Women and Education in Some Arab Countries

Literature Review

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Education of females is still a topic of interest in many countries, for despite the decrease in illiteracy rates and the rise in education levels in developing countries, there is still much to hope for. I will attempt, in this article, to shed light on female education in three countries of the Middle East region, notably Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The three countries represent different models and approaches to female education: Egypt is at present known for its secular outlook at education after the revolution of 1952 and the gradual integration of women into higher education and the labor force; Saudi Arabia has always had and continues to have a religion based approach towards female education, emphasizing strict separation between males and females; Iran, through the Revolution has come to develop a new outlook at female education, embracing both strict religious Islamic values and involvement of women in education and public life.

Egypt: the secular character of education and the systemic reforms

Education in Egypt dates back to the early days of settlement in the Nile Valley in 3110 B.C. At that time, education was confined to the clergy and a few of the fortunate elite. In the mid seventh century AD, education was introduced to the population in a formal manner. Under the Quranic system, the "kutab" (writers) or Quranic schools and the "Madrassa" (school) were the only educational institutions. Under this system, women were almost entirely excluded from education in schools. Exceptions existed only when wealthy families provided private tuition for their daughters at home; but even then, females were restricted to ethical aspects of education only.

Mohamad Ali, the founder of a dynasty in Egypt that ruled until the "Free Officers' Revolution" of 1952, established a public and secular educational system in the country. This system, motivated by Mohamad Ali's need for a modern army, was parallel to the traditional religious-based system. Educational reform in favor of girls took a positive turn in 1923 when Egypt adopted its First Constitution. One of its articles called for free and compulsory education for all Egyptians, male and female, in public schools, starting at the age of seven for a five-year cycle.

The 1952 revolution brought about a new philosophy and approach to education. The revolutionary regime preached uniformity, equity, equal opportunity, and access for all at all levels of education. The prevalent type of schools at that time was the public elementary school. In 1956, the Constitution of Egypt stipulated in article 51: "Education is free and compulsory at the elementary cycle in all public schools". The impact of religion however continued to exist, since the new Constitution of 1971 stated that "Religious education is a basic course in the general curricula". In 1980, the amendment of the Constitution guaranteed equality of educational opportunity for all Egyptians by stipulating education to be free at all levels.

The successive modifications of the Constitution and the changing attitudes towards education after the Revolution of 1952 reflected positively on illiteracy rates. Thus, while 61.8% of Egypt's population aged 15 years and above were illiterate in 1976, this rate dropped to 51.6% in 1990. Among females, illiteracy dropped by 17.2% from 77.6% in 1976 to 66.2% in 1990.

Not only did illiteracy rates drop in general and among females in particular, but women's educational achievements at various levels improved as well. Table 2 represents a comparison of educational levels among Egyptian females from 1980 to 1990.

Hence, the improvement in female education in Egypt was not only noted in terms of decrease in illiteracy rates, but rather

an improvement in female education at all levels as shown in table 2.

The improvement in female education is not only seen in terms of general trends, i.e. higher numbers of educated females, but also in the embracing of different specialties by females, especially those not traditionally associated with women. Thus, the specialties of commerce and business administration, natural sciences, math and computer, engineering and agriculture that have been considered traditionally male-dominated fields included in 1990 quite a significant proportion of females as can be seen in table 3.

Thus, it can be concluded that in the case of Egypt, the secular and compulsory character of education have had a positive impact on female education. The secular character guaranteed that both males and females alike are entitled for education, while the compulsory character has implied gender equality with no favoritism to males. The amelioration in female education in Egypt can be considered as being a by-product or an integral part of the reform of the educational system as a whole, that came out as a result of the 1952 Revolution and its aftermath.

Saudi Arabia: the impact of the religious element and the continuation of traditional values.

In Saudi Arabia, all aspects of social life are imbued with a religious element. Before 1960, there was no public formal education for women in the country. Some of the rich families educated their daughters at home by private tutors, while the daughters of poorer families could attend informal 'kutab' schools where they were taught to read the Quran by a blind religious man 'motawa" or a religious woman 'motawa'a'; yet the majority of girls did not receive any formal education at all apart from what they learned at

Table 1 Illiterate population aged above 15 years in Egypt

Year	Illiterate, total	Illiterate, male	Illiterate, female
1976	61.8%	46.4%	77.6%
1986	51.7%	36.4%	68.6%
1990	51.6%	37.1%	66.2%

Table 2 Gross school enrollment ratios in Egypt 1980, 1985, 1990

Year	First Level			Second Level			Third Level		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1976	78%	90%	65%	54%	66%	41%	67%	79%	54%
1985	91%	100%	82%	66%	77%	54%	79%	89%	69%
1990	101%	109%	93%	81%	90%	73%	91%	100%	83%

Table 3 Students by field of study in Egypt in 1990

Field of study	Total, Number	Females, Number	Percentage, Females
Education	80,591	37,783	46.9%
Humanities and Religion	83,996	39,250	46.7%
Fine and Applied Arts	7,313	3,215	43.9
Law	87,464	17,891	20.4%
Social and Behavioral Sciences	5,397	2,326	43%
Commerce and Business Administration	146,910	44,150	30%
Mass Communication	1,727	926	53.6%
Home Economics	2,273	1,709	75.2%
Service trades	1,099	724	65.8%
Natural Science	26,770	8,838	33%
Math and Computer	1,095	294	26.8%
Medical-Health Related	53,465	21,093	39.4%
Engineering	53,726	6,866	12.8%
Agriculture	42,386	13,696	32.3%

home. It is to note however that in 1941, pilgrims who had come to Mecca from Indonesia and Malawi opened the first private school for girls.

The subject of females' education was addressed for the first time in the public arena by King Saud in a formal speech given in 1959. This was triggered by two main phenomena that had been taking place over the preceding two decades: the first was the establishment of a number of private schools by pilgrims who had come from Africa, and the second was the increasing number of Saudi men who were marrying foreign females, because they felt that Saudi females were not educated enough and hence were not appropriate spouses for them. In his speech, King Saud declared that the more open attitude towards female education was the result of the religious men 'ulama's' desire to open schools to teach girls the science of Islamic religion from the Quran, as well as 'fuqh' (religious instruction) and other sciences that are in line with Islamic religious beliefs, such as home management, home economics and child rearing. A committee of important 'ulama' was formed to organize schools for girls, develop the program and oversee its implementation.

The committee was called the General Presidency of Girls' Education. It assumed and still bears, to the present time, the responsibility for the education of girls at all levels with the exception of university education. Consequently, the first four public schools for girls were opened in 1964. In the same year, the first secondary school was also opened with the goal of preparing girls for their domestic roles as wives and mothers and also for university studies.

However, traditional values related to gender continued to prevail and were disseminated in schools. Thus, women's freedom in countries of the West was not pictured as being positive elements. Moreover, differences continued to exist between male and female curricula: hence, physical education and sports were replaced, for girls, by home economics and embroidery.

The first women's college was opened in 1970. Its students had completed secondary education and were interested in becoming teachers. Universities opened their doors to females only after 1975.

As a result of the promotion of female education in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s and 1970s and the increasing number of schools, enrollment ratios for females at first, second and third levels increased significantly from 1980 to 1990 as shown in table 4. Yet, in terms of the educational system, men and women remain segregated in the schools and in universities. Women do not frequent the same libraries or laboratories as men. In universities, they are mostly women professors while male professors may only lecture through the medium of a closed circuit television. This method is, however, negatively evaluated by most Saudi female students because it does not offer free communication nor does it leave room for open group discussions.

The adoption of female education at large scale in Saudi Arabia did not imply a full-fledged change in the educational status of women. Traditional values continued to prevail and permeate all aspects of Saudi life. The case of Saudi Arabia represents an illustration of the non-systemic changes towards female education, one in which educational reform did not form part of the reform of the social system as a whole.

Iran

Women in Iran of the Shah had acquired quite high levels of education. The Revolution of 1978, that called for religious

Table 4 **Gross school enrollment ratio in Saudi Arabia 1980, 1985, 1990**

Year	First Level			Second Level			Third Level		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1980	63%	75%	50%	30%	37%	23%	7.3%	8.8%	5.0%
1985	67%	74%	59%	41%	49%	32%	56%	64%	48%
1990	77%	82%	72%	46%	51%	41%	63%	68%	58%

revivalism and traditional values, was expected by many to leave negative repercussions on female education in Iran. The basic point behind this argument is that secularism brings about many ameliorations in the status of women while it is believed that a system that relies on sacred values, such as that of post-revolutionary Iran, limits the aspirations of women. On the other hand, many proponents of the Revolution in Iran claim that this was not the case.

In an article entitled " Women in Iran: the Revolutionary Ebb and Flow", Nesta Ramazani, argues that in post-revolutionary Iran, women "were targeted as an important social force."

In the early years of the Revolution, segregation between males and females was the common practice in universities. Women were banned from certain fields of study. However, with the reformist government of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, progressive measures were taken to "improve the status of women" as Ramazani says.

In 1988, Rafsanjani announced that in Islam, "there are no barriers to the education of women in any field". The spiritual leader Ali Khamenehi argued in 1991 that an "Islamic environment cannot tolerate even one illiterate person." Zahra Mostafari, the daughter of Ayatollah Khomeini, who has a Ph.D. in philosophy argues that her father was a strong advocate of female education. Great efforts were exerted under the leadership of Zahra Rahnavard, a university professor and writer who strongly defends Islamic reform, to open the doors of many specialities to women. At present, women in universities are allowed to major in nineteen academic disciplines. Females are admitted to dentistry, physiotherapy, audiology, statistics, radiology and radiotherapy. Yet, disciplines such as engineering and agriculture remain to a large extent undesirable for women. In addition to opening up the different disciplines to women, it is worth noting that in 1992, 42% of Iran's university graduates were females and one third of them had doctoral degrees.

The involvement in religion and religious teaching is generally classified in the public field, thus closer to males. In Iran, women today have access to and are more involved in religious education. Thus, in the past, female 'mujtahids' (religious scholars) and 'qaris' (reciters of the Quran) were very limited occupations among female, restricted mostly to certain social categories such as daughters of clerics, tutored at home by their fathers. Post-revolutionary Iran witnessed the establishment of a 'hozzeh-ye Islami,' a higher theological school, to train women in theology and jurisprudence, and hence the creation of new opportunities for women from many backgrounds to study the Quran and Islamic law.

1- Ramazani, Nesta. (1993). Women in Iran: the Revolutionary Ebb and Flow. **Middle East Journal** 47: 409-428.
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3- Saad Al Rawaf, Haya and Simmons Cyril. (1991). The Education of Women in Saudi Arabia. **Comparative Education** 27: 287-295.
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Table 4 **Students by field of study in Iran in 1990**

Field of study	Total, Number	Females, Number	Percentage, Females
Education science	52,552	15,217	28.9%
Humanities and Religion	11,373	4,945	43.5%
Fine and Applied Arts	2,058	963	46.8%
Law	3,430	559	16.3%
Social and Behavioral Sciences	14,054	5,577	39.7%
Commerce and Business Administration	5,748	1,793	31.2
Mass Communication	860	387	45%
Home Economics	604	450	74.5%
Service trades	19	9	47.4%
Natural Science	11,283	4,450	39.4%
Math and Computer	5,709	1,861	28.9%
Medical-Health Related	31,262	13,863	44.3%
Engineering	36,967	1,861	5%
Architecture	2,,,09	521	25.8%
Trade, Craft, Industry	551	160	29%
Transport	50	1	2%
Agriculture	5,751	373	6.1%