

# Tracing the Trajectory of Advancement of Arab Women in The 21st Century

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**Abstract:** The advancement of women in the Arab states goes beyond redressing historical injustices against them and ensuring their equitable treatment. Indeed, the advancement of women is a prerequisite for a comprehensive Arab renaissance. There is also, in this context, a consensus over certain criteria of advancement of women as conceptualised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Arab countries have made significant progress in this regard. The flourishing economies of these countries, fuelled by oil wealth, has witnessed active participation of women. Yet, a lot remains to be done as a complex array of socio-economic, political and cultural factors pose serious impediments to granting women a fair share of the power.

**Keywords:** *Gender Equations, Transnational Feminism*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women can play a crucial role as agents of change in a society and in building their country. They are a valuable human resource for the national economy when allowed to participate in it equally with men. The Arab governments have taken note of this and are taking necessary corrective measures. Though a growing number of individual women, supported by men, have succeeded in achieving greater equality in society and more reciprocity in their family and personal relationships, many remain victims of legalised discrimination as well as social subordination. In some societies, the qualitative accumulation of small victories by women has caused patriarchal hegemony to retreat, to varying degrees. However, there is still a long way to go.

The most important factor behind the revolutionisation of gender equations all over the world has been the triumph of market economy (Doumato, 2003). Access to salaried work has led to the economic advancement and independence of women. The Arab society, not being insulated from the rest of the world has also been a witness to this phenomenon. Despite the fact that economic empowerment of women is largely an urban phenomenon and is confined mainly among the educated elite, these changes are steadily trickling down to the grassroots level of the society and the winds of change are blowing strong and threatening to challenge age old stereotypes that have been treated as axioms in gender discourses in the Arab societies.

The most formidable foe to women's advancement in the Arab world is patriarchy. Islam, the belief system of an overwhelming majority of this part of the globe becomes a crucial factor in this regard allows for both fettering and liberating interpretations and tempers this dominance variously. As Deniz Kandiyoti (1991) explains, conservative elements, using the Qur'an, the Hadith and the lives of prominent women in the early period of

Muslim history as instances, confirmed that existing gender asymmetries are divinely ordained, while feminists discerned possibilities for a more progressive politics of gender based on the egalitarian ideals of early Islam.

The role of Islam in influencing gender relations in the Arab world was temporarily eclipsed during the 1970s and 80s when analyses used to take place from alternate intellectual perspectives and secular parameters. However the resurgence of political Islam in the twenty-first century in the Arab world has re-established the primacy of Islamic doctrines in gender discourses with renewed vigour. According to the renowned Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1991), Islamism is an assertion of identity in the face of rapid social changes threatening existing authority relations (especially between genders), and a response to the boundary problems created by the intrusions of colonialism.

Therefore, a study of women in the Arab world in terms of changing gender equations and resistances demands a careful consideration of certain factors. These can be listed as follows;

1. The tug of war between the conservatives and liberals in the Arab world over gender parity and the role of Islamic doctrines in the debate.
2. The secular and religious perspectives of Arab feminism and the temporal and spatial heterogeneities.
3. Universal and Arab parameters of feminist aspirations and their points of convergence and divergence.
4. State policies for integration into the global economy have been affecting women's economic participation and social rights in legal frameworks.
5. Feminist associations have been vocal and visible in demanding political participation and rights of women, and in effecting legal and policy changes, in the face of both globalization and Political Islam.

The Arab society has been undergoing a steady transformation since the 1970s from the rural to the urban. As of now, more than 50 percent of the Arab population is city dwelling. Consumption, emigration from rural to urban areas, and other paraphernalia of change have had their inevitable bearing upon the status of Arab women. Three main factors that have profoundly affected the lives of women in the Arab world are access to education, participation in salaried work and birth control. The consequences of these changes have been most conspicuous in the cities in the Arab world. Furthermore, since the rural-urban divide was never watertight in the Arab countries, these changes are not confined to the urban landscape and have affected the Arab society as a whole, albeit with spatial variations. The corresponding adjustment as regards the changing equations in gender relationship, however, have largely been made outside any conceptual framework and limited legal reforms.

## **2. A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ISLAMIC FEMINISM**

The Arab response to the global stirrings of transnational feminism was twofold. One school of Arab feminists advocated a wholesale adoption of Western feminist ideas and

a total rejection of Arabic social norms pertaining to gender relationships. From this perspective, Islamic doctrines were looked upon as outright misogynistic and biased in favour of the male. This brand of secular feminism in the Arab world viewed *Qur'anic* injunctions as the source and support of patriarchy prevalent in the society and rejected Islamic norms on gender relations which they saw as inflexible and unaccommodating to female aspirations. Such a spirit of uncompromising and radical feminism was perhaps best personified by the famous Moroccan intellectual Fatima Mernissi (1991a) who had argued that women enjoyed more rights and were better off in pre-Islamic Arabia and that their status had diminished ever since Islam was firmly established as an ideological doctrine governing all spheres of collective and individual life in the Arab World.

The pioneers of such movements mainly hailed from the upper and upper middle class of the Arab society with exposure to Western education and ideas. Gender inequality and male domination were perceived as medieval vestiges of the decadent and feudal Ottoman rule and Feminist aspirations were inexorably linked with the rising tide of Arab renaissance and nationalism. However despite its deeply nationalistic roots, this brand of feminism was looked upon, by a large section of the society, as a western import, alien and incompatible with Arabic and Islamic traditions.

Another school of feminist thought sought to reconcile modern feminist ideas with fundamental tenets of Islam. The predominance of patriarchy in all institutions of Arab life and the religious sanction offered in its defence was seen as a misinterpretation of the gender-egalitarian character of the Holy Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). These feminists, therefore, called for a reinterpretation of the religious doctrines instead of their refutation and rejection. This version of Islamic feminism received greater acceptance in the Arab world. Linking of Islamic doctrines with strong patriarchy has been a predominant practice in Arab ethnography. Mainly Western and also some Arabian scholars for long have identified *Qur'anic suras* as the main reason of subordinated status of women in the Arabic world. This has often contradicted the profoundly gender-egalitarian spirit of the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith and has led to an intellectual paradox. In an attempt to expound this puzzle, a consensus is developing in Islamic discourses that patriarchy in the Arab world has its roots in pre-Islamic days of Arabia and has withstood the attempts of Islam to neutralize it. A genre in the modern scholarship of the West Asia dominated by female Arabic intellectuals is also posing a serious challenge to conventional understanding of gender relations in the Arab world. A plethora of scholastic works based on empirical case studies, analyses of historical and contemporary data and reinterpretation of religious texts are steadily demolishing Western intellectual shibboleths about the Arab world ostensibly grounded on adamant foundations.

The presence of women in the field of international relations is not a recent development. Women, in the other words, have always been part of world politics; it is just that their role and contribution had been ignored (Tickner 2001). During the times of famous philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau, women were mere objects. Women were described "not as individuals, but as members of men's households, and thus, along with their offspring, under male control". In our age, feminist writers felt the need to "ungender world politics" indicating that in the realm of international politics there is no

scope for gender discrimination. This was necessitated by the fact that, as Cynthia Enloe (1989) declared, certain essential areas characterize every political system and these are often male dominated. The feminine of 'gender' is always referred to in global politics and according to Cynthia Weber (1994) it is essential to possess a feminine perspective on such subject matters. This feminist approach will be adopted to analyze certain available materials. Marysia Zalewski (1995) believes, "Feminism is better understood as an important and often central category of analysis".

The subject matter will move to the fact that women in the two chosen states, i.e. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, are anything but in similar stages of progress. This view point is echoed by Charlsworth and Christine (2000) according to whom "women impose the appearance of homogeneity that conceals real difference in the lives of women. These include race, ethnicity, indignity, religion, class or caste, wealth, family, status, geographic location, education, sexuality and age."

The significance of the term "advancement" implies different meanings to different societies. However, for women "advance" only implies the path forward (Doumato 2003). This development can only take place if women are incorporated into every sphere of the state, both socially and politically.

As a corollary to the new brand of Islamic feminism, there is a steady attempt in the Arab world to reinterpret historical and religious literature and reconcile normative religious injunctions with modern feminist aspirations. Fatima Mernissi (1991), in *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, makes a very interesting reading in this regard. The author has offered to expound the paradox of the co-existence of the gender neutral teachings of Islam with deeply entrenched Patriarchal and often misogynistic values of the Arab society. As a challenge to those elements within the Arab society who oppose female advancement and participation of women in public life tooth and nail and legitimize their opposition citing the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith, Mernissi has argued that their misogynistic rhetoric is contradictory to the original gender-egalitarian intent of the Prophet (PBUH). The use of false Hadiths and incorporation of pre-Islamic misogyny prevalent in Arabia in the days of *Jahilliya* was a deliberate ploy of the male elite to subdue women and meet their own selfish political and economic ends.

Cynthia Nelson (1974) makes a very interesting observation upon the stereotypical image of the recessive Arab female. She argues that analysis of the Arab social world in terms of binaries like male and female and the public and the private is to a large extent divorced from reality. The myopic understanding of the Arab society as regards gender relations is due the dominance of western male scholars in Arab ethnographic literature. Thus, ethnocentric as well as androcentric biases have so far obscured the truth whenever these scholars tried to understand gender relations among Arabs with the help of western parameters. Yet another factor that interfered with this understanding was the limited access of western intellectuals to Arab women in person. Nikkie Keddie (1991) highlights various social practices, traditions and customs among different Arabic speaking tribes and communities distributed from the Maghreb to the Persian Gulf to illustrate the fact that women in the Arab world from historical past have played a significant role in central institutions of society like Politics, Law, Administration and even Warfare. Analyses by

Elizabeth W. Fernea (1998) pose a formidable challenge to the conventional assertion that the Arab society is strictly compartmentalized in the public and private world with men enjoying absolute dominance in the former and women in the latter without any mutual interference.

Another Arab scholar Amira Jarmakani (2008) in her well researched work *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* goes a little further and correlates western, especially American commercial and strategic imperatives behind the distorted portrayal of the Arab female. From this perspective, Jarmakani tries to project seemingly two contradictory images of Arab women dominant in the American collective conscience: the seductive, highly sexualized belly-dancer and the veiled, burqa clad, heavily oppressed figure. The former exotic and commoditised image served American commercial interest while the latter served to present a medieval and barbaric image of the Arab world to subtly justify America interference in West Asian affairs, especially post 9/11.

### 3. WOMEN AND THE ARAB STATES

Advancement of women can only be assessed if the basic factors about their involvement at all levels of the state are taken into account. Aspects such as the position and status of all women in the government structure, their presence in various ministries, areas such as the armed forces and other positions which may be seen mundane in any other nation are in fact some of the issues to mull over in both these states. An initial review of the literature, for instance, has revealed that the Bahraini government has made an attempt at introducing women citizens into their state institutions. Writers such as Habib Toumi (2006) has revealed that Bahrain has not only more women deployed in the various ministries but they have also been employed in the diplomatic arena and in the international organizations such as United Nations. H.E. [Haya bint Rashid Al Khalifa](#) was elected President of the sixty-first session of the General Assembly on 8 June 2006. At the time, she was serving as Legal Adviser to the Royal Court in the Kingdom of Bahrain. She became the first Arab woman and only the third woman in history to take over the post.

Bahrain was able to incorporate women into its institutions from the beginning along with its initiation of democratic measures. Al-Mazraoui (2009) believes this cause eased the introduction of women simultaneously into the new democratic agencies launched. Saudi Arabia also, contrary to popular thinking, has embarked on the mission to promote its women citizens.

For the first time female advisors have been appointed to the Shurah Council in Saudi Arabia, along with the nation's first female Education Minister in 2009. Though not at that level, small steps are being taken into this direction as revealed by various Saudi government agencies as well as writers like Jafar Al Shayeb (2010) and Nadereh Cham-lou (2004).

Similar observations were made about other essential aspects considered important for promoting women's right such as the presence of a National Mechanism for Gender Development in the respective countries. Shirin M. Rai (2002) has stressed the importance

of the establishment of such a mechanism in any country and its influence on the promotion of women's rights.

According to the King of Bahrain the advisory board was set up "to assist the government on issues relevant to women and recommend amendments to existing legislation." Unlike Bahrain, in Saudi Arabia there is no dedicated agency for women although the social security section under the Saudi Ministry of Labour provides assistance to widows and females who have no family or financial support as revealed in the works by Mahnaz Afkhami (1995). With respect to political status the progress of women is dependent on the political conditions prevalent in their respective states. Politically, Bahrain is more democratic than Saudi Arabia and Bahraini women are made politically active. In Saudi Arabia, there is minimal political participation and women are not permitted to participate in any forum as observed by Eleanora Abdella Doumato (2005). Based on the recent announcement of King Abdullah, women in Saudi Arabia would be the last to attain political freedom. In September 2011, King Abdullah decreed that women would have the right to vote and run for local elections from 2015 (Al-Masah Capital Limited 2012).

### **3.1 Arab Women in Society, Culture, Wealth Possession and Development**

The advancement and upward social mobility of women in a society is contingent upon the degree to which social norms, customs and legal institutions are conducive to feminine aspirations. For an objective understanding of this conduciveness, it is necessary to have a look into the law of the land under study.

The constitutions of the states in question are the primary source for such information. In Bahrain, the 'constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain, Article 18' is the clause which directly relates to this particular aspect. While in Saudi Arabia a general statement is made with respect to issues of equality and particular liberty. Legal status also involves looking at the methods and means by which women related cases are dealt within the judiciary. Aluma Dankowitz (2004) believes settling all personal status issues under the provisions of Islamic *sharia* might be the common factor among these states and though *sharia* is the basis for referral, this commonality ends here as the degree and methods vary in each state.

Women citizens can only protect their interest if they are aware of their legal rights and this can only be ensured if they are provided with education. Education is another social indicator which may appear to be simplistic. Nevertheless, without it no woman will be able to demand her rightful position. Bahrain can be credited with setting up the premiere girl's school in the Gulf as early as in 1928 as pointed out by A.M. Hakima (1965). However, it was not until Bahrain's independence in 1971 that education was brought into mainstream in the country.

Contrary to popular belief, women in the ARAB states hold a large pool of wealth. The substantiality of wealth held by women in the ARAB is not surprising. There are two reasons for this: (i) women control 27% of wealth across the globe (the same for the Middle East is 22%, which is quite reasonable); (Boston Consulting Group Global Wealth Management report 2010). (ii) Women in the region abide by the Islamic inheritance law, which gives women the right to own and manage their assets before and after marriage



and denies the husband any right to the personal wealth of his wife without her consent. The Islamic law dictates that the husband is required to undertake the responsibility of fulfilling the financial needs of his family, including his wife.

The women of two concerned states of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia form an essential part of the economy. Though the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia may not be actively promoting democratic values and institutions, on the economic front their women citizens are very advanced. Women entrepreneurs are abundant in the country and they own more than 23,000 enterprises in the Kingdom. These businesswomen are believed to own more than 40% of the nation's private wealth. In Bahrain women constituted 35% of the total workforce in the government sector as of 2009 (World Bank 2011) as compared to only 5% of the total workforce in 1971, (Nadereh Chamlou 2008).

Although female labour participation is limited in Saudi Arabia, Saudi women are ahead of their male counterparts in terms of obtaining higher education. Over 93% of employed females hold either a secondary qualification or a university degree versus around 60% of employed men. In fact, 78.3% of the unemployed women are university graduates; while 76% of the unemployed men have a secondary education or lower (Booz & Co. 2010). Social pressures and the lack of family support prevent women from entering the labour market.

According to Tim Dunne and Nicholas J. Wheeler (1999), the presence of an active civil society depicts the level of development in any given country. Though the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia bans the formation of associations, permission can be acquired to form professional associations. There are certain Human Rights Organizations present there. However, none of them are dedicated to women. Amidst restrictive policies and regulations women have involved themselves in the struggle for change. Many women championed both causes simultaneously. But attempts by Arab-Muslim feminists such as Nawal El Saadawi and Leila Ahmed to champion the rights of women by demanding equal educational, occupational, and social opportunities based on the model used by their Western counterparts have not been completely successful and have been criticized as merely replicating colonial conditions (Marina Ottaway 2004).

On the international front also, besides the national, the advancement of women is of prime concern. Critical observers have argued that globalization has increased opportunities for women's transnational networks (Moghadam, 2010; Castells, 2010); although it is recognised that often these coalitions are restricted via class, tribe and political affiliations (Metcalf and Rees 2010). There is no doubt, however, that the growth of women's NGOs especially in fields of education, employment rights and social welfare, has contributed to feminist consciousness raising efforts, although there is a variety across the region in terms of the legitimacy and their ability to act independently from political authorities (Metcalf and Mutlaq, 2011). The United Nations has created the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in order to incorporate this cause at the global level (Shaheen Sardar Ali 2002). The UN expects all nation states to adhere and to accept the clauses under CEDAW.

This platform puts the states under scrutiny and provides the state with a benchmark to match their women citizens' aspirations. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are both signatories

to CEDAW; however a closer analysis of the CEDAW documents reveals their shortcomings.

#### 4. RECENT DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGES

The Arab world, at present, is caught between the two turbulent forces, these are furiously market driven economy and the rising tide of Political Islam. The former leads to economic empowerment of women and necessitates a revision and reconstructions of traditional gender asymmetries while the latter calls for a reconciliation of feminist ideals with Islamic beliefs and ideas.

The entire Arab world is passing through a phase of historic transformation. One of the inevitable after effect of these changes is the rise of political Islam as a dominant force in the body politic of the Arab states especially in the aftermath of the Arab spring. In this regard a controversy has geared up concerning the fate of Arab people in general and Arab women in particular vis-a vis the suspected spectre of a looming theocracy. A paranoia is being generated from certain corners of the intellectual world that the new order that is filling up the political vacuum in the Arab states following the displacement of the dictators will gradually reveal its authoritarian nature and what is about to come, will certainly not augur well in the interests of women.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it makes a hasty assumption that religion as a social institution presents a formidable obstacle to social development. From a secular and post-modern perspective, this attitude betrays lack of cultural relativism and fails to comprehend the complicated relationship between religion and society in the Middle East. The most important factor that has sparked of this domino effect in the Arab world is the gradual introduction of market economy. In Marxist interpretation, The economic base is changing and hence gender equations, which constitute an important element of the social superstructure, is bound to change. What actually is challenging the feminist aspirations is the deeply rooted institution of patriarchy in the Arab society. This entrenched institution of male-favouritism seeks legitimacy from historical traditions of Arab society and has nothing to do with Islamic beliefs and practices.

In fact, Arab feminists braced themselves to this truth long time back. Arab feminism which began in the form of secular movement and described religion as force of retrogresses and oppression gradually revised its philosophy and reconciled their ideas with Islamic tenets scholars like like Deniz Kandiyoti and Fatima Mernissi etc. The Quran, the hadiths are replete with the message of gender egalitarianism. The history of Islam presents a very positive picture of gender equality. A prolific writer and intellectual in her own capacity like Nikkie Keddie (1991) highlighted various social practices, traditions and customs among different Arabic speaking tribes and communities distributed from the Maghreb to the Persian Gulf to illustrate the fact that women in the Arab world from historical past have played a significant role in central institutions of society like Politics, Law, Administration and even Warfare.

Thus, entrenched patriarchy deeply rooted in Arab social and cultural traditions has been the real impediment to Arab feminist aspirations. Religion by no means interferes with



the advancement of women and on the contrary has always played a positive role establishing symmetry in gender relationship in the annals of Arab history. Advancement of Arab women is possible when states work within the tenets of Islam to create economic, political and educational opportunities.

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