Teaching about Women and Empowerment in the Arab World

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How can women's studies, and feminist theory and methodologies best serve the Arab world?[2] The region is now home to quite a few research centers devoted to gender studies and programs of instruction that were based on the relevance of feminist theory developed in and for the Arab world.[3] In addition, many "gender specialists" are now employed by the numerous NGOs in the region. Still, all of these new areas of study or employment face complex challenges, especially if education is to lead to women's empowerment.

First of all, the goal of women's empowerment through education is not a given. There is a great deal of disagreement about the degree of transformation necessary or even possible in Arab society. Moreover, it is not clear to many that women are an integral part of the very fabric of society and lie at the heart of its developmental needs. Furthermore, women, are not, as is commonly believed, merely another under-represented interest group. Beyond this, another debate rages over whether women can be "mainstreamed," especially in more segregated environments. Most importantly, many forces in Arab societies oppose women's empowerment if it means changes in women's duties and responsibilities in the family.

Many women's and feminist studies programs are in their infancy, though the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University is the adult exception, dating back to the early 1970s. And, for reasons like feminism's uncomfortable "step-child" status in interdisciplinary studies and university politics complicated by post-colonialism, some theoretical and methodological aspects of empowerment remain controversial. For example, the use of comparative data, theory, and methodologies from the other regions of the world are not well integrated into regional curricula. Progressive pedagogies, effective mentoring, efforts to affect the pre-collegial curriculum, and ideas from the Western self-development and self-empowerment movements have also taken a backseat to more traditional education. The essential link between feminism and women's studies is still in question.

In my view, the most essential feminist component of women's studies, indeed, of education itself is the intent to empower. Women's studies informed by feminism centers on the empowerment of women. Ignoring the locus and workings of power uncouples feminism from women's studies, and diverts us from the very point of using gender as a category of analysis.[4]

Empowerment, a complex and relative notion, implies that there is a scale of power, and a linear progression from one end to the other. This view generally focuses on power through a modernist lens forged by postcolonial conditions in the Arab world. In undertaking the task to empower students, a responsible educator should complicate and enrich understandings of "women," "men," "gender," "Arab," and "agency." The educator needs to conceptualize the paths toward empowerment. This helps women ask why we are where we are now.[5] When the women studies educator attempts to explain women's legal status or the economic or health situation in Egypt,[6] or discrimination under the law in Lebanon,[7] an emphasis on lessons learned is key.

The educated regional population does possess increased awareness of gender as a category of power and status. However pre-collegial students may not yet understand how social processes are related to gender. Gender, to them, is an XX or XY label, and not necessarily a condition that needs to be altered in their view. Or, they may perceive different versions of gender roles as cultural indicators that divide the religiously conservative from the liberal, or one nationality from another.

Other false dichotomies complicate the study of women, such as sharp contrasts between women in rural and urban settings; essentialisms of social class which fail to recognize the effects of social mobility via state mechanisms; divisions of time or history; and the treatment of Arab women as a monolithic and exceptional category. It is therefore up to educators to describe the oppression of women as a broader condition. Our students need a sense of the universal implications of gender — that the world's women are a majority of the poor and one third will be subjected to violence. Or, that two million girls under the age of 15 are forced into the sex trade each year and twice as many women as men are affected with HIV in Africa.

Basic universal definitions of empowerment often begin with educational, legal, political, and professional rights. This includes access to all professions; equivalence in salaries, opportunities for advancement, insurance and pensions; economic rights to own and dispose of property, and to pay for goods at the same rates as others. Women seek rights over their own bodies, to receive support for women's health issues, and prosecute those who engage in domestic violence, rape, or abuse. Empowerment may involve quotas, or affirmative action policies, or may require new structures to enable implementation of protective policies, and enforcement of new laws. Teaching about these issues presents special challenges for educators in the Arab world.

Teaching and effecting the empowerment of women requires combining tools from a variety of sources. Self-empowerment is a fairly contemporary theme that seems most pronounced in Western scholarship and pedagogy. Many works of literature, biography and autobiography from the Middle East illustrate feminist self-empowerment, and the old maxim that "the personal is political." The theme of self-development has a lengthy history in Sufi philosophy and literature. The examination of family relationships that was an essential part of early women's studies is another avenue for discovery. Women conference attendees often compare and discuss their family relationships and bearing on their self-esteem and self-image. To some degree these ideas are also available in anthropological literature (Joseph, 1999 and Abu Lughod, 1986). However, the point of this literature is primarily to describe existing social relations, and not necessarily to emphasize transformation. Students are learning more about women's history in "niche" programs,[8] but mainstream education continues to ignore women's presence whether in world history, or Islamic and nationalist histories (Qassem, 2005).

Feminist process — an exercise during which group members respond to a specific statement, proposal, or question, and defer discussion until all have expressed themselves — is supposed to enhance participation and egalitarianism. While women's studies centers and NGOs may be familiar with "process," and utilize it, instructors in the Arab world are frequently too concerned with maintaining student respect, and find it risky to soften their pedagogical style. Beyond style, pedagogy is often simply absent. Educators are so exhausted with the struggle to survive professionally, that it is very difficult indeed to create the desire for lifetime learning and intellectual regeneration.

Mentoring also has important roots in both Arab and feminist cultures, and has been crucial to public activism and professional advancement. No one is born knowing how to chart a course of professional development, or how to respond to significant workplace challenges. Sometimes, women, experiencing the Darwinian dilemma themselves, may shortchange mentees or even play off protegées against each other. Yet we know that mentoring programs aid retention of women in non-traditional fields and can serve as an important source of support. Mentors can impart or demonstrate key professional skills such as public speaking, personal presentation, problem-solving, and organization. Mentoring and women's leadership programs suit both mixed-sex and single-sex university environments.

To teach about empowerment, we should effectively

communicate the ambiguities of social change. Many of us lecture and write for audiences outside of academia. Yet, our deep intellectual understanding of the mixed progress toward women's empowerment may not always help us communicate our knowledge. We need to strategically tailor our messages to the present, rapidly shifting set of circumstances. To do this, I developed a "balance sheet" for Arab women's empowerment. The incremental progress that this balance sheet has recorded over the past five years[9] is helpful in communicating ideas about women's empowerment.

Successes
• The passage of a law in Egypt in January 2001 making divorce easier and providing for family courts. These courts are to include mediators.
• Increased female enrollment and performance in educational institutions as demonstrated by statistical data.
• The incorporation of "women's voices" in society, including more attention to women's history and expression in the past and present.
• A marked decrease in the fertility rate in some urban areas of the Arab world.
• The increase of prominent women who have entered male-dominated professions, or run successful businesses (Sullivan, 1986, *Al-Raida*, XVI, 83-84, 1998-1999) and new networks for women in professions and business.
• The creation of numerous NGOs focused on a) creating sustainable development and income generation for women, b) eradicating girl's illiteracy and addressing the need for higher retention rates for girls in high school, and c) empowering women political candidates.
• Growing evidence that people oppose violence against women, and support legal efforts to outlaw it.
• Increasing numbers of women in politics in Morocco, Iraq, and the Palestinian Authority as well as an increase in women's interest in politics in many other places.

Ambiguous Factors
• The legalization of '*urfi* marriage in Egypt as well as the increase in other informal forms of marriage.
• The increasing cost of marriage in urban areas around the region (Singerman and Ibrahim, 2001).
• The apparent significance of college degrees as qualifications for better marriages rather than correlating to more and better career opportunities for women.
• Increasing numbers of female heads-of-households in rural areas due to male migration as well as increasing rates for female migrants (Juntenen, 2001, Salih, 2003, Ennaji, 2006, Zuhur, 2003, 2006).
• The future status of women and family law in Iraq.
• The failure of Saudi authorities to implement separate desks for women at ministries, increase women's employment opportunities, and the May 2006 decision to remove photographs of women from newspapers.

Failures
• Women were not permitted to run for office or vote in Saudi Arabia's 2005 municipal elections.
• The continued prohibition on women's driving in Saudi Arabia, and the subsequent rise in the overall number of women who lack mobility and the means to become employed (due to the cost of a car and driver).
• The practice of FGM (female genital mutilation) involves a larger number of women in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries than we thought, including northern Iraq.
• The continuity of "old" and rise of "new" versions of polygamy (Al-Krenawi, 2000; Zuhur, 2006).
• The continuing valuation of virginity and male responsibility for female sexuality means that many women are still strongly encouraged to marry instead of pursuing careers and advanced education. Others resort to hymen replacement or subterfuge to maintain their "honor."
• An apparent increase in crimes of honor in both rural and urban settings.
• The thwarting of the campaign to create a civil law of personal status in Lebanon (El-Cheikh, 1998-1999, Zuhur, 2002).
• The continued existence of laws in numerous Arab states that grant citizenship on the basis of the father's – not the mother's – nationality (Botman, 1999, Joseph, ed. 2000).
• Attacks by Islamists on prominent feminists (Gallagher, 2003, 2006).

A contextual approach is particularly helpful in explicating "the map," which also shows that efforts to improve income and living conditions without changes in basic notions concerning gender and sex-roles do not always empower women. Such efforts formed the basis of the early social welfare and government orientations.

Some women speak of a backlash against their gains in the public space. The concept of backlash speaks to many of the ambiguities above. Economic effects and inter-relationships of social and political change can also elucidate the data and trends discussed here. Simply gaining access to educational rights does not necessarily lead to a stronger female presence in politics or in society as a whole. Wholesale changes in public perceptions of women, changes in legal rights, and the creation of women's networks and special training for political leadership are required. Changing the laws that pertain to women's bodily integrity – as in the banning of FGM in public facilities – will be ineffective if medical personnel are unconvinced of the merit of the law.

Issues of Public Space
Arab women do not function just as men do in public space (nor do Western women, for that matter) because

of historical attitudes towards women's bodies which express themselves in differential laws and behaviors (harassment, pressure to veil, rape). Public space means the street, schools and universities, public transportation, television, cinema, entertainment venues, the workplace, governments, even the Web (Sami, 1999, Afsarrudin, ed., 1999; Haddad, 2001, Nouraie-Simone, 2005). Clearly the gendering of spaces has changed over the last century; just think about examples of women in public entertainment over time (Danielson, 1997, Zuhur, 2000, Zuhur, ed.1998, 2001b, and Zuhur in Nouraie-Simone, 2005d, and Franken, 2001).

In communities where women's university enrollment or employment is quite recent, the movement of women in the public space has been both modified and enabled by *hijab*-wearing and access to transportation. Research on the issues of public space, harassment, and dress sought to explain a wave of new veiling that coincided with a growth in religiosity (Rugh, 1984, Zuhur, 1992, MacLeod, 1991, Hammami, 1990, Brink and Mencher, eds. 1997, Bahgat, 2001).

The *hijab* has been voluntarily adopted by millions of Muslim women. It is not clear precisely how many women decide to wear the *hijab* as a result of peer pressure, direct contacts with religious organizations, or on the basis of individual motivations. Today, it is the *niqab*, or face mask that is the more recent sign of religiosity — the *hijab* alone is deemed insufficient. This trend is most common in the Gulf states, but also appears in Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq. One interesting point for teaching about empowerment: while the *hijab* (or *niqab*) has not prevented men from harassing women in public space, it has increased the vulnerability of unveiled women. Moreover, anyone now instructing Muslims addresses at least some students wearing *hijab* who may differ with the instructor's, class's, or literature's approach to veiling.

While in the United States most teach that Saudi women's inability to drive is a marker of disempowerment, should we apply apologetics in the region? The 1990 driving demonstration by 47 Saudi women resulted in their punishment, and not the lifting of the ban. One wrote:

> Sometimes I wish that I never went to school or learned anything so I would not see the unfairness and the wrongdoing and not be able to do anything about it, and most of all, so I would not know that I do not have rights. (*Austin Peace and Justice*, January 16-22, 1990 and reprinted May 1991)

Today, Saudis are still proposing modifications for the introduction of female driving. In Iraq, militants have attacked women who drive. In other areas of the Arab world, women's driving has clearly enhanced their career opportunities.

Political Rights
Students understand that political rights for women mean, at a minimum, suffrage and the right to run for office, and to be appointed in non-elected governmental positions. Still, simply electing or appointing women is insufficient, for without politicians and officials who consider the effects of various policies, laws and measures on women's status, no cohesive headway toward social change or reform will ensue. Some female politicians and decision-makers may be as ambivalent toward the empowerment of women as their male counterparts, yet others (who may influence male counterparts) are responsive to the concerns of poor and illiterate women as well as the educated and to the increasing number of woman-headed households in various districts.

By 2005, women in Bahrain and Qatar had achieved the vote. Women in Kuwait campaigned for suffrage and demonstrated wearing pale blue clothes. They finally won the right to vote in May 2005, the culmination of efforts started following the Gulf war (Reeves, 1999, Severeid, 1999; al-Mughni and Tetrault in Joseph, ed. 2000, p. 255). Saudi women have been disappointed by their continued denial of political rights, and it is hoped that a government campaign to increase the numbers of female identification card holders and provide separate polling facilities will pave the way for women's participation in the 2009 elections (Zuhur, 2005b, pp. 33-34).

Women elsewhere have turned their attention to the issue of women and political leadership. Lebanese proponents of female political leaders have noted problems that stem from women's gender socialization. These problems exist in a political environment in which egalitarianism is included in the national constitution but largely does not exist (Mobassaieh, 2000).

In Egypt, the National Council for Women cooperated with the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights to groom and prepare women for the 2000 election (Zuhur, 2001, Elbendary, October and November 2000). Of 120 women, only seven were elected. It seems that education, family support, social status, and to some degree, economic status are initial factors explaining why so few women won. Considering this, the decision to support "quotas," or seats reserved for women at a minimum number in Morocco, thanks to support from the Palace, and in Iraq, a compromise with women politicians that was backed by the Coalition Transitional Authority have been important and positive steps toward women's empowerment.

Probably the most difficult questions for educators go beyond the numbers of women in politics and concern democratization's benefits as they impact women. Etatism, or state-led reform, has thus far led to more political action benefiting women than we may see with democratization if it empowers larger blocs of Islamists or conservatives (presuming that the latter two groups are less supportive of or are against feminist reforms). State-sponsored feminism has been a major focus in materials written about the Arab world (Najjar, 1988; Kandiyoti, 1991; Brand, 1998; Joseph, ed. 2000; Al-Ali, 2000, Charrad, 2001). Scholars have also held that feminist reforms which lack grassroots support may be the cause of popular backlash.

Legal Reforms
In the area of legal reform, significant steps have been taken toward the empowerment of women, or at least toward more equity. Still, progress in this area has been complicated by the long historical debate over secularism versus religiosity in public life and the complicated derivation of civil laws from various codification systems. In some cases, there has been a failure to create civil laws, while in others, the success of new modifications is not entirely complete. And, with regional Islamization, it is no longer a given that civil law benefits women more than a reinterpreted, or "reformed" shari'a system – even educators are divided on this issue.

Lebanese President Elias Hrawi first proposed to legalize civil marriage in 1996. Women's groups and progressive political parties favored optional civil marriage, but opposition arose first in the Sunni religious establishment, and spread to other religious officials (Dick, 1998, Chahine, 1998, "Statement" n.d.). Prime Minister Hariri's decision to postpone the issue with the Syrian president's interference reflected Lebanon's political realities (El-Cheikh, 1998-1999, Khouri, 1998, Zuhur, 2002, 2005c).

Lebanon granted women the right to vote in 1953. The delicate balance between the various confessional groups in the country is formalized in the Taif Accord that ended the civil war. The accord also paradoxically calls for the reduction of sectarianism. Sectarianism has a direct bearing on women's issues as it empowers religious leadership, who too often seek to prevent inter-religious marriages and maintain control over personal status (divorce, marriage, adoption, inheritance, and custody).

The Egyptian parliament passed a new law affecting divorce after lively debates and allegations of political steamrolling, and President Mubarak signed it on January 29, 2000. Following a failed intervention by an arbiter for each side in accordance with a Quranic principle (Surah IV:35), divorce may be granted in three months and is to be irrevocable. The new law prevents men from divorcing their wives without immediately informing them (*talaq al-ghiyabi*). This reform kindled a certain degree of backlash, however. It provides a method for women to divorce regardless of the legal grounds for their action so long as they forfeit monetary compensation and the traditional gifts given. This so-called *khul'* law also created a family court that was to facilitate divorce cases as well as a family insurance plan. Among the reform's architects was Mona Zulficar who had earlier identified many discriminatory aspects of laws in Egypt (Zulficar, n.d.).

Debates concerning the laws of personal status first emerged in the nineteenth century when the customs of female seclusion and the lack of education for women were also questioned. The Ottoman Empire issued two imperial edicts allowing women to sue for divorce on limited grounds in 1915 and codified family law in the Ottoman Law of Family Rights in 1917. Subsequent laws were passed in Egypt in 1920 and in 1929 broadening the grounds for divorce by incorporating principles outside the Hanafi legal school. Women could obtain a divorce under certain conditions: if they were deserted, mistreated, denied financial maintenance, or if their husbands were imprisoned or had a serious contagious disease (Esposito, 1982, pp. 53-55). Other proposed but rejected reforms would have allowed women to write clauses into their wedding contracts restricting their husband's right to take another wife.

Subsequent efforts ensued in 1971, due in part to the efforts of the Minister of Social Affairs, 'A'isha Ratib. Special reforms affecting divorce, custody, and retention of the family home were eventually decreed by President Anwar Al-Sadat in 1979 during a parliamentary recess, and then later passed by the legislature – these were dubbed "Jihan's laws" after First Lady Jihan Sadat (Zuhur, 2001). However, because of their extra-parliamentary method of legal passage, the Higher Constitutional Court declared these reforms to be unconstitutional in 1985.

The 1979 personal status reforms had incorporated new grounds for divorce by a woman if her husband took another wife without her consent. Additionally, she was to be informed if her husband divorced her and allowed to obtain a notarized certificate of divorce. The divorced wife could keep the custody of her children until the ages of 10 for a boy and 12 for a girl. She could be awarded the family apartment as a residence until she remarried. These reforms permitted female employment so long as it did not interfere with their "family duties" and ended the practice of *bayt al-ta'a* (house of obedience) wherein the husband could imprison his wife at home until he obtained her "obedience." The 1985 retraction of these laws undid these reforms.

Unfortunately, the Egyptian reforms of 2000 are not a civil law in the most complete sense as they do not apply to Coptic women. The Church has long refused to recognize divorces that did not involve grounds of adultery and has denied couples who were divorced in "civil" proceedings the right to remarry (Zuhur, 2001, Hatem in Joseph, ed. 2000, Zulficar n.d;). And the reforms failed to settle the question of children's nationality which they receive through their father, an aspect of legal discrimination that affects nearly all Arab women. Notably, Palestinian women reformers have recently achieved a change in this area (Al-Rifa'i, 2005).

Lastly, the 2000 reforms brought a legal status to `urfi marriages. Such marriages, contracted via simple oral agreement or written contracts were practiced in Egypt since the 1940s but have never been considered legitimate marriages implying transference of property, duties of financial support or inheritance. Growing in popularity due to the high cost of *nikah* marriage (Singerman in Singerman and Hoodfar, eds. 1996), couples increasingly resorted to `urfi marriages. These marriages sidestep family authority (Mutawwi`, 2000) and were critiqued for their similarity to *muta'* (temporary) marriage (Zuhur, 2003, 2006) known as *sigheh* in Iran (Haeri, 1989) or the so-called "visiting" marriages authorized by some Sunni clerics. The press attacked "deviant" youth and women who participated in `urfi marriages, who were endangering the entire social fabric of virginity, honor, and chastity (Abaza, 2001). Some women married four to six men through 'urfi (*al-Ahram*, March 22, 1999; and al-Akhbar, September 28, 1999) though a few men outdid them with scores of `urfi wives. Since the passage of this law, Hind El-Hinnawi filed a paternity suit against actor Ahmed El-Fishawi and although theirs was an `urfi marriage, she won her case based on a DNA test. In teaching about such unions, one needs to convey that alternative modes of patriarchal control, such as these more informal unions, may socially or legally disadvantage women.

Violence against Women
Violence against women bridges the areas of women's legal and bodily rights. It will be up to the next generation of women activists to create conditions in which women are free of physical violence – whether beatings by their husbands, honor crimes, rape, or FGM. Ongoing denial of violence complicates discussion as well as lingering beliefs that it affects lower class women, not elites, or that types of violence, like FGM are irrelevant to women in areas where this custom is not practiced. Reformers who attempted to address FGM, like other versions of violence against women, thought that education and modernization could resolve these issues.

Legal reform by itself also presents a false solution. The death of an eleven-year-old girl in Cairo in 1999, despite the ban on FGM being performed in public health facilities, illustrated the complicity of the medical profession, and the inadequacy of legal change on its own. Female circumcision, just like the preservation of virginity until marriage, is believed to be a "good tradition"[10] because it controls both female sexuality and the designation of paternity. Women as well as men support the tradition, even though the practice is harmful to women's reproductive and psychological health. The medical establishment in Egypt has not educated doctors about the negative effects of FGM. Some reformers called for "medicalization" of FGM, meaning that the main problem was infection at the hands of non-professionals (barbers, midwives) and that in hospitals and clinics infection could be controlled. A scandal ensued after CNN aired coverage of a young girl undergoing FGM in Egypt. The official fiction that the practice was primarily conducted by those of rural origins and was dying out had been challenged directly. The minister of health then imposed a ban on FGM in public places, and despite serious legal challenges which overturned the ban for a time, it was re-upheld. A Task Force on FGM has engaged in a multi-pronged campaign against the practice (Seif al-Dawla in Ilkkaracan, ed. 2000) but its efforts have been hampered by tradition. Truly changing minds would necessitate educating the public through the discussion of sexual issues in the media and in schools.

Researchers previously estimated that 50-60% of Egyptian women have been circumcised. However, a 1995 EDHS (Egypt Demographic Health Survey) showed that 97% of Egyptian women who have been married ("ever-married women" including divorcées and widows) are circumcised (Zanaty, et al 1996; Guenena and Wassef, 1999). And, while many women in the Mashreq have complained that this practice does not impact them, in fact Bedouin women are circumcised in the Sinai peninsula and the Negev, as are some women in the Gulf, and a large number of Iraqi Kurdish women (Irin, 2005).

The discussion above illustrates the challenge of teaching about issues of women's bodily rights. Not all institutions protect academic freedom. Students may challenge educators whom they regard as critiquing the morality of their society. Perhaps what should be emphasized is the hypocrisy of a moral system allegedly designed to protect its members but which in fact victimizes them.

It is due to the import of the cultural code of sexual honor and the value granted to virginity and chastity that hymen replacement (to ensure "virginity" at marriage) occurs all over the Arab world as do honor crimes. Campaigns waged to alter the penal codes, notably in Jordan, are very relevant to the issue of women's empow-

erment. Unfortunately, this campaign has ran into a backlash, and in any case, has only been able to address the aftermath of such crimes in its effort to mandate more severe penalties (Zuhur, 2005).

Where Arab women stand on protections against rape and other forms of violence against women is also relevant. Rape laws invoking the traditional concepts of honor and family ownership of women's bodies have been codified by the state, but not always to women's best advantage. In addition, women's testimony is often doubted, and women are held accountable for their own victimization. Even with witnesses, as in the 'Ataba bus case in Cairo where a girl was raped despite her conservative dress style, and her mother's presence at the bus station, the judge rebuked the victim for not wearing the *hijab*, although he did note that she had worn a long skirt. In other cases, as a result of their understanding of the law, police have often attempted to force the victim to marry the rapist (Sonbol, in Ilkkaracan, ed. 2000, Zuhur, 2007). The steady pursuit of justice has not yet taken place, and the double standard guiding men's versus women's sexual behavior remains in place, though some efforts are being made to create shelters for women and programs to serve rape and abuse victims.

Conclusion

There are many additional important issues and related examples that can be used for the teaching of women's empowerment in the Arab world. Given more space, we could address women's literary and cultural expressions and their impact on the road to empowerment. These, too, have mixed effects, if, for instance, we consider the great popularity of women in entertainment, who appear empowered and influential, but may not be. One only need think of the 2003 death of Tunisian pop singer, Zikra, at the hands of her husband. However, in briefly reviewing some remaining obstacles to empowerment, I want again to point out that education (sometimes limited only to literacy) and modest income-generating projects are clearly insufficient to bring about a much higher quality of life for women of the Arab world, which should be our aim.

Teaching about empowerment in ways that strongly emphasize self-empowerment puts the whole process into a more positive light. Here, women's life-stories, such as the memoirs written by Leila Ahmed (1999), Hanan Ashrawi (1995) and Fay (Afaf) Kanafani (1999) can play a role like that of women's literature (Arebi, 1994, and too many others to list). By grasping the workings of self-empowerment in the lives of prominent women, we can encourage students to change their own lives through self empowerment. Women's studies in the West gave some special attention to the topic of self empowerment, but some of these have been trivialized. Those of us who come from positions of little power must alter our consciousnesses and levels of self knowledge in order to effectively utilize our connections, and deal with heightened social challenges or severe setbacks in our own uneven individual progress toward empowerment. Recognition of the effects of patriarchy on our own lives and learning to think in a liberated manner are difficult but useful achievements. We can thereby gain confidence to break boundaries, to create, and to empower.

The arduous task of self-empowerment differs from quotidian efforts to chronicle women's gains and losses through public policies and reform. But these complement each other. Without movement toward equivalent legal rights, access to public space, and political influence for all women, individual women have little hope of further expanding their individual rights. Self-empowerment is necessary, as is effective coordination of our various efforts to further women's empowerment overall.

Endnotes

1. The views expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense or the US government.

2. This question absorbed Dr. Cynthia Nelson, who passed away on February 14, 2006, having devoted much of her considerable energies to this issue. She sponsored a Regional Conference on Gender and Women's Studies held at the American University in Cairo in May 1997 (see *Cairo Papers for Social Science*, 1999). Later I presented a follow-up paper at the Troisième Colloque International sur le Thème: "Femmes et Education," Le Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur la Femme, Université Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Dhar El Mehraz, Fés, March, 2002.

3. Laurie Brand. *Women, the state and political liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African experiences*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998; also see Mounira Charrad. *States and women's rights: the making of postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

4. Joan Scott contributed the notion of gender "as a category of analysis,." Judith Butler has written extensively about the "performativity" or performance of gender, and both scholars contributed the following: Judith Butler and Joan Scott. Feminists theorize the political. (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

5. This type of inquiry can look at history as in Aziza Al-Hibri's

essay on the sources of Arab female oppression, "A study of Islamic herstory. Or how did we get into this mess?" *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5, No. 2, (1982).

6. John Esposito. *Women in Muslim family law* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982). Mona Zulficar, *al-Mar'ah al-Misriyya fi 'alam mutaghiir* (Cairo: Rasa'il al-Nid'a al-Jadid, n.d.); Sherifa Zuhur, "The mixed impact of feminist struggles in Egypt during the 1990s." *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 2001); Diane Singerman and Hoda Hoodfar, eds. *Development, change and gender in Cairo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Fauzi Najjar. "Egypt's laws of personal status." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 10, 3, (1988), Andrea Rugh, *Family in contemporary Egypt*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984); Essam Fawzy, "Muslim personal status law in Egypt: the current situation and possibilities of reform through internal initiatives," in Lynn Welchman, ed. *Women's rights and Islamic family law: perspectives on reform* (London: Zed Books, 2004). Nimat Guenena and Nadia Wassef, *Unfulfilled promises: women's rights in Egypt*. (New York: Population Council, 1999); Diana Digges, "Circumcisors circumvent the law." *Cairo Times*, Vol. 2, Issue 12 (6-19 August 1999); Mona Abaza, "Perceptions of urfi marriage in the Egyptian press" *ISIM Newsletter* [20-21] (March, 2001).

7. Nadia El-Cheikh, "The 1998 proposed civil marriage law in Lebanon: the reaction of the Muslim communities," in *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law*, Vol. 5, (1998-9), pp. 147-161; Sherifa Zuhur, "Empowering women or dislodging sectarianism?: Civil marriage in Lebanon." *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2002); Statement of the Higher Shar'› Muslim Council, In rejection of the optional status law (n.d.); Second periodic reports of states parties due in 1988: Lebanon. November 22, 1996. CCPR/C/42/Add.14. (State Party Report). Human Rights Committee. Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties under Article 40 of the Covenant Addendum. LEBANON 1/2, 6 (June 1996); Ghada Khouri. "Caught in the middle: women in Lebanon." *Women's International Net*. Issue 13A, (September 1998).

8. Sherifa Zuhur, "Voices and silences: problems in the study of women, Islamism, and Islamization" Paper presented to the Al-Falah Conference on Women in Islamic Societies, University of California, Berkeley, (Nov. 16, 2001).

9. Also see Sherifa Zuhur, "Women and empowerment in the Arab world." *Arab Studies Quarterly* Special Issue. Social work in the Arab world. Vol. 25, No. 3, 2003 and in Sherifa Zuhur, *The Middle East: politics, history and neonationalism* (Carlisle: Institute of Middle Eastern, Islamic and Diasporic Studies, 2005) available through Ingram.

10. Nawal Saadawi, "Circumcision of girls" in Saadawi, *The hidden face of Eve: women in the Arab world.* (in English, London: Zed, 1980; and Boston: Beacon, 1982) pp. 33-43; Nadia Wassef, *Da kan zaman* (Cairo: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 1998); Janice Boddy, "Womb as oasis: the symbolic context of Pharaonic circumcision in rural northern Sudan" in Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo, eds. *The gender sexuality reader: culture, history, political economy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 309-324.

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