

A History of the Development of Women's Education in the Arab World

The essence of education for women in the Arab world was not conceived until the nineteenth century (1). The first and most intensive development took place in the fertile crescent or what is known as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. Development in the Gulf countries came much later.

The inferior status of women at the turn of the century was inherited from a long period of cultural and political stagnation. Women's status was characterized by restriction to the home, segregation of the sexes, male dominance and religious interpretations. Hence, these role definitions hindered and slowed social assimilation of the importance of education for women and consequently, their level of enrollment.

However, the socio-political and geo-political changes which came with the fall of the occupying Ottoman Empire produced strong internal and external currents for change, namely an Arab awakening and the establishment of schools by Western missionaries.

The internal factor, an Arab awakening, had two driving forces, the intellectual and the political, both helping to bring about change in Arab attitudes towards the status and education of women (2). Reputed scholars and intellectuals calling for change offered ideologies and themes for women's rights to education, which varied in degree of liberation yet continued to reinforce male patriarchy. For instance, Ahmad Fares Al-Shidiaq called for women's liberation from illiteracy only. In his book, *Al-Saq Qabl Al-Saq* in 1855, he emphasized that women should become literate in order to read magazines and teach their children, warning against higher education because it would only improve women's inherent manipulative and cunning skills against

men.(3) Other views were less discriminating. Thus, Abdel Rahman Al-Kawkabi, a reputed advocate of freedom spoke of women's education as an essential element for social and cultural development. He related degradation of values and social behavior to the persistence of ignorance among women. Al-Kawkabi emphasized quality and value of education for women rather than basic literacy. Hence, to illustrate his point, he said that half of society acquired profound knowledge and wisdom from Prophet Mohamad's Wife in-depth education; whereas, the erotic and dubious poetry of females with lower educational background have only reinforced men's fears of allowing women to seek an education. Another scholar openly held men responsible for women's illiteracy and ignorance. Asaad Dagher said that men should remove the veil from their own ignorance before removing it from the head of a woman; and Arab men must admit that her education and knowledge are more important than her beauty.(4)

The influence of early Christian and Western missionaries on Arab education and society was an external factor influencing change. Modest educational contacts with the West caused the opening of a number of schools in the fertile crescent(5), which surpassed Egypt in educating its women. The first school for girls was founded in Beirut in 1826 by American missionaries, i.e. the wives of Father Thomas and Father Dodge, respectively. However, it was still uncommon for girls to go to school making the number of students very minimal. After founding a second school for girls in 1834, by Father Dodge's wife, the number of female students slowly rose from 6 to 40 in 1836. By 1946, the number of female students in the fertile crescent as a whole was still 144.(6). In 1860, the National Ottoman Islamic School was founded bringing about the enrollment of Muslims girls for the first time. The first nursing school of the Syrian College in Beirut was founded in 1908 graduating nine females in 1911.

In Egypt, the first public school for girls was founded in 1873, and in 1908, there were 30, 306 female students in Egyptian schools, representing

0.5% of the population. Furthermore, an additional 8, 545 foreign female students, whose parents (from Greece, Italy, England, France, Sweden and Germany) were residents of Egypt, enrolled in Egyptian schools.

Higher Education

Arab universities have a long history of accomplishments going back to the ninth and tenth century and the introduction of Islam. In the beginning they were mostly part of mosques and religious studies was the core of instruction (7) The twentieth century witnessed the establishment of colleges by missionaries, and National universities in Khartoum and Undurman (Sudan), Baghdad (Iraq), Rabat (Morocco), and Cairo in Egypt.(8)

At the time, however, the severely restricting social traditions did not allow for women's admission to these institutions of higher learning. Moreover, women candidates were so few that the question did not arise of providing separate colleges for them.(9) The only alternative was to study abroad, which was perilous and unlikely.

By 1920, women were at last able to venture into higher institutions in the Arab countries. The first university which opened its doors to women was the American University of Beirut. It did so hesitantly because it was reluctant to arouse public disapproval on a matter related to long-standing social traditions. The University of St. Joseph, also in Beirut, allowed admission of females in 1920.

A major girl's college in the region was The Beirut College for Women (BCW) which was established in 1933. After World War II in 1949, it became a four year college. In 1950, BCW graduated its first fourteen seniors to receive the B.A. degree, and in 1955 permission to grant a Bachelor of Science Degree was given by the board.(10) The College became co-educational in 1969 and its name became Beirut University

College (BUC). BUC is a leading example of women in Academe in this part of the region. Heads of Departments, Professors, Directors and Scholars are largely women. Furthermore, it produced leading pioneers and successful women in society in the fields of art and others

The Arab Countries

Unlike private universities, state universities in the neighboring Arab countries, admitted women as a matter of course at first. Eventually women were admitted on the grounds that they were not denied by law. Consequently, in 1924-25, one year after the establishment of the Syrian University, the first woman was admitted to the College of Medicine; and one woman entered the College of Law in 1929. In Egypt, women students first entered the Egyptian University in 1929-30. Similarly, in Iraq, the first woman was enrolled in 1930. It was noted that in Iraq, which had limited contact with the West, girl's education made a late start. **With respect to the other regions in the Arab world, women's access to higher education followed a similar pattern, but had a much later start related to the stages of national development and the degree of contact with the West. In general, the beginning of local higher education for women occurred in the 1940s and 1950s in the North African States, and in the 1960s and 1970s in the Arabian Peninsula or Gulf area.**(11).

Nowadays, women's access to universities is assured. In the past, higher education was seen as cultural refinement and exclusive for women of upper social classes who can afford tuition fees (12). Nowadays it is considered a necessity. In most parts of the Arab World, higher education is no longer strictly related to social status, but a necessity for the female as it is for the male. Sex segregation on campus still exists, mostly in the Gulf area, but is slowly decreasing. Women are tackling a variety of fields of study ranging from the most traditional such as teaching and

humanities to medicine, law, engineering and others. The female/male enrollment ratio in most of the universities in the Arab world ranges from twenty five percent in the late 1970s (13) to an approximate fifty percent estimate (14)

(1) Samir Abdo, *Al-Mara' wa Al-Taalim*, (Women and Education), *Al-Mara' bain Al-Takhaluf wa Al-Tahharor* (The Arab Woman between Stagnation and Liberation), Beirut, Dar Al-Afaq Al-Jadidah, 1980.

(2) Edith A.S. Hanania, *Access of Arab Women to Higher Education*, *Arab Women and Education*, Beirut, Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1980, p. 19.

(3) Abdo, *Ibid*.

(4) Abdo, *Ibid*.

(5) Hanania, *Ibid*, p. 19.

(6) Abdo, *Ibid*.

(7) Jarrar, S. and Byron Massialas, *Arab Education in Transition: A Source Book*, New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1991, p. 48.

(8) *Ibid*.

(9) Hanania, *Ibid*, p. 24.

(10) Marie Aziz Sabri, *Pioneering Profiles*, Beirut University College, Beirut: Khayat Book & Publishing Co. S.A.L., 1967.

(11) Hanania, *Ibid*, p. 28.

(12) Abdo, *Ibid*, p. 57.

(13) Jarrar and Massialas, *Ibid*

(14) "The Effects of the War on University Education of Lebanese Females", based on a research study by Dr. Aisha Harb Zureik with the same title and written in Arabic, *Al-Raida*, Winter 1991, Vol. IX, No 52. p.4.