



## **Gauging the Gender Divide in the Middle East's Educational System**

### **Causes, Concerns, and the Impetus for Change**

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#### **A Review Essay**

One child, one teacher, one pen and one book can change the world. Education is the only solution. Education First (Malala Yousafzai to the United Nations Youth Assembly on July 12, 2013).

Malala Yousafzai's words echo the call of United Nations Millennium Development Goal 2A to achieve universal primary education by ensuring that, by 2015, children everywhere can complete a full course of primary schooling. This call for universal primary education is most imperative in the Middle East. From the doorsteps of Anatolia to the river communities in the Nile Delta and into the valleys of the Zagros Mountains, young girls have diminished prospects to study and lower chances to develop careers because of economic, legal, and social barriers to education. The disparity in educational opportunities and prospects for women and girls in the Middle East depicts a frustrating trend in schools and colleges, but it leads to greater societal problems with enormous economic, legal, and sociopolitical consequences. The Global Fund for Muslim Women reports that while Muslims constitute 25 percent of the world's population, Muslim nations contribute only 11.2 percent to the Global GDP. Data from the World Economic Forum and the United Nations suggests that much of this gap can be attributed to gender inequality despite Islamic teachings that support gender symmetry and equality of all people. While the educational system in the modern Middle East is dilapidated and anemic compared to similarly situated developing countries in parts of Latin America and East Asia, this essay asserts that the single-largest impediment to future regional prosperity in the Middle East is the lack of

female education. National and local public policymakers identify the problem of female education, but do not recognize its severity except at the level of posturing that the problem exists. I will review four recent books to provide insight into how contemporary public policy and legal regimes can be reworked to favor female education in the Middle East.

By discouraging and, in more serious cases, forbidding women and girls from seeking secondary and post-secondary education, rulers and policymakers are exacerbating their already weak and volatile economies. If females had the opportunities to seek education at all levels and the incentives to pursue careers in diverse industries, they would be able to make economic contributions to their families and communities. The International Labour Organization's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) prepared a report on *Gender, Education, and Child Labour in Egypt* (Abu Ghazaleh) that indicates that girls were viewed as "an economic liability, not only because of a parent's personal beliefs but because the market provides few employment opportunities for women." The report further states: "Parents are also often reluctant to send their girls to school because the future benefits are not equal to the present service the child provides at home to replace her mother, who can then go out to work." When families have to choose between educating their daughters and their sons, the sons' schooling has priority. Higher tuition costs have impeded access to education for all children, but families opt to educate sons over daughters, creating a tremendous gender gap in enrollment.

### **Egypt on the Brink**

In *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak*, Tarek Osman delves into the issues of educational disparity among men and women and the results of high unemployment rates on the national scale. Osman, a banker by profession, examines the consequences of the failures of Egypt's educational system from a societal as well as an economic point of view. The Egyptian constitution stipulates that education is a right granted by the State and that all Egyptians are entitled to free education at all levels regardless of gender, geographic or socio-economic status. Education laws issued in 1981 and revised in 1988 govern the implementation of this constitutional right.<sup>1</sup> Osman argues that even though elementary education is mandatory in Egypt and figures illustrate that in 2008 more than 19 million Egyptians between the ages of six and eighteen, representing around 90 percent of all school-age children, enrolled in the pre-university education system, "the system as a whole is in trouble, with falling enrollments, poor teacher-student ratios and persistent gender inequality" (205). Osman notes that "[a]ctual school enrollments in rural areas often fall below 50 per cent of all school-age children. School drop-outs, especially in Egypt's poorest regions (mainly Al-Saeed) or the rougher neighborhoods of Cairo and Alexandria, reach 20-25 per cent of all enrolment figures" (205). Among the educational statistics that Osman provides, the most telling is that enrollment rates of girls are "typically around 20 per cent lower than those of boys, and drop-out ratios are higher" (205). Even though the overall

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<sup>1</sup> The formal education system in Egypt consists of two pre-university phases: the compulsory phase of basic education (six years of primary and three years of preparatory) followed by three years of non-compulsory secondary education. Secondary education is divided into general and vocational secondary (commercial, industrial, agrarian). In parallel to the general education system, both public and private, is a religious education system introduced and supervised by Al-Azhar. This system maintains the same three phases.

educational outlook in Egypt is bleak, the decreased enrollment of girls in schools worsens the educational forecast in Egypt.

Infrastructure problems aggravate Egypt's educational woes with the class size of most public schools ranging from 60 to 70 students in a single class (205). The average teacher-student ratio is around one to fifty. Osman describes the lack of infrastructure: "Playgrounds, let alone music, art rooms or laboratories, are a rarity. English is a part of the curriculum in secondary stages, but the quality of teaching and students' command of the language leave much to be desired" (205). Osman remains unimpressed by increasing rates of literacy in Egypt because of the quality of education that he has observed:

At university level, the links to international centres of excellence and innovation are paltry; there is a major retreat in research and development, a thriving clandestine trade class notes and examination essays and little emphasis on independent knowledge of learning as opposed to passing the exams and receiving a degree.

These processes – a change in the country's value system, detachment from society, the gap between generations, the weakening of Egyptian culture, deterioration in the educational system and the damage to the most sacred of the tenants of Egyptianism, the land – have altered in Egyptians' link to each other and their country (205).

Osman is mindful of the sense of regression in the Egyptian psyche. He mentions that the literacy rates of the population in 2007 for the general population were 32 percent and for women 42 percent (5). This statistic is noteworthy because it shows that literacy among women is higher, but the opportunities for women to seek higher education and further career opportunities are not available.

Religion in Egypt, like much of the Middle East, hinges on Islamist ideology. On the rise of Wahhabism, Osman argues that "[t]he change can be measured in the increase in the proportion of women in Egypt wearing the veil, from less than 30 per cent to more than 65 per cent in two decades; by the early 1990s, the veil was established as the dress code on the Egyptian street rather than as an occasional choice" (80). Osman correlates the heightened religiosity in Egypt during the reign of President Hosni Mubarak to a resurgence of traditional heterodox gender dynamics. Osman may be underestimating the ability of women to make their own decisions regarding the donning of the veil. Women under authoritarian regimes are subjected to greater threats to their safety and personal well-being. The veil is a way for them to assert their femininity and maintain their security. So while there was "a general shift in the socially preferred pattern of gender roles, with the return to an emphasis on men's public role and women's domesticity," women in modern Egypt were exposed to liberal and conservative thoughts, and often chose tradition over modernity with respect to dress.

During the Mubarak era, "[a] vaguely defined liberalism became the regime's cultural doctrine: under its umbrella gathered active promotion of women's rights, somewhat more daring cultural products, . . . a revival of the interest of pharaonic Egypt and more engagement with the West (especially Europe)" (138). The increased visibility of the veil in

Egypt may also have been rooted in this selective form of liberalism that hinged more on popular culture than increased opportunities for women. Osman proposes that “the liberal experiments, and especially its focus on Europeanizing society, could have been perceived as an attempt to separate Egyptian society from its historic and cultural heritages” (35). However, “the progressive schools of thought that had evolved inside of Al-Azhar (or the Islamic movement in general) – from Al-Tahtawi to Mohamed Abdou to Al-Akkad – were ammunition against such an argument” (35). Osman argues that the Muslim Brotherhood “seemed mired in a dictatorial, backward-looking structure and mindset” (35). Women often became pawns in these politico-religious movements, and the veil was a way to gauge their acceptance or subservience to the rise of Islamism.

Meanwhile, a number of factors were brewing the seeds of discontent in Mubarak's Egypt, which made way for the 2011 and 2013 regime changes. The divide among the rich and poor grew deeper as geographically the peasant and elite classes grew closer. Osman points to the “increasing number of schools in the Nile Delta and Al-Saeed, the growth in print media, and the rising penetration of radio inspired thousands of young peasants to discard rural life and land cultivation and pursue secondary education . . . as a route to more prestigious careers in law, business, teaching and the budding public service” (37-38). This social shift created a greater awareness of rights and demands for improved working conditions (38). At the same time, the upward social mobilization of the *fellahin* class likely created momentum for further inroads in the area of women's rights and access to education. Egyptians were aware of their country's regression over the past four decades (204). When the Mubarak regime “stuck to notions of ‘Egyptian leadership and headship,’ the more the realities of daily life confirmed the deterioration” (204). Egyptians were able to sense their own decline as a country:

Blame flew everywhere, from the mismanagement and corruption of successive governments to the dysfunctional system, to the regime's shady governance, to the decline in society's values. Within the many morbid symptoms of the fracturing of the social order and national regression, a shared feeling emerged: that “something had gone wrong” (*fee haga ghalat*) in the society and values, and in the heritage available to the young, rising generation (204).

The county's congestion and rising population caused competition for already scarce resources to skyrocket. This stress was felt most by women. For example, in Cairo's City of the Dead, an area of more than 8 square kilometers, “4 million poor Cairenes live and work in a crowded grid of tombs and mausoleums, forming a quasi-independent community” (202). Children in this community have little or no access to education or basic sanitation (202). As mentioned earlier, when families have to decide who to send to school, it is often the daughters who are left to stay home and attend to domestic tasks. Egypt's soaring population also contributes to the stressors on women's lives because they are responsible for childbearing and rearing. Education of females takes a backseat to general welfare and survival in communities where community resources are seriously limited.

The near doubling of the Egyptian population since the 1970s has turned the Egyptian demographic structure into a pyramid – extremely narrow at the

top and enormously wide at the bottom, with very limited conduits between the few millions in their fifties, sixties and seventies and the 45 million-plus under thirty-five years of age. The fading generation is coming off with it the classic compositions of the Egyptian character in the reservoir of the Egyptian personality, while the incoming increasingly dominant generation is hardly receiving any cultural heritage. The new generation never fought (or witnessed) a war; never lived with the national project; grew up at a time in which the country was undergoing surgical transformation (the move from Nasserite secular, socialist Arab nationalism to Islamism, and later capitalism, through Sadat's *al-infatāh*). It was a tense period. The new generation lived through an almost open war between the state and groups bent not only on overthrowing the regime, but on transforming the entire society (203).

Women bear the brunt and burden of Egypt's development project, but the transformation of the entire society should begin with the education and empowerment of Egypt's women and girls. The new generation is aware of the disparity of opportunities for women and girls, but whether or not it places this issue on the agenda and makes it a priority will determine how rapidly and successfully Egypt will advance in the future. Taboos still persist in Egyptian society; pregnancy and HIV/AIDS should be health imperatives instead of moral issues. The educational empowerment of Egyptian women should be accomplished hand-in-hand with improved access to healthcare.

Osman's *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak* explores the dynamics of education and employment prospects and poverty. However, the book does not emphasize the matter of child labor or explain the failures of female education aside from general issues related to poverty and the rise of Islamism. Ending child labor in Egypt requires enhanced access and accessibility to education for Egyptian children at all levels of the social strata. Egypt's inadequate public education system reduces incentives for children to remain in school. For girls, the physical and emotional environments of schools are key factors; girls tend to be more comfortable and learn better in schools that offer privacy and security. According to the International Labour Organization, "[e]motionally oppressive school environments can offend the sensibilities of children, particularly girls, and cause them to develop an aversion to school and drop out. Egyptian schools are not known for good facilities, let alone girl-friendly ones (for example, clean, protected bathrooms)." While this discussion is beyond the scope of Osman's work, it is helpful in addressing issues of female education on the regional level.

### Modern Iran

Nikkie R. Keddie in *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* explores the unequal educational opportunities for women in Iran. Keddie shows that the movement for female emancipation and education existed prior to 1925, and asserts that Reza Shah's modernization program "relaxed somewhat the social restrictions on women, and encouraged the adoption of European dress and manners at home, although the government moved slowly in this manner in the 1920s" (92). Keddie focuses on the changes in modern dress during the early years of Reza Shah's rule by drawing attention to the use of the chador and face veil among women. She says that one of the most significant changes during the

Reza Shah regime was the partial emancipation of Iranian women (100). Keddie attributed the “growing women’s movement . . . and the westernization of middle- and upper-class life, as well as woman’s entrance into factory work, teaching, and nursing,” to the reduced restrictions on women’s lives (100). However, she notes that “Reza Shah’s absolutist approach to changing woman’s dress” was problematic even though Reza Shah viewed this change as “a hallmark of national modernization” (100). These mandatory changes in women’s dress were drastic and backfired in many ways, leading to the Shah’s unpopularity among conservative segments of the population: “Some women saw this as an equivalent of going out naked and refused to leave their homes, as gendarmes sometimes tore chadors from women on the streets” (100).

The emphasis on women’s dress and appearance cannot be overestimated in its impact on female education. The veil is equated with the downtrodden status of women. Religious families removed their daughters from schools when faced with the forced removal of the veil (100). Houchang Chehabi observes that even though educational opportunities for women improved under Reza Shah, the attempts to westernize dress codes for men and women “deepened another cleavage in Iranian society i.e. that between westernizers . . . and the rest of society, which resented the intrusion in their private lives” (quoted in Keddie: 100). Keddie says “the spread of male and female secular education and emphasis in a variety of men’s and women’s writings and activities on modern, rather than ulama-endorsed ideas, began to encourage new growth attitudes regarding women” (92). Overall, the Reza Shah regime encouraged female education (100). Despite these strides, girls lagged behind because three times as many boys received an education than girls.

Whether westernization was forced or voluntary, the ramifications of westernization played a pivotal role in the 1979 Iranian revolution. Keddie writes that the émigré newspapers tackled issues of corruption and hypocrisy by ulama and state officials as well as “the veiling, seclusion, and enforced ignorance of women” (179). The mass media and new forms of prose literature sought inspiration in Western models and created lively and enlightened discussions among Iranians (179). Women’s participation in student movements was crucial but secondary to that of men who were the primary leaders in such movements (229). Keddie explains the tensions with the feminist and revolutionary movements based on attempts at modernization:

Women were important among the guerrillas even before 1977, and a number were jailed or died in shootouts. Since women’s organizations had been homogenized into the official Iranian Women’s Organization, women strongly opposed to the regime tended to shun such organizations, and indeed generally avoided wholly feminist causes, which they mostly saw as divisive at a time when the main aim was to overthrow the Shah and his regime. As in many revolutionary movements, many politically conscious women assumed that their participation in struggle and the victory of their cause would give to women what they desired. It should also be realized that many woman did not consciously feel oppressed as woman, and showed no interest in women’s causes. Therefore, the moves of the Shah’s regime to modernize women’s dress, education, and work patterns, which in any case mainly affected middle and upper class woman were not necessarily . . . felt

by the majority of Iran's women . . . Women's participation in politics during and after the revolution was multiclass and gave many women a new sense of pride at their ability to organize, take action in the public sphere, and sometimes risked their lives (229).

This passage illustrates the political struggles along with political apathy of Iranian women. The aspirations of women to be empowered did not inspire all women to mobilize and seek out the classical feminist notions of modernity. Women are not a monolithic group who sway one way or another on issues related to education, modernity, religion and secularism. Yet it is important to realize that women have had a disadvantage in education regardless of class and religiosity. This inherent educational inequality festered deep-seeded social, political, and economic problems in Iran.

Keddie found the readopting of Muslim dress among some university students in the mid-1970's an "ironic phenomenon" (229). Attempts to unite against the regime brought out gender issues in the university setting. Demonstrations for segregated dining halls and single-sex classes and pressure to wear the chador reflected the conservative tendencies of the student movement leading up to the 1979 Revolution (230). This attitude contrasts with the actions by university officials who denied chadored women access to courses and examinations on account of their dress (230). From the western vantage point, the issue of the veil may seem trivial, but it demonstrates discontent for and against the veil. However, it is the women who suffer because they are marginalized on account of their dress. Issues surrounding the veil and concepts of Muslim womanhood heighten friction in the educational arena.

The educational improvements for women set in motion by Reza Shah would later disrupt Iran's ruling political system. Women were active in political demonstrations and activities. Keddie highlights the involvement of "chadored bazaar women, who came out usually in separate ranks to participate in the mourning processions, where they had always been, but where their presence took on a new political meaning" (230). Keddie's constant references to the chador and veil are indicative of western perceptions of Muslim women. The veil was a lightning rod for debate and dissent against an authoritarian regime. Keddie's repeated remarks against the veil seek to free and liberate some women, but unintentionally marginalize others. This bias reflects how in the Muslim world the veil overshadows and complicates the issue of women's rights and alienates women in social, political, and educational sectors.

Iranian literature explores themes of female inequality from varying points of view. For example, the poetry of the Constitutional Revolution explores themes of the veiling of women and "the lack of education that cuts down women's contributions to society and harms their children's education, on their mistreatment by ignorant husbands, and on other aspects of their subordination" (230). Writers and activists lauded Reza Shah for the opening of schools and universities to girls and his unveiling of women as an outcome of their struggles (230). ("In the Pahlavi period there were a number of excellent women writers and essayists, as well as important women in other fields. Among the poets the two most outstanding were . . . Parvin E'tesami . . . and . . . Forugh Farrokhzad . . .") (230).

In the 1990's, women continued to struggle for their rights. Keddie says that "[t]he new reformist parliament had fewer women deputies than its predecessor, and many woman activists faced the familiar problem of their male colleagues urging them to postpone women's demands" (279). The reformist parliament passed several family laws that sought to restrict discrimination against women in marriage, divorce, and inheritance; however, the Guardian Council vetoed these laws. Khatami attempted to forward women's causes by "creat[ing] in each ministry a department to look out for women's interests and financ[ing] dozens of women's NGOs and involv[ing] them in the formulation of his five-year plan" (280).

In Iran, the consistent increase in female education and urbanization has led to declining birth rates which have, in turn, eased the burden on women to bring more women into the labor force. Keddie points out, though, that "the current large number of children and youths, along with a 'child-centered' trend also known elsewhere, of parents having to take children to special classes and activities and supervise their homework, had increased burdens on many middle class women" (296). Overall, modernization has created increased educational opportunities for women and girls in Iran.

### **Ataturk**

Educational inequality based on gender remains a major obstacle in the development process in Turkey. Trends toward modernization reveal increased secularism but traditional gender casting has inhibited women's educational and advancement opportunities overall. In *Ataturk: An Intellectual Biography*, M. Sukru Hanioglu examines issues of nationalism, self-determination, secularism, and democracy from the Kemalist perspective. Ataturk continues to be eulogized in Turkey and among members of the Turkish diaspora for developing and solidifying the Turkish national project. Ataturk's heroic military exploits and keen strategic acumen led to his exemplary management style. Kemalism, Hanioglu asserts, is neither a philosophy nor an ideology, but an aspiration, a vision. Ataturk deserves to be memorialized for saving Turkey from the imperialist hands of Britain. Ataturk also served as inspiration for other anti-colonial movements in the Middle East and in South Asia.

Where Ataturk arguably may have left his greatest mark was in the area of education and notably with respect to women. Despite the Islamic imperative to seek knowledge, literacy in Muslim societies is abysmal, especially among Turkey's largely rural population; women are seldom, if at all, educated. Among Turkey's urban and more elite circles, women, who are educated, may not participate in the society beyond achieving their post-secondary and university degrees. What is striking about Turkey's situation is that the country is of the most modern and progressive in the Middle East, but literacy rates among women are relatively low compared to Europe and North America. Despite strides for women during the Tanzimat reforms of the Ottoman period, the status of women and opportunities available to them remain low in Turkey.

Hanioglu's seminal work on Ataturk is, as the title indicates, an intellectual biography, but the narrative sheds considerable insight into Ataturk's influences that may have shaped his attitudes toward women. Ataturk promoted education and greater opportunity for women. He was not alone in his ideas about women having increased participation in public life. "Like others of his generation, Mustafa Kemal perceived westernization as a prerequisite



for creating a society founded on science. Some of the changes of the early Republican era included the participation of women in social life” (60). The radical element of Ataturk’s reforms “exceeded the expectations of the Ottoman Westernizers” (60-61). His refusal to accept engrained customs and traditions resulted in “a radically new set of norms, structures, and values” (61). Ataturk’s rise through the military ranks and his later political life was calculated. The social context that gave way to Ataturk is important to consider:

Although he was later idealized as a mythic harbinger of change, it is imperative to realize that Mustafa Kemal emerged from within a specific social milieu, one that limited the range of options open to any perspective revolutionary leader. The crucial point in the present context is that many of the radical ideas destined to become central planks and his reform program were widely held in intellectual circles at the turn of the century, and were expressed with increasing explicitness after the Young Turk Revolution (55).

The reforms Ataturk led in the legal, educational, and civil society opened new avenues of thought and civic engagement for women, especially in higher education. While this aspect of Ataturk’s reforms may appear western, they are actually very much in line with Muslim ideology of the respect accorded to women. The Turkish leader’s early schooling and childhood experiences shaped his ascription to modernity and the rule of law. The modernization of the educational system and turn away from religious indoctrination, which emphasized rote memorization and traditional Muslim practices, toward enlightened thinking, debate, and intellectual engagement echoed Ataturk’s own educational experience.

For example, in Ataturk’s hometown of Salonica, Hanioglu says that the ruling establishment “kept firm control over primary education” and “resisted any attempt to reform the elementary schools” (17). In this regard, elementary schools continued to reject change in the form of “modern methodologies, curricula, and even equipment, such as blackboards, desks, and maps” (17). Even if some private elementary schools were established, the majority of Muslim children attended traditional public schools (17). The Semsî Efendi School, which young Ataturk attended, engaged students in modern education practices and techniques (20). Ataturk’s “deep-seated predilection for new institutions and practices owed much to his years as one of a handful of students in the Empire who had their primary education at a private elementary school devoid of strong religious focus” (20).

Ataturk enjoyed relative prosperity in the middle class until his father’s untimely death when he was only seven (19). This life event was significant because Ataturk’s mother, Zubeyde, was widowed at a young age and bore the responsibility of raising her son on her own. This family dynamic gave Ataturk a greater respect for his mother as he observed her struggles as a single mother. His father’s death also prompted Ataturk to switch schools due to financial reasons. When his mother eventually remarried, Ataturk begrudgingly accepted another man in his mother’s life, but this remarriage also stirred in him an intense sense of rebellion and outrage and added a new dimension to Ataturk’s perception of women.

As a young man, Ataturk attended a military preparatory school, which had a modern curriculum, “though not radically so” (22). The military preparatory schools taught French, Arabic, and Persian along with mathematics, drawing, gymnastics, and some religious subjects (22). The strictness of military discipline was evidenced by the uniforms students

wore, the salutes students had to give to teachers, who were mostly low ranking officers, and the school's strict hierarch (22). The insistence on a rigid ranking system was also at play. Ataturk's mother cited her son's appointment as a class sergeant, a liaison between students in his class and the school administration, as a major accomplishment (22).

Ataturk's upbringing, schooling, and experiences growing up in the European provinces resulted in his "westward orientation as an adult" (25). Ataturk and his contemporaries "viewed life as a perennial tug-of-war between modernity and tradition" (25). I focus on these early years because they show the importance of education in Ataturk's life and vision. Hanioglu remarks that Ataturk "attempted one of the greatest societal transformations of modern times. Not only as a statesman, but also as a self-made thinker, he invested tremendous energy in preparing the intellectual groundwork for this momentous project" (194).

A part of the modern Turkish project regarded the status and appearance of women. Ataturk's reforms with respect to women occurred gradually over the course of many years because he was cognizant of the sensitivity of the matter, especially of the veil. Hanioglu comments that despite the traditional garb of leaders of the late Ottoman's women's movement, these leaders espoused modern ideas and proceeded in making substantial gender related demands. On the other hand, the republican woman pioneers wore western dress, two-piece dresses and fashionable hats. Despite the reforms and feminist changes, a substantial segment of the Turkish citizenry "remained fairly traditional" (213).

Ataturk proceeded with caution on changing the rights and roles of women in Turkish society. He was particularly concerned with the status and appearance of women. In 1926, the adoption of the modified Swiss Civil Code granted extensive rights to women and was followed by initiatives towards women's equality. The Turkish regime granted women's suffrage at the municipal level in 1930 and in 1934 at the national level – long before many Western nations. Along with these changes, the regime promoted an image of the new "republican women," who were educated, nationalistic, fashionable, professional, secular, and had fully internalized *l'esprit républicain* (209).

The regime raised the images of female role models, who acted like "mothers of the nation," not those who were espousing a feminist agenda or making gender-related demands (210). The emphasis placed on women's appearance cannot be overstated; modernity in Ataturk's Turkey was linked as much to how a woman appeared as to what she actually achieved. The regime supported the women's movement in Turkey as long as it embraced the country's new republican ideology and served the state without criticism.

Looking back, Hanioglu argues that the leaders of the Late Ottoman women's movement advanced modernist ideas and made substantial inroads toward gender equality. Ataturk's republican women pioneers expressed modernity in different ways. The regime disseminated its ideals for women through role models instead of legal measures, which were liable to arouse opposition. It is interesting to note that despite the regime's efforts and attempts to assuage traditional sensitivities, the actual numbers of educated, European-style women never amounted to a significant majority of the female population in Turkey. Turkish society remained – by and large – traditional. The sweeping changes did not create a critical mass of educated women in Turkey. While Turkey today may serve as a beacon for

modernization among Muslim-majority states, its rates of education for women are still not as high as other similarly-situated nations. The next two sections will look at reasons why the Middle East lags behind in female education.

### **Towards Gender Equality**

Valentine M. Moghadam notes in her United National Development Programme report how feminist Muslim scholars argue that “Islam has been interpreted in patriarchal and often misogynistic ways over the centuries (and especially in recent decades), that Sharia law has been misunderstood and misapplied, and that both the spirit and the letter of the Koran have been distorted” (14-15). Further, the Algerian philosopher Mohammed Arkoun argues that the Quran “has been ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary, and psychological contexts and then been continually recontextualized in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors” (quoted in Moghadam: 15). Moghadam addresses the issue of patriarchal readings of the Quran, but suggests that does not completely explain why the Middle East lags behind in female education compared to its developing world counterparts. Religion and centuries old cultural biases do not fully explain this disturbing trend of the poor educational system in the Middle East.

Lasting change tends to occur over long periods of time, but the more radical and swift changes in policy have also been remarkable:

Cultural and gender changes have come about partly through long-term structural processes such as industrialization, proletarianization, and urbanization, including the expansion of education and urban employment. But some of the most profound cultural changes and changes in gender relations have come about via revolutionary processes or state-led legal reforms, such as the Kemalist revolution in Turkey, the Nasser revolution in Egypt, the Bourguiba reform of family law in Tunisia, the Shah of Iran's White Revolution, the socialist revolution of the former PDRY, the social reforms of the former Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Apart from Iran's Islamic Revolution, which can be said to have initially resulted in cultural regression and legal setbacks for women, revolutions and legal reforms in the Middle East accorded women a wider range of rights and opportunities than had been the case under customary or Islamic laws, gave them access to the public space and public sphere, and helped change perceptions and attitudes within at least some sections of the population (18-19).

Moghadam remarks that even though the Nasser period in Egypt “allow[ed] women unprecedented access to education and employment, the regime would not address the family law” (26). The failure of the Nasser regime to further expand women's rights “served to reinforce patriarchal gender relations and the distinction between the public and private spheres. It also allowed the religious establishment control over a key societal institution” (26).

While income growth in the Middle East from 1960 to about 1985, which surpassed that of any other developing region, allowed for the expansion of education and health, it did

not result in high levels of literacy or educational attainment, especially for women. Despite rapid urbanization, significant rural populations continued to exist in Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. Within these large rural populations, marriage and fertility rates among Arab women remained high – higher on average than in other countries at similar stages of development. These trends were intensified by patriarchal laws, cultural practices and norms.

Additionally, the nature of the oil-based economy limited women's access to paid employment. During the oil boom, "the oil economy and high wages kept women locked into a patriarchal family structure, affecting both the demand for and supply of female labour" (30-31). Women were not required for labor and, therefore, investment in female literacy, educational attainment, and training remained stagnant.

### **Women's Education and Development**

The resources discussed in this essay address gender disparity, but they do not access how educational decisions are made or how economic and cultural differences in developing countries, especially in the Middle East, impact schooling choices. In fact, I was disappointed by the first three works I reference; they are seminal works in Middle East studies, but do not *in toto* account for women's rights and women's access to education in the region's development agenda. Even more disappointing are works on Middle East studies that fail to mention the contributions of women or do not recognize the absence of substantive female participation in intellectual, political, and economic sectors and how this undermines regional and national development. King and Hill discuss compelling evidence that the education of women of all ages promotes both individual and national well-being. Their book explores movements in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, and East Asia along with the Middle East and North Africa. King, Research Manager for Public Services of the World Bank's Development Research Group, and Hill, a former economics professor at Queens College, City University of New York, have academic and policy backgrounds that provide insight into the complex issues associated with female education. Gender disparities measured by educational attainment are costly to development goals. When development is defined as economic progress and improvements in the overall quality of life, the issue of female education becomes an important contributing factor. Hill and King note, "A better educated mother has fewer and better educated children. She is more productive at home and in the workplace. And she raises a healthier family, since she can better apply improved hygiene and nutritional practices" (12). Another effect of the gender gap is that the wife's role in decision-making may be weaker than the husband's when the husband's education is far greater than the wife's. Higher levels of primary and secondary school enrollments for women are associated with longer life expectancy, lower infant mortality, lower maternal mortality, and lower total fertility rates (19-20).

Studies in demography, economics, medicine, and anthropology show a strong link between a mother's schooling and the decreased the incidence of mortality among children – a link that appears to be strongest in low-income countries. Data from these studies indicate that an added year of education for a mother's education is associated with a reduction of between five to ten percent in child mortality (Hill and King: 28). A mother's schooling

improves her own health and also leads to higher educational opportunities for her children. Education also gives women the abilities to exercise their rights and responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>

While the data provided in King and Hill is almost two decades old, the trends indicated by the research they cite show the monumental importance of female education in the development processes. The social costs of education are traditionally calculated by adding public spending on education to the private direct and opportunity costs of education so the social returns to education are lower than the private returns, often by 20 to 30% (Schultz: 79). Supporters of public education argue, "a better educated society is more capable of managing a political system that protects individual rights and facilitates efficient and equitable growth" (80).

Investments in female education encourage women to shift from home-based to market-based work. Development experts believe the shift in how women allocate their time may have other desirable consequences for the productive use of social resources. "[B]ecause better educated women are more likely than less educated women to work for wages, they tend to pay more direct and indirect taxes; given the government's need for resources, this lowers the tax rates for others" (Schultz: 81).<sup>3</sup> It is hopeful that parents appear to be responding to growing evidence in the developing world that educated sons and daughters obtain better jobs so that the children's future earning capacity offsets the parents' sacrifices. The link between more education and higher earning explains the growth in school enrollments in most low-income countries.

Nagat El-Sanabary reports that female literacy and educational attainment have been much lower in the Middle East and North Africa than in Latin America and East Asia (136). The variant interpretation of Islamic codes from country to country impacts education. While there have been strides in efforts for national economic development for girls' education, the rate of change is slow. Girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school, especially in rural areas. Research on Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and several other countries document this pattern (143). The reverse, however, is true of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where girls in primary and secondary school have consistently lower dropout and repetition rates than boys. This rate has led their governments and education planners to conclude that the internal efficiency of girls' education is higher than that of males.

El-Sanabary observes that contrary to the Western stereotype, no inherent bias against educating girls exists in Islam (151). However, she notes, certain Islamic cultural attitudes and traditions can inhibit female education. For example, Muslims have a strong concern for the modesty and safety of girls and women; the male desire to guard his females is evidenced

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<sup>2</sup> The right to own land is diminished by not being able to read or to do simple arithmetic. The right to vote is meaningless unless woman can inform themselves on the issues of the day. Violence against women in the home or even on the streets is related to poverty and illiteracy, which prevents one from asserting their right to due process of law.

<sup>3</sup> Increases in men's education contributes to higher wages and fewer work hours, and tends to reduce the number of hours their wives work in the market labor force. Woman's education, which returns more in taxes for public services such as education, has a higher social rate of return than men's education.

in their seclusion veiling (151).<sup>4</sup> According to UNESCO, single-sex schools are not necessarily discriminatory, “so long as the same number of places is offered to pupils of each sex, and the conditions under which instruction is given are equal” (160). The issue in most countries is not whether schools are single-sex or coeducational but whether an adequate number of schools exist at all (160).<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Nations in the Middle East and North Africa recognize the issue of female education, but, citing a lack of resources, fail to properly tackle the issue. The problem is less about resources than about priorities. Imposing Western educational models on Muslim and Arab societies is effective to a certain point, but local culture and traditions should also be considered when developing female education policies. Assistance from the international community can help bridge this gender learning gap.

When Tawwakol Karman delivered her remarks as one of the recipients of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, she said, “The solution to women’s issues can only be achieved in a free and democratic society in which human energy is liberated, the energy of both women and men together. Our civilization is called human civilization and is not attributed only to men or women.” The pressing concern for female education is not only a women’s issue, but a matter of human development. When half of the population does not have equal access to education, it stymies national economic growth and undermines upward social mobility. While this article has focused on female education, the issue is not exclusive to girls and young women. Acting on the fact that education is key to development, Middle East nations can work to improve education and, eventually, their standards of living, governance systems, and perhaps achieve greater political stability, particularly in the case of Egypt.

Since the launch of the Millennium Development Goals, many developing countries, such as China, Chile, Cuba, Singapore and Sri Lanka, have successfully completed campaigns towards universal primary education (see Singh). These countries can serve as examples to struggling Middle East countries.

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<sup>4</sup> It is Arab cultural traditions, rather than Islam itself, that have constrained girls’ education. Evidence of these traditions includes opposition to coeducation and the presence of male teachers in girls’ schools, reasons for sending girls to schools away from home, and pressures on girls to marry at an early age.

<sup>5</sup> In many countries in the region, having an adequate number of schools is a costly proposition. Only in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia has this option been implemented on a large scale. In Kuwait almost as many girls as boys attend secondary school, and more girls than boys go on to higher education. In Saudi Arabia much progress has been made in narrowing the gender gap. The success of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia stems from oil wealth, which makes it possible to absorb the additional costs of education that observes cultural values and gender segregation.

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