decisions—whether or not to have more children, whether or not to use contraception, and so on (Morgan et al., 2002). The study finds that the important variable is not Muslim versus non-Muslim, but rather of age at first marriage, employment outside the house, and number of years of schooling; a greater level of autonomy (indicator of women's social status) in both types of communities leads to reduced fertility rates (Morgan et al., 2002). The study concluded no religion-based difference between the two groups and their fertility levels and women's decision-making power (again, an indicator of women's

status within the household and family). Olmsted (2003, 2005), in her study of the MENA countries, examines what she calls the “fertility puzzle.” She tests variables such as income, government policies, women’s labor force participation, and cultural factors and, like Morgan et al. (2002), finds that female education and age at marriage are among the most significant factors in determining fertility levels. Thus, Islam alone does not affect women’s fertility patterns.

Clearly, Islam plays a role in regulating women’s social status, however, it is more important to study how Islam is used as an instrument of control in response to forces originating in the region’s cultural history, and how political and economic realities (domestic and global) take advantage of the region’s Islamic roots to control the population in accordance with the needs of the governing elite.

A Closer Look at the Path of Social and Economic Change

Much of the Middle East and North Africa gained independence from Western European imperialism and foreign rule shortly after World War II. The influence of European colonialism, however, was supplanted by the growing influence of the United States and the former Soviet Union. After the fall of communism, the United States emerged as the dominant foreign power in the Middle East and through its reach into the oil industry it contributed to the political turmoil that had been smoldering since the 1940s. The region experienced rapid economic development during the 1950s, and the oil boom of the 1970s contributed to further economic, political, and demographic changes. With oil prices soaring in the 1970s, “it was like drawing the winning global lottery ticket; from being the poorest countries in the world, the Gulf States found themselves among the wealthiest” (Hijab, 1988: 36).

During economic and demographic transitions, new ways of life result from the changes in a society’s values and norms as well as its demographic characteristics: fertility and mortality levels decline (refer to classical modernization perspective); often times, age of marriage increases (which in turn can contribute to lower fertility and a higher educational level); the occupational structure of the society changes and educational opportunities for its citizens increase. Changes such as these are expected to bring more opportunities and comfort to women’s lives, especially when they are followed by reduced fertility and household responsibilities. Women’s participation in the labor force is expected to decline during the early transitional stages (from pre-industrial agriculture to industrial manufacturing economy) and pick up momentum when the society enters the postindustrial service economy stage. As the formal labor market grows during the early stages and agricultural sector jobs decline, more women leave agricultural work. However, the absence of jobs for women in the early manufacturing economy leads to an overall decline in women’s employment.⁴ Later on, with job growth in the service and white-collar occupations, women’s labor force participation increases again. The transition from a preindustrial agriculture economy to an early industrial urbanized economy, and later to postindustrial economy, is explained by modernization perspective as having a U-shaped effect on women’s labor force participation. Thus, there is a *curvilinear* rather than a *linear* relationship between economic development and female employment (for quantitative analysis see Haghghat, 2002, 2009; Pampel and Tanaka, 1986).

⁴ See For more information on modernization perspective, see the works of the following: Anker and Hein, 1986; Black and Cottrell, 1981; Boserup, 1970; Evans and Timberlake, 1980; Inkles and Smith, 1972; Kentor, 1981; Levy, 1996; Moore, 1979; Oakley, 1974; Parson, 1971; Ryan, 1975; Semyonov, 1980; Tilly and Scott, 1978.

Challenging the Conventional Modernization Perspective

Feminist critiques point to significant weakness in the modernization perspective; although widely applied, it has not been able to explain women's status and the demographic changes influencing their lives in some parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East. Several decades ago, Ester Boserup's work *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970) challenged modernization and particularly the perspective that technology liberates women and therefore has positive consequences on women's status. She argued that urbanization (as a consequence of modernization) encourages rural-urban migration and the urban setting is less favorable for employed women; they are often cut off from their rural kinship support networks. Before leaving their rural life, women could count on multigenerational kinship support for illnesses, child care, household duties, and shared financial support of the family. Once leaving that environment for the urban life, they are alone or with a husband, with fewer or no extended family in the vicinity for support, and they also have to purchase all social services (daycare, health care, and housing). Furthermore, as reported by Luo (2005), while a change in the economy made it favorable for women to migrate and enter the workforce, persistence of the traditional cultural barriers to women subjected them to significant wage discrimination.

Other perspectives have been offered to explain the lack of women in the workforce in the Muslim Middle Eastern countries. For example, the sociocultural perspective explains women's lower participation in the modern sector—regardless of a woman's qualifications or a demand for labor—as a result of powerful cultural norms, particularly the strong kinship system, the patrilineal descent tradition, and patriarchal norms that discourage women from entering the labor force and participating in the modern sector of the economy.

Patriarchy, Bargaining with Patriarchy, Neo-patriarchy

Patriarchy is considered a system that enables men to dominate women and maintain power and control of resources. Women—especially younger ones—have minimal power and are dependent on men.⁵ Kandiyoti (1992) defines classic patriarchy as the systematic inequality of women in societies. She describes a patriarchal family as multigenerational and hierarchical, where younger women and children are placed in the lowest level of the hierarchy. The *paterfamilias*, as she calls it, is characterized by young women marrying men older than themselves (frequently significantly older). When the young bride enters the new household, she is placed at the lowest level of the hierarchy with the least amount of power. Upon bearing sons, she gains more status and eventually, by becoming a mother-in-law, she gains more power as an older female in the household. Marrying young girls is important because it legitimately extends the length of time that they can bear children. A young woman is also more readily socialized to her unequal role and inequitable entitlement to the family resources—even compared to her own children (Kandiyoti, 1992; Moghadam, 2004). Women's modesty and the practice of veiling, *Hijab* or *Purdah*, are also emphasized in patriarchal societies. Within a community, a woman's honor is an extension of the family's honor and reputation. What do women gain from their lower status with these inferior arrangements? In exchange for their low status and unequal access to resources, women are entitled to protection and maintenance. Kandiyoti refers to this exchange as the "patriarchal bargains." Women find strategies within

⁵ See Mason (1986, 1996, 2001)

acceptable set of norms and rules to negotiate their status and position in the family and in the society and make compromises with male members in their lives.

Johnson (1997) describes four dimensions of a patriarchal social structure. He argues that these structures are:

1. Male domination—men predominantly hold the most prestigious and powerful roles and women hold the least powerful roles.
2. Patriarchal control—women are devalued and experience physical, psychological control, violence and fear of violence in their everyday lives because of the ideological need for men's control, supervision, and protection.
3. Male identified—most aspects of society that are highly valued and rewarded are associated with men and identified with male characteristics. Any other attributes less valued and rewarded are associated with women.
4. Male centricity—public attention (e.g., the media, public spaces) is often granted to men and women are placed in the background and on the margins.

Hughes et al. (1999) describe patriarchy as an institution where gender inequality is perpetuated by a set of complex processes referred to as sexism:

The most pervasive form of institutional sexism is patriarchy, a system of social organizations in which men have a disproportionate share of power. Patriarchy is rooted in cultural and legal systems that historically gave fathers authority in family and kin/clan matters, made wives and children dependent on husbands and fathers, and organized descent and inheritance through the male line.” (p. 250)

The influence of patriarchy on women's societal resources is seen as a complex phenomenon. For instance, on the demand side, patriarchal values embedded in the culture discourage employers from hiring women and investing in them (e.g., Papanek, 1990). Therefore, in many of the societies with strong patrilineal descent and strong extended family and kinship systems (e.g., Middle East, South and East Asia) tend to keep women out of the labor force.⁶

Patriarchy Meets Modernity: The Neo-patriarchy Perspective

Sharabi (1988) describes neo-patriarchy as the side-effect of the encounter between modernity and tradition. Neo-patriarchy could explain the discrepancy between industrialization, the absence of an increase of women in public life, and their continued lower status. With respect to gender roles, a woman's primary role as homemaker and mother (not far removed from traditional patriarchy) remains a strong marker of the cultural norms. Therefore, changes in the level of industrialization have little effect on women's social status and overall involvement outside of their familial and kinship circles. Furthermore, Sharabi (1988) reminds us of the influence of the oil wealth entangled with patriarchy in the Middle East region. Also, Sharabi reminds us further that only Western societies experienced modernization in a “pure” sense because it happened without interference from other nations. Due to their dependent political and economic positions and their cultural differences, a long history of Western colonialism, on-

⁶ See for example Greenhalgh, 1985; Jones, 1984; Pyle, 1990; Salaff, 1981.

going interference of the Western world in the MENA's economic and political systems (mainly due to oil wealth in the region), modernization in today's Middle East has followed a different path.

Sharabi (1988) expresses the two main concepts of neo-patriarchy as being (i) patriarchy (cultural), and (ii) dependency (economic). Its economic structure is dependent capitalism³ and its social structure is patriarchy. Neo-patriarchy is the product of the interaction between modernity and patriarchy (tradition) in the context of dependent capitalism. In neo-patriarchal societies, there is a wide gap between inward and outward societal context. Kinship and culture in these societies are deeply rooted in patriarchal values (inward) even with the presence of modern forms of government and economic development strategy (outward). Sharabi concludes that this strategy became financially possible mainly because of the sudden accumulation of oil revenues and other investment strategies. In neo-patriarchal societies, the state then becomes the ultimate power and also the main employer and investor.

Patriarchy as a Political and Economic Expedient

Moghadam (1993, 2004) applies the neo-patriarchal framework to the legal and political status of women in Muslim societies. She writes:

Neopatriarchal state practices build upon and reinforce particular normative views of women and the family, often, but not exclusively, through the law. In particular, laws that render women legal minors and dependents of men reflect and perpetuate a modernized form of patriarchy. In some cases, the focus on women is an attempt to deflect attention from economic failures. States may also find it useful to foster patriarchal structures because the extended family performs vital welfare functions. (p. 14)

A similar argument by Obermeyer (1992) focuses on the politics of fertility, mortality, and female labor force participation in Arab Muslim nations and states:

The ambivalence of any Arab/Muslim leaders toward female emancipation stems from their need to address two conflicting demands in their societies: prosperity, which means modernization; and identity, which is partly rooted in tradition . . . the traditional bases of identity present themselves as the safest choice, and religion is used selectively to cope with political exigencies and to legitimize the power of individual leaders. (p. 52)

Hijab (1994) also argues that patriarchal values and messages in the name of Islam are used selectively to suppress women's rights when it is actually more of an economic decision justified and reinforced by traditional values when that makes the most political and economic sense. She presents studies of countries such as Tunisia and Iraq where the role of the government in social attitudes toward women's employment changed when their labor was in demand. For example, Iraq's need for workers was so pressing that the government imported over a million Egyptians to be employed in the agricultural sector. The Iraqi government also

made special efforts to change social attitudes toward women's involvement in the public sector through media and elite channels. Hijab gives the example of a pharmaceutical plant north of Baghdad where female workers had to be brought in from Baghdad and housed in dormitories because the plant was not able to hire women from the nearby village as local women were not allowed by their male family members to work in the factory. The villagers were resentful of the new plant. Sometimes the buses transporting women from Baghdad were attacked. Gradually, attitudes changed and women from the villages started to seek work in the factory themselves, first being chaperoned by their male relatives and finally going to work on their own.

Hijab also cites the example of Tunisia where the government had been eager to integrate women into the modern labor force up until the unemployment of men became a serious problem. She states that the male unemployment problem became so serious that the state could not afford to consider the needs of both men and women. The government "was clearly happy to adopt the traditional view that men were the breadwinners and had to be planned for accordingly, and that women were the economic responsibility of their men folks" (p. 81). In times of high unemployment the government's inability to grow the economy in order to create jobs or provide social benefits replacing women's services becomes the real reason for reverting to "traditional ways." In essence, to avert a sociopolitical crisis due to a failing economy, the government may fall back on the Islamic excuse to exclude women from competing with men for jobs by claiming that traditional gender roles must be preserved. Religion becomes the justification and allows the government to preserve itself by not having to admit its inability to provide jobs and revenue.

To sum up, it seems that once women's labor in the modern sector is in demand, government responds to the need by integrating women into the modern workforce. Islamic ideology as a conservative factor to suppress women's equal access to the modern sectors is manipulated when the society is facing a high rate of male unemployment. Government officials engineer this strategy as a way to deflect attention from economic failures. The state may find patriarchal structures politically and economically useful because the extended family performs vital functions.

Is Labor Force Participation Empowering and Liberating for Women?

Returning to the discussion of women's social status, access to resources and the process of empowerment, we know that labor force participation is associated with women's empowerment because of the access it provides to societal resources. Most of the feminist literature, as well as reports from the World Bank and the United Nations, portray women's contribution to productive resources as the main ingredient for their empowerment and higher status. Dubeck and Dunn (2002), in their study of women's work, list many reasons for examining women's employment. They argue that women's paid work is not only good for individual women (it is empowering and status enhancing) but also beneficial to the collective well-being of the society. Working women contribute to the production of goods and services but their participation in the workforce extends beyond advancing personal economics to the creation of jobs and new industries. For example, family and educational institutions are intensely affected by women's employment since employed women are not able to perform every familial task themselves. Therefore their services are often replaced by the development of new

industries, such as child and elderly care institutions, extended school days for children, janitorial services, the growth of the fast food and restaurant industry, and so on.⁷

It has also been argued that women's entry into the workforce strengthens their position in the political system, helping them understand their rights and boosting their political participation both individually and collectively.⁸ Oftentimes grassroots organizations are formed by and for women to protect their interests in countries where they work in low-wage factory jobs. These countries include Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, Indonesia, Tunisia, and Morocco (Moghadam, 1999; Ross, 2008, 2012; Telhami et al., 2009). Studies of female garment workers in Bangladesh indicate that when women work side by side in factories, these locations become fertile grounds for sharing information and building social networks. For example, from these social networks, women learn about health-related issues and become more aware of contraceptive choices (Amin et al., 1998; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004).

So, is paid employment empowering and liberating for women? The answer is it can be, but employment is sometimes disempowering and exploitative of women. Olmsted (2005), in her analysis of paid work in the Arab nations, states:

Paid employment for women is no panacea, either for women themselves or for society in general. Even when they enter paid employment, women often remain more economically vulnerable than men, not only because they face discrimination and exploitative work conditions, but also because societies continue to assign them the generally unremunerated economic role of reproductive labor. (p. 112)

The subject of employment and its role in advancing women's social status is complicated. The nature of the work and the ability to advance within the job are also important variables (echoing back to Kabeer's ideas of agency and achievement). There is no doubt that women in many parts of the world are often exploited by their employers and oftentimes by their own family members, where they are used as unpaid and subjugated labor. It is also worth pointing out that there are actually cases in which women's participation in the workforce is counterproductive. Women from lower socioeconomic status groups who end up in lower class jobs find their social status is further diminished. Sassen (1999) and Parrenas (2000, 2001) explain this as a phenomenon of the global labor market.

The Impact of Fertility and Women's Employment

The MENA region has succeeded in lowering its fertility rate for the past several decades (see Haghghat, 2010). Access to reproductive health care facilities helps reduce fertility, leads to rising employment participation, and can increase women's autonomy and social status. And yet, in many of the countries in the MENA region, women's employment drops when they enter marriage and the childbearing years since their primary role is considered to be caring for their

⁷ See For more information on modernization perspective, see the works of the following: Anker and Hein, 1986; Black and Cottrell, 1981; Boserup, 1970; Evans and Timberlake, 1980; Inkles and Smith, 1972; Kentor, 1981; Levy, 1996; Moore, 1979; Oakley, 1974; Parson, 1971; Ryan, 1975; Semyonov, 1980; Tilly and Scott, 1978.

⁸ However, their strength within the political sphere can also be curtailed when those jobs disappear. For example, women's involvement in the workforce (and their up-tick in social mobility and social liberation—wearing pants and performing skilled labor) in the U.S. during WWII was specific to that time period and was followed by a conservative period with a return to the cult of domesticity in the 1950s,

family, per the strong patriarchal traditions of the region, and alternatives for care are not available due to the lack of government-provided social services. Wahba (2003: 26) reports the following:

1. In Egypt, women's employment drops as soon as they enter marriage and their childbearing years (Assaad and El-Hamidi, 2002).
2. In Iran, married women have the lowest rate of participation compared to single and widowed women. Divorced women have the highest rate of participation in the labor force (Salehi-Isfahani, 2000a).
3. In Kuwait, single women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-nine have twice the labor force participation as married women (30 versus 60 percent) (Shah and Al-Qudsi, 1990).

In many MENA societies, reproductive behavior is a function of the sociopolitical context rather than the impact of the Islamic influence. Islam does not prohibit the practice of family planning and does not encourage high fertility. The pro-natalist orientation of Islam is based not on direct injunctions, but indirectly through the political conditions created which are conducive to high fertility (Obermeyer, 1992). When governments act to remove economic, social, and cultural barriers, to facilitate the use of health and family planning services, fertility and mortality rates drop. Countries such as Algeria and Iran saw fertility decline dramatically while experiencing the rise and domination of Islamic fundamentalism (Fargues, 2003).

Although the region is experiencing one of the highest population growth rates in the world, most countries in the MENA region have reduced their fertility (and mortality) rates drastically. However, the domino effect of those previously higher rates of fertility is that many of the MENA countries still have a disproportionately young population (often referred to as the youth bulge) to educate, employ, and provide with social services for decades to come.

Table 2. Selected indicators of employment for men and women.

Country	Estimated earned income (PPP US\$), 2001		Income disparity between men and women* (in %)	Female labor force participation (% of total labor force)			Unemployment			
	Female	Male		1980	1990	2000-4	Total (% of total labor force)		Female (% of female labor force)	
							1990	2000-4	1990	2000-04
Algeria	2,784	9,329	30	20	23	30	19.8	29.8	15.9	29.7
Bahrain	7,578	22,305	34	11	17	19	-	-	-	-
Egypt	1,970	5,075	39	19	26	22	8.6	11	17.9	23.9
Iran	2,599	9,301	28	20	20	33	-	11.6	-	20.4
Iraq	—	—	—	16	17	19	-	28.1	-	16
Jordan	1,771	5,800	31	18	19	24	-	13.2	-	20.7
Kuwait	8,605	25,333	34	13	22	25	-	-	-	-
Lebanon	1,963	6,472	30	28	32	30	-	-	-	-
Libya	—	—	—	16	17	26	-	-	-	-
Morocco	2,057	5,139	40	21	24	25	15.8	10.8	-	-
Oman	3,919	17,960	22	15	11	16	-	-	-	-
Qatar	—	—	—	9	10	14	-	3.9	-	12.6
Saudi Arabia	4,222	21,141	20	8	11	15	-	5.2	-	11.5
Syria	1,423	5,109	27	23	26	30	-	11.7	-	24.1
Tunisia	3,377	9,359	36	19	21	27	15.3	14.3	-	-
Turkey	3,717	8,023	46	35	29	26	8.0	10.3	8.5	9.7
United Arab Emirates	6,041	28,223	21	5	10	13	-	2.3	-	2.6
Yemen	365	1,201	30	28	27	28	-	11.5	-	8.2
Region/ economic category										
MENA	-	-	-	20	-	27	-	13.6	-	-
Lower Middle Income	-	-	-	41	-	42	3.9	5.9	-	-
High Income	-	-	-	39	-	44	5.6	5.5	5.5	5.4
U.S.A.	26,389	45,540	58	41	44	46	5.6	6.4	6.8	6.6

Source:
The World Bank Group, GenderStats, Database of Gender Statistics, <http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/genderRpt.asp?rpt=profile&cty=BHR,Bahrain&hm=home>. Retrieved on August 30, 2007

**2005 World Development Indicators, Women in Development, table 1.5
Human Development Report 2003, Table 22, Gender-related development**

The World Bank Group, GenderStats, Database of Gender Statistics, <http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/genderRpt.asp?rpt=profile&cty=BHR,Bahrain&hm=home>. Retrieved on August 30, 2007

* Income disparity is calculated as (female income/male income) * 100.

The Inequality of the *Education = Work* Equation in the MENA Region

A strong relationship between increased access to education and positive changes in women's status is expected in the MENA region but that does not seem to reflect reality. A society's investment in education is generally assumed to pay off in the creation of more jobs (mainly in the nonagricultural sector) and better-educated individuals in the workforce. For a society to receive returns on its investments on education, it needs to build a skilled and flexible labor force. The high rate of women's access to secondary and higher education in most of the MENA region is impressive. Contrary to expectations, however, the MENA region's substantial investment in education has not been paying off as expected. There is little evidence that education has contributed to economic growth in the region (Nabli, 2002). As women's education level has increased in the MENA region, their labor force participation has not increased as expected. An examination of labor force statistics indicates that female labor force participation is relatively low in the MENA region, and ranges from 13 percent of the total labor force in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to 33 percent of the total labor force in Iran (refer to Table 2).⁹

As of year 2000, women's formal employment in the MENA region was as low as 27 percent, which is accompanied by a staggering unemployment rate—sometimes as high as 30 percent (refer to Table 3). Within the region, the GCC countries show the lowest rate of women's employment. The low rate of women's employment (despite their improved educational attainment and lower fertility) results from the absence of a commensurate improvement in women's social status (Lattouf, 2004; Shavarini, 2006). Despite women's high levels of education, governments enforce traditional roles and values on women—a direct consequence of economic stagnation and regional political problems—effectively delimiting their social mobility. There is no doubt that women's access to higher education contributes to improving their individual status. As previously mentioned, Lattouf's observation that, despite the questionable rate of economic return, families support their daughter's higher education as a way to improve their daughter's chances of finding a suitable husband of a similar or higher social status—but this continues to confine the “improvement” to the familial/kinship level. If a woman's higher education does not confer an improved status on a societal level, her higher education credentials will not help her to get far in the job market.

Among the younger generation, the gap in educational attainment between women and men has narrowed tremendously in the MENA region (Haghighat, 2010). Many educated women are marrying later and having fewer children. In theory, higher education for women should lead to more employment opportunities. And yet, Bahramitash (2007), in her study of contemporary Iranian women and the changes in their social status over the past decades, points to a lack of connection between education and employment. Fundamentally, Iranian society has not been able to provide jobs for many of these women. The unemployment rate was as high as 20 percent for females and 12 percent for males in 2000–2004. Algeria, as another example, reports its unemployment rate for both men and women increasing and staying unusually high (30 percent

⁹ Bahrain (19 percent), Oman (16 percent), Qatar (14 percent), Saudi Arabia (15 percent), UAE (13 percent), five of the six Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) countries excluding Kuwait (25 percent), show the lowest share of female employment. The Kuwaiti government has managed to create jobs and include women in their labor force. Women are heavily employed in government positions (clerical, teaching, and nursing). Over 90 percent of the Kuwaiti female labor force is employed in the public sector. Although Kuwait still uses a large number of guest workers as part of its labor force, other GCC countries are heavier users of guest workers. The impact of guest workers on employment statistics will be explained in detail in this article.

for both between 2000 and 2004) (see Table 2 for available unemployment statistics). It is all well and good to educate women, but if the underlying economy cannot support more workers an advanced education does not necessarily offer an advantage. Furthermore, in recent decades, the poverty rate among women has increased dramatically due to higher inflation, higher male and female unemployment rates, and higher incidences of women not marrying, marrying later, or getting divorced, which leaves them without a male to support them financially. Rising poverty rates and high inflation force many educated and less educated women to seek employment. But the question becomes at what level are they finding employment? Employed workers are often concentrated in particular sectors that contribute to gender segregation in the labor force. Female concentrated jobs are often lower status and lower paying jobs. In general, women are concentrated in public sectors in most of the MENA region. More than 50 percent of employed women in Jordan and Egypt and over 90 percent in Kuwait, for example, are public sector employees (Wahba, 2003). If women, both educated and non-educated, are competing for low wages, low status jobs then Bahramitash (2007) argues that working “does not necessarily translate into economic empowerment for women” (p. 104). Simply because statistically more women are working does not mean they are seeing improvements in their wages or that overall they are a more economically empowered group. Rising employment for women in Iran and other countries in the region could be indicative of “economic exploitation rather than economic empowerment.” (p. 104)¹⁰

Table 2 shows patterns of women’s employment and unemployment from 1980 to 1990 and 2000–2004. In fifteen out of eighteen cases, female labor force participation has increased between 1980 and 2004. In Turkey we see a steady decline. In Egypt and Lebanon we see an initial increase between 1980 and 1990 followed by a decline by 2004. The same data, grouped by region, shows that overall in the MENA region female labor force participation has increased, as is also witnessed in the United States. The lowest rate of female employment in the MENA region in 2000–2004 belongs to UAE (13 percent) and Saudi Arabia (15 percent). The highest rates are reported for Iran (33 percent), Algeria, Lebanon, and Syria (all 30 percent). Female labor force participation for the MENA region is as low as 27 percent. Despite the relative levels of rising employment for women, unemployment rates in the MENA region for both men and women are among the highest in the world indicating a high demand and a low supply of jobs. In Iran women’s employment rate is 33 percent—the highest in the region (still low compared to countries in other regions) and the female unemployment rate is over 20 percent. In Syria the labor force participation of women is 30 percent, and the unemployment rate for women is 24 percent (a pattern similar to Iran). While the unemployment rate in high income countries is slightly lower for women than for men (6.8 percent for men and 6.6 for women in the United States), in the MENA region, women’s employment rate is much lower than men’s and their unemployment rate is much higher than men’s. The highest recorded unemployment rates among these countries belong to Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. These countries also have

¹⁰A major motivator for the globalization of the economy is cost-cutting—the relocation of work from affluent nations to less-developed nations where labor and operating expenses are less. Roberts and Hite (2000) point to a paradoxical effect on women’s status when developed nations invest and create jobs in less-developed nations. In the beginning they notice that the jobs created yield earning power for women with the immediate effect of improving their quality of life. In addition it provides women with the opportunity for independence, material benefits, and to a certain extent a sense of self-actualization. However women employed in the foreign factories begin to see the disadvantages of working for a transnational corporation as they become marginalized and exploited, often working in oppressive work conditions, without job security, and low wages.

a higher percentage of college educated women among their younger population (with the exception of Iraq). Consequently, unemployment rate is further complicated by age; the younger generation of men and women are experiencing even higher unemployment rate in the MENA region than the older age groups. Roudi-Fahimi and Kent (2007) express this concern:

While less than 15 percent of young men and women were unemployed worldwide, the ILO estimated that just over 20 percent of young men and just over 30 percent of young women in MENA were unemployed in 2005. The situation is particularly dire for members of MENA's youth bulge in some countries. More than 40 percent of Algeria's young men and women were unemployed in 2005, which may be why so many Algerians are emigrating [*sic*] to Europe and elsewhere in search of jobs. Between 21 percent and 31 percent of young men were unemployed in Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and several other MENA countries, along with between 29 percent and 50 percent of young women. Qatar, with a labor force dominated by foreign male workers, has relatively low unemployment for young men, but high unemployment for young women." (p. 17)

Income disparity between men and women in the MENA region is even more prevalent (Table 2). For example, Kuwaiti men earn three times more than women, Omani men four times more, Saudi men five times more. In contrast, there is a much smaller gap between men and women's earnings in the United States, Norway, and Sweden.

Societal Norms, Social Contracts, and Women's Employment

Societies often have an implicit set of norms indicating how individuals should be cared for through the traditions of family and religion. For example, the patriarchal system gives men the ultimate control of the family members but also assigns them the responsibility of providing for their immediate and often extended families (elderly parents, sisters, nieces, and nephews in addition to their own nuclear family). Some interpretations of Sharia law state that men are economically responsible for women but women do not have the obligation to provide unpaid housework and have the right to be compensated for their work, and married women do not have an obligation to contribute to the household income. A study of women's paid employment and financial arrangements with their families in the United Arab Emirates shows that employed (mainly more affluent middle and upper middle class) married women were in control of their own money and did not have the obligation to share their income with their husbands. The expectation is that men are in charge of their family's finances but women are not obligated to work or share their income if they do work (Briegel and Zivkovic, 2008).

Societies also, to varying degrees, have explicit social contracts provided by the government. For example, governments set up tax systems in exchange for providing social services to their citizens. Members of a society might give up some things (certain rights, and monetary payments in the form of taxes) to their government in exchange for receiving social services. In societies with few or no explicit governmental social services, families and kinship systems perform these roles. For example, in Nordic countries with social democratic welfare regimes, the government takes responsibility for almost all social services including education, health, child, and elderly care. But in countries like those in the MENA region, with strong

patriarchal family systems, societies rely on families and kinship systems to provide the care for children, the ill, and the elderly. It is often argued that it is financially beneficial for governments to justify and perpetuate patriarchal family norms, as is the tradition in many of the Middle East, South and East Asian societies.

Another interesting twist to the MENA societies' women-work equation is that the relatively high male income levels made possible by the oil boom, directly or indirectly by means of remittances, "contributed to the preservation of the patriarchal family structure by making it [financially] unnecessary for women to seek paid employment outside the home" (Wahba 2003: 26).

Integrating women (and I underline "integration" and not exclusion or exploitation of their labor)¹¹ into the paid workforce will be advanced by a society if it is not facing economic and political failures and can support both men and women with jobs and social services. When the country is facing political turmoil and economic breakdowns along with a disproportionately young population to support, women's employment is not a priority. In those instances all sorts of cultural norms and ideological messages will be used to justify keeping women at home to attend to their families' care and well-being. Frequently however, women of lower socioeconomic status do not have the strong familial support and the societal system is also ill-equipped to protect them.

Labor Migration, Oil and the Impact on Women's Employment

Prior to the 1970s, a relatively small pool of foreign labor existed in the Middle East. Americans and Europeans held jobs in the oil export industry. Pakistanis, Sudanese, Egyptians, and Palestinians were often employed as doctors, nurses, and other professionals in small numbers. The foreign worker community was rather small but started to grow rapidly with soaring oil prices in the early 1970s (Martin and Widgren, 1996). Today, a majority of the foreign workers in the Middle East are from South Asia and neighboring Arab countries. The largest single source of foreign workers in the MENA region is from Egypt. Egyptians work in different parts of the Middle East, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. Other major labor exporting countries are Jordan, Yemen, and Sudan (Martin and Widgren, 1996; Shah, 1995).¹² By the 1990s nearly 70 percent of the GCC labor force consisted of foreign workers, with UAE's foreign-born labor as high as 90 percent of their labor force (Table 3). In countries such as Kuwait and UAE foreign workers constitute 84 percent and 90 percent of the labor force (Table 3). Foreign-born labor constitutes 39 percent of the total population in the GCC but 70 percent of the labor force (Table 4). The extreme dependence of these countries on foreign labor is undeniable and would be very difficult to change. Shah (1995) explains the concerns regarding the high volume of migration and states that immigration is likely to continue in heavy volumes. Among the many reasons cited for the heavy flow of immigration are: (i) the need to maintain the infrastructure, (ii) the reluctance of the native labor force to participate in productive and manual labor, (iii) the increased demand for domestic servants (p. 1001).

¹¹ In general, dependency theorists would argue that the West has exploited and prospered through access to the MENA regions' cheap petroleum production. MENA women only enter an exploiting workforce if needed and enforced by their country's elite and multinational companies.

¹² Migrant workers in the GCC countries dominate three main sectors of the economy: construction, manufacturing, and utilities. The greatest decline has been in the construction sector since the peak of the construction boom in the 1970s and 1980s. In turn, the service sector has grown and absorbed a large percentage of immigrant workers (Birk et al., 1988).

Table 3.
National and foreign population and labor force in GCC countries.

GCC Countries	Bahrain %	Kuwait %	Oman %	Qatar %	Saudi Arabia %	UAE %	GCC %
% foreign population	39	66	28	67	31	76	39
% of foreign work force relative to the total work force							
1975	46	70	54	83	32	84	47
1985	58	81	69	90	65	90	70
1995-97	62	84	62	82	64	90	70
Women as % of the labor force							
1975	5	8	-	2	5	3	-
1980	11	13	5	7	8	5	-
2000	19	25	16	14	15	13	-

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Sources: (1) Willoughby (2005), table 2 and 7. (2) Shah (1995), table 1; World Bank Group, GenderStats database of gender statistics. 2006. Retrieved in August 12, 2006. <http://devdata.worldbank.org/>.

Female migrant workers, with a variety of skill levels, also constitute a relatively large percentage of the foreign workers holding jobs. Many are illiterate or barely literate and perform janitorial and domestic work (mainly women from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Philippines, and Sri Lanka). Some are highly educated (mainly from other Arab countries such as Egypt) and hold jobs as teachers, nurses, and, sometimes, doctors serving the country's female population. In many of these countries, the native population is overqualified or is not willing to take low paid and low status jobs. Shah (1995), in her description of the migrant and native population in Kuwait, states:

As the educational level increases further among the Kuwaiti population, indigenous workers would be overqualified for occupations currently performed by illiterate foreign workers. Such jobs will be considered too lowly by nationals. Also in cultural terms, certain occupations (e.g., cleaning services) are now deemed to be purely non-Kuwaiti occupations, and participation in them would reduce the status of a Kuwaiti tremendously. (pp. 1016–1017)

We should be reminded here that, MENA countries maintain a constant multifaceted effort to preserve the patriarchal system by limiting change in women's status. For example, the GCC countries' response to a significant loss of male laborers to more lucrative jobs across the borders was to bring in replacement male laborers from poorer or more overpopulated regional members. If GCC countries did not replace their male citizens who migrated to high paying positions in oil-producing states with imported replacement labor, it might challenge the patriarchal system by encouraging women to enter the local labor force. One last effect of migration to high paying jobs outside the country is that the remittances sent home are in a higher valued currency, which helps create a higher standard of living for the families in the home country.

The question then is (the patriarchal attitude aside): why haven't labor shortages in labor importing countries led to a greater integration of women into the labor force as is

theoretically expected? According to Hijab (1988) three conditions are needed to promote women's gainful employment in a country: need, opportunity, and ability. An absence of any of the three could lead to a slower pace or lower integration of women into the labor force. In the face of those criteria the MENA region falls short on several fronts.

- *Need:* In oil-producing nations, sudden wealth meant a sharp rise in Gross National Product per capita. However, because of the high level of male income and the job security offered by the governments, women's financial contribution was probably not felt to be needed by families.
- *Opportunity:* Oil wealth also meant that the government could easily afford to hire foreign workers "despite the fact that this was felt to be a threat to the social fabric" (Hijab, 1988: 137). Migrant workers entering the MENA oil-producing states have the potential to bring cultural changes. To avoid this migrants are subject to government controls that deny them the right to marry local women, bring their families, or start a family during their employment. Not only are they denied citizenship from the host country, but they can be deported when their employment ends or is terminated. The perceived encroachment of foreign influences was probably the main factor reinforcing attachment to traditionalism's particularly rigid interpretation of gender roles (Hijab, 1994; Sharabi, 1988). Women's roles in that context were defined as mothers and wives, which tend to deflect the opportunity for women to be economically active.
- *Ability:* The sudden wealth created job opportunities in the modern sector (including jobs that were acceptable for domestic workers vs. migrant workers). For decades (until recently), women in general were not prepared with proper education and skills to enter the modern labor force due to the disparity between male and female education and skill levels. The education gap in the past few decades has narrowed. However, despite women's great strides in educational achievement in the Middle East, they are kept out of the labor force due to reasons such as a government's political and economic failures, high inflation and a population explosion.

After accounting for the fact that the oil industry as a capital-intensive industry (due to its enormous wealth flow from oil) created many labor-intensive jobs in construction and oil industry suited for men (mainly taken by migrant workers), other reasons for the unchanging status of women vary from country to country in the MENA region. Governments in many of these countries insisted on preserving the patriarchal system, already in existence for centuries, in which women's status was solely defined by successfully maintaining the family's well-being. In other countries, a population explosion provided the labor force with more than enough men to fulfill the job market demands. If further labor was needed, it was imported from neighboring countries or South Asian countries with the legal stipulation that migrant workers could be denied citizenship and family rights, and sent home when no longer needed. And finally, some countries are still experiencing political and/or economic failures in growing a diversified economy. While the oil industry brought in much needed revenue and created some jobs, failure to promote other industrial avenues made it difficult for the remaining unemployed men to find work.

The Dutch Disease Translated to Oil Rich Countries in the MENA Region and Women's Employment

Ross (2008) suggests that the under-representation of women in the workforce and politics is not because of Islam, but is due to the effect of petroleum on the economies of these countries. In addition, Ross explains the unusually low status of women in oil-producing countries outside of the Middle East region (e.g., Azerbaijan, Botswana, Chile, Nigeria, and Russia) as also being connected to oil and mineral production. In his analysis of oil-rich and oil-poor countries, Ross emphasizes an economic condition called the Dutch Disease. The Dutch Disease describes the relationship between the decline in the manufacturing sector and exploitation of natural resources such as petroleum production and export of goods. With the increase in wealth and revenues from natural resources (oil in this case), the traditional sector—also referred to as the traded sector (agriculture and manufacturing)—becomes less significant, while non-traded sectors (construction and services) becomes more significant in the economy (Corden and Neary, 1982). Ross adds another dimension to the Dutch Disease: gender segregation in the labor force. He argues that women are given opportunities to enter the labor force but are only allowed to enter specific jobs in specific sectors, which permits employers to set different wages for men and women—lower wages for women and higher for men. In oil-rich countries, with the expansion of the oil economy, the non-traded sector (construction and services) will get a boost and support from the government and therefore expand where there is a concentration of male workers. Also oil-rich economies tend to expand their heavy industry; therefore, male jobs rather than female jobs expand and are protected (Ross, 2008).

Conclusion

The focus on women's issues (emphasis on traditionalism in the name of Islam) has often been a political strategy for these nations to deflect attention from their economic failures: high inflation rate, a lack of ability to provide employment for everyone, and a lack of adequate social services.¹³ Religious ideology, cultural beliefs, and traditional principles cannot be argued to be the one and only reason for women's labor force lagging behind in these countries. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, as one of the top oil producers of the world, did not require female labor in order to grow and develop economically (in a form of capital-intensive industry). Nor was there any incentive to employ indigenous women workers. It was cheaper to hire migrant laborers, and it was not in the best interest of the wealthy rulers or governments to be forced to supplement social services as would be needed if women moved out of the domestic arena. As Gross National Product continued to rise and to supply a relatively high level of income for men who were employed, it reinforced the attachment of these societies to traditionalism, conservatism, and Islamic fundamentalist ideology (Moghadam, 2004). While rapid population growth (as high as 3–4 percent) and high male and female unemployment, might have spurred change, the response was equally reactionary: keep women in their domestic roles according to and justified by custom, so there is less competition for available jobs. In response to economics, societies willingly and openly adopted Islamization of the state and embraced traditional gender roles.

By contrast, countries such as Indonesia (oil-poor, majority Muslim) and Tunisia (no oil, majority Muslim) have developed their economy through labor-intensive industrial production and taken advantage of their female labor. Those countries are characterized by a higher rate of female labor force participation and women's political participation (Ross, 2008). Studies have

¹³ See Hijab, 1988; Moghadam, 1992b, 2004; Obermeyer, 1992

shown that women's status improves when they become essential to the financial system; when the unstoppable forces of a growing and a diversified economy are able to provide jobs at least equal to the demand. The data for educational attainment by women in MENA show the effects of modernization as in recent decades, the percentage women enrolled in higher education (university) has increased significantly. Some MENA countries present the majority of university students as female. The family dynamics change from having many children to provide labor for the parents, to smaller families where the parents invest more in the children through education (quantity versus quality). In the latter case, there is a greater return when parents invest in a smaller number of children. Society also benefits from a more educated and smaller population.

The solution to the future improvement in women's status, as well as stabilization to the MENA region, is dependent on the next course of industrialization and modernization. The political and economic status quo is maintained by reinforcing historically patriarchal ideologies, but the need to maintain the status quo reflects an inadequate response by the government for economic development. Nor has embracing the status quo led to political stability and prosperity.

Salehi-Isfahani (2000) points out how in Iran, the 1979 revolution against the government was born among the disenfranchised youth. Following the revolution, Iran's fertility rate increased dramatically thus producing another, even larger, youth bulge. Hope, according to Salehi-Isfahani, lies in the government changing the country's base of economic growth from oil, to "human capital." The oil industry, based on a finite quantity of a natural resource, produced a financial windfall for the Iranian economy—not a sustainable economic model. This is also true for the other major oil-producing nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. Wherever there is a tight relationship between per capita income and oil exports, further complicated by rapid population growth, social and political scientists will see the potential for civil unrest and instability. And it is clear that an oil export based economy can have adverse effects on women's status.

Throughout the MENA region, a youth bulge followed by a decline in fertility means that over time, the ratio of adults to children changes to produce more teachers/nurturers to raise fewer children. This facilitates the transition of economic growth away from oil and more toward human capital. The timing of this transition is paramount. All the MENA countries with declining fertility rates must make a rapid investment in their human capital and create a diversified economic base for sustainable growth before the current youth bulge reaches retirement (estimated around 2040). At that point there will be a smaller cohort of working contributors to care for a larger elderly population. Investment in human capital today, and diversification of a sustainable economy away from just an oil based industry, will provide tomorrow's generations with stability and prosperity (Salehi-Esfahani, 2000).

In sum, in the MENA region, the consequence of women's increased access to education deviates from the common expectations predicting a strong relationship between increased access to education and positive changes in women's social status and eventual social mobility. While the MENA region is going through a modernization process, improvements in women's social status still lags due to limited opportunities in the job market and their exclusion in the political arena. Women's social status in the MENA countries has been and continues to be conditioned by the economic and political realities and regional stability. When expedient, Islam and historical traditions of patriarchy have been engaged as frameworks and justifications for controlling the population. However, in Islamic countries where we see a more diversified economy, Islam has not been an altogether limiting influence. Therefore, we can predict a substantial improvement in the future of women's status in MENA region if it is able to move

away from the reliance on oil exports and focus on an investment in human capital and a diversified economy with ample jobs. Most importantly, women's status would improve by virtue of the natural economic forces that would ensue from stability and economic diversification.

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