2. Girls’ Education and Gender Socialization in the Mediterranean

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Summary

The question addressed in this paper is whether the consistent elements of gender socialization in the Arab Mediterranean region, and the confusing messages for both sexes, can only lead to entrenching processes of gender inequality. At the very least, the paper argues that gender socialization, combined with the continuing discrepancies in education opportunities and outcomes, not only provide a negative feedback loop, but effectively contribute to entrenching patriarchal norms.

The paper notes how political events on both sides of the Mediterranean and the endorsement of political leadership are often catalytic, if not necessary, determinants of policy change in the MENA region as a whole. All the governments in the region have, at one time or another, put special effort into including girls in the education system.

While there is a continuous role for policy-makers and governments to play in the region – by now beyond legislation and well into ensuring effective implementation in many countries – the paper traces how it is increasingly clear that the socio-cultural terrain is where the real battles need to be waged in a studied, deliberate and targeted fashion. Furthermore, the paper concludes by acknowledging that “education” itself is in multiple stages of transition, which are bound to have an impact on patterns of gender socialization in the Mediterranean. The author warns that while it is a mistake to overestimate the power of entrenched patriarchy, it would be equally unwise to underestimate the capacity of women to significantly refashion their realities.
The following story is a personal illustration of some of the dynamics of gender socialization and girls’ education in an Arab country: It is the beginning of the 1980s and I can still hear my mother’s voice explaining to me, with some urgency, that finishing my first university degree as soon as possible, having to score very high and getting some part-time work experience were very important for “me as a female.” “But why?” I once asked her. I was tired and frustrated after losing my second summer both to courses that would enable me to finish university earlier and part-time social service. “Because we are not sure your father will live long enough to continue to fund your degree,” she responded, “and you must have that degree, and with a high grade and some work exposure, in order to be able to get a good job that will not make you dependent on anyone.”

So I studied hard, did an elite stint of “social service”, and graduated among the youngest of my year, cum laude. But when I wanted to apply for jobs, my father’s response was “no daughter of mine should be made to work for compensation. Are you in need of anything? Why make people think that you have to work because I do not take care of you?”

Baffled and angry, I confronted both my parents. My mother remained silent and my father insisted on his position. Eventually, and after much discussion, I “negotiated” with my father that if he would allow me to take on a part-time job, I would use the money I earned to partially fund my graduate degree. This would afford me the opportunity to work, and simultaneously serve for him to “save face” amongst his friends and family. Now it was my mother’s turn to get upset. “But with a graduate degree it will be more difficult for you to get a husband. You will be too qualified for many eligible men and you will not be an attractive marriage prospect.”

Needless to say, this apparent mixed message – become an adult quickly, study hard, be qualified enough to be independent, “just in case”, but do not risk surpassing men’s accomplishments, do not risk becoming independent of the institution of marriage and its practical and social dependency on men – lies at the heart of the paradoxes of gender socialization, particularly among the middle classes of the Arab world. It is noteworthy that the Arab region remains one where some leading liberal social ideologues and some political activists will still proudly refer to “the patrimony of Arabs” and cite its demise as one of the many reasons behind the political stagnation which is ostensibly handicapping Arab development. In other words, the Arab region, in spite of significant and quantifiable accomplishments of its women over the last 50 years, remains a heavily patriarchal terrain, where nostalgia about the past defines the future agendas of many present-day so-called “liberals”, as well as their Islamist opponents – albeit each hungry for different aspects of their (re)imagined past.

But I jump ahead here. Let us first acknowledge the main parameters of girls’ education and gender socialization more broadly, before we revisit the Arab region and its gendered realities.

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1. I did end up working, eventually acquired a Ph.D. and moved to an international job abroad – a dream my mother had long had herself. I also got married to a non-Arab – something my parents were viscerally against – but whom they both grew to love and respect. My mother lived long enough to share her “pride” at my accomplishments – a rare acknowledgement from a woman who was herself an over-achiever in every aspect of her life. My father, who outlived her, constantly acknowledges that, “in everything, including confronting tough men in positions of authority to get things done, she was smart, tough and full of courage.” This article is dedicated to her memory.
Why Is Girls’ Education Important?

Amartya Sen, often referred to as the father of the concept of “human development”, reminds us of a quote by H.G. Wells, where he said that “human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” Sen maintains that “if we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just but also less secure.” To Sen, the gender aspect of education is a direct link between illiteracy and women’s security: “Not being able to read or write is a significant barrier for underprivileged women, since this can lead to their failure to make use even of the rather limited rights they may legally have (say, to own land or other property, or to appeal against unfair judgment and unjust treatment). There are often legal rights in rulebooks that are not used because the aggrieved parties cannot read those rulebooks. Gaps in schooling can, thus, directly lead to insecurity by distancing the deprived from the ways and means of fighting against that deprivation.”

For Sen, “illiteracy and innumeracy are forms of insecurity in themselves. Not being able to read or write or count or communicate is a tremendous deprivation. The extreme case of insecurity is the certainty of deprivation and the absence of any chance of avoiding that fate.”

Indeed, international development actors maintain, in different ways, that girls’ education lies at the heart of the striving for and sustainability of human development processes. The World Bank and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), together with the United Nations respective funds for children and for women (UNICEF and UNIFEM) cite several compelling benefits associated with girls’ education. These include the reduction of child and maternal mortality, lower fertility rates, improvement of child nutrition and health, enhancement of women’s political participation, improvement of general economic productivity and growth, and the protection of girls – and wider society – from HIV/AIDS, abuse and exploitation.

According to the World Bank, “girls’ education yields some of the highest returns of all development investments, yielding both private and social benefits that accrue to individuals, families and society at large...”

Both the WB and UNFPA maintain that women with formal education are much more likely to use reliable family planning methods, delay marriage and childbearing, and have fewer and healthier babies than women with no formal education. The World Bank estimates that one year of female schooling reduces fertility by 10%, particularly where secondary schooling is undertaken.

In fact, because women with some formal education are more likely to seek medical care and be better informed about health care practices for themselves and their children, their offspring

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3. Ibid.
have higher survival rates and are better nourished. Not only that, but these women themselves are less likely to undergo early pregnancy. Being better informed increases the chances of women knowing how to space their pregnancies better, how to access pre- and post-natal care, including prevention of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases and family planning in general. In fact, the World Bank estimates that an additional year of schooling for 1,000 women helps prevent two maternal deaths.

In the summer of 2009, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) issued a report entitled *Give Girls a Chance: Tackling Child Labour, a Key to the Future*, which makes a disturbing link between increasing child labor and the preference being given to boys when making decisions on education of children. The Report states that in cultures in which a higher value is placed on education of male children, girls risk being taken out of school and are then likely to enter the workforce at an early age. The ILO report noted the most recent global estimate that more than 100 million girls are involved in child labor and many are exposed to some of its worst forms.

The report highlights the importance of investing in the education of girls as an effective way of tackling poverty. This is in line with assertions made in numerous other studies, which also point to the fact that education increases women’s labor force participation, the wages they earn, overall productivity, and thereby yield higher benefits for communities and nations.

The World Bank, together with UNICEF and UNFPA, highlight in several of their reports the intergenerational benefits of women’s education. An educated mother is more likely, it is maintained, to attempt to ensure education opportunities for her children. Indeed, the WB specifically notes that “in many countries each additional year of formal education completed by a mother translates into her children remaining in school for an additional one-third to one-half year.”

Sen notes empirical work which has brought out very clearly how the relative respect and regard for women’s well-being is strongly influenced by women’s literacy and educated participation in decisions within and outside the family. Even the survival disadvantage of women compared with men in many developing countries (which leads to such terrible phenomenon as a hundred million “missing women”) seems to go down sharply – and may even get eliminated – with progress in women’s empowerment, for which literacy is a basic ingredient.

In short, girls’ education and the promotion of gender equality in education are critical to development, thus underlining the need to broadly address gender disparities in education.

**Gender Socialization**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, western feminist stalwarts, such as De Beauvoir, were elaborating on the difference between biological “sex” and social gender. Anne Oakley in particular is known for coining the term gender socialization, which indicates that gender is socially constructed. According to Oakley, parents are engaged in gender socialization but society has
the largest influence in constructing gender. She identified three social mechanisms of gender socialization: manipulation, canalization, and verbalization. Oakley noted that gender is not a fixed concept but is determined by culture through the use of verbal and nonverbal signifiers and the creation of social norms and stereotypes, which identify proper and acceptable behavior. The signifiers are then perpetuated on a macro level, reinforced by the use of the media, as well as at the micro level, through individual relationships.

The concept entered the mainstream lexicon on gender relations and development dynamics and through criticism and counter criticism “gender socialization” itself became an important signifier. As a tool to highlight discriminatory practices, laws and perceptions (including stereotypes), gender socialization is often identified as the “root cause” which explains various aspects of gender identities, and what underlies many gender dynamics.

In 2007, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) defined gender socialization as: “[…] The process by which people learn to behave in a certain way, as dictated by societal beliefs, values, attitudes and examples. Gender socialization begins as early as when a woman becomes pregnant and people start making judgments about the value of males over females. These stereotypes are perpetuated by family members, teachers and others by having different expectations for males and females.”

There is, therefore, a clear interaction between socio-cultural values (and praxis) with gender socialization. This only partly explains why it is that in many developing societies there is a persistent prioritization of women’s “domestic” roles and responsibilities over public ones. Most young girls are socialized into the “biological inevitability” of their socially determined future roles as mothers. This is closely connected, in many relatively socially conservative contexts, with the need to ensure (the prerequisite of) marriage.

From the late 19th century onwards, economic and political realities intervened to mar this process of socialization, especially with the effects of the world wars, the industrial revolution, decolonization and independence processes, liberation struggles and the like. As more and more women found themselves needing to work merely to sustain themselves and/or their families, a conflict emerged between what societies expected of girls and women (which continued to include the function of procreation), how they were accordingly “judged” and the realities of survival which pushed more and more women into the labor markets.

**Realities of Education in the Arab Region**

“Each mother is a school. If you educate her, you ensure a nation with strong foundations.”

This paper will not delve into the colonial era backdrop of gender relations in the Arab region, as this continues to be extensively covered elsewhere. The contemporary reality, however, is

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6. Qasim Amin (1865-1908) is firmly linked with the movement for women’s emancipation in Egypt in the opening years of the twentieth century. He is often noted by Arab feminists as one of the first feminists. While this is sometimes disputed, it remains a historical fact that Amin was the first male who spoke – and wrote – in relatively strongly emancipatory terms for women’s rights in his time.
what merits an overview, particularly the socio-political and economic context which impact on and interact with the processes of gender socialization.

According to a World Bank report entitled *The Road Not Traveled*, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has experienced a unique population growth pattern over the past 50 years. It notes that the total population increased 3.7 times during this period, from 100 million in 1950 to approximately 380 million in 2000. No other region of the world has grown as rapidly, and the report quotes estimates that the total population in MENA will reach 600 million by 2025.

The report attributes the region’s population growth largely to past high fertility rates. Since the early 1980s, fertility rates have declined – as did the corresponding population growth rates. However, this World Bank report concurs with several others (notably by the UNDP and ILO) which predict that the percentage of youths in the population in MENA will continue to be higher than in other regions of the world for some time to come.

Currently, figures for youths in the region vary between estimates of 70 million to 95 million in 2005. Most reports point to the fact that the youth population represents an overwhelmingly large share of the total population. As this “bulge” works its way through the population, the World Bank echoes other international reports when it maintains that “the profile of human capital they bring with them will ultimately determine how each country in the region will develop in economic, social, political, and cultural terms.”

About 9 million children – nearly 5 million children aged 6 to 10 and another 4 million children aged 11 to 15 – were out of school in 1995. By 2015, these numbers are projected to increase to 7.5 million and 5.6 million, respectively, for a potential total of more than 13 million children and youths who are of school age and who will not be in school. To complicate matters further, many of these are often poor children, rural children, children who speak non-majority languages, mainly girls and young women, children with disabilities, children who have serious health and sanitation problems, or children caught up in conflict zones of violence. They also have no or minimum access to basic social and economic services.

Furthermore, reports warn that many out of school children and youths start working at a young age, and may be malnourished, sick, disabled, living on the streets or in orphanages, or resorting to crime and delinquency. “If they also have no compulsory education, they become a drain on economic development, while creating the possibility of increased political alienation and greater tensions between generational and social groups. These ‘last-mile’ populations also include the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in the region.”

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10. Ibid., p. 98.
11. Ibid., p. 102.
The 2005 Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) documents some of the contrasts of the education and knowledge context for Arab women. The Arab region, we are informed, has one of the highest rates of female illiteracy – as much as one half, compared to only one third among males – while also displaying one of the lowest rates of enrolment at the various levels of education. This is in spite of the success of some Arab states, most notably those in the Gulf, in increasing the percentage of girls’ enrolment and narrowing the gap between the sexes at the three levels of education.

While female enrolment in university education has risen, women are still concentrated in fields such as literature, the humanities and the social sciences, where they constitute the majority. In contrast, enrolment rates for females in fields such as engineering and science are noticeably lower. We are also informed that the proportion of girls among top scoring students in all Arab countries is over 50%. Given that, on average, girls account for fewer than half those enrolled in education, this achievement highlights how well the girls are performing academically. “Such achievement is all the more remarkable given the unhelpful societal and familial environment that some face arising from the myth that a girl is destined for the house and that education and work are basically male domains.”

The AHDR 2005 further quotes international data indicating that girls in the Arab region perform better in school than boys, and that drop-out rates for girls are lower than those for boys in all the countries for which data are available. “Notwithstanding this,” the AHDR notes, “discrimination against women in Arab countries continues to limit their access to knowledge despite the mass of statistical and other evidence indicating that Arab girls are the better learners, especially on the first rungs of the education ladder.”

Political Dynamics in the Arab Region

There is a strong relationship between religion and politics in the Mediterranean basin, and events in the Arab region both influence and are influenced by geo-political dynamics “across the waters” whether in the EU or the United States. More specifically, what is happening between the US the EU and the Arab region is part and parcel of the intricate developments in the discourse on, with and about religion. This is something that the entire first series of Arab Human Development Reports (2002-2005) have emphasized and traced.

13. Ibid., p. 8.
14. Ibid.
15. The Arab Human Development Reports posit very clearly this relationship between internal social, political, cultural and economic developments in the region with external dynamics. The latter refer, among other things, to the role of the United States foreign policy in general, and developments in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in particular. See www.undp.org/arabstates.
It is very difficult to speak about a general development in the context of the Arab world without looking at the foreign policy of the major world power(s) and how that impacts on the Arab region economically, politically and culturally. This is not to lay the blame outside of the region or to take away due responsibility. On the contrary, while much of the responsibility for what develops in any region has to be borne primarily by the inhabitants of the region themselves, the argument must nevertheless be made that to understand how the relationship between religion and politics evolves, an in-depth, more nuanced and more holistic perspective is necessary.

One of the most articulate arguments clearly linking politics, development and culture made over the last two decades is the seminal work on *The Politics of Culture*, edited by Brett Williams in 1991. The arguments made in this book, which explored the ways in which people re-engaged dominant institutions, related their own stories and planned their struggles for political identity and power within cultural constructions, were echoed and enhanced by another great work edited by Larry Diamond on *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries* (1994). In this work, Paul Sigmund, writing on “Christian Democracy, Liberation Theology and Political Culture in Latin America” makes a powerful case for how religion (Catholicism in particular) is a “positive development for liberal pluralist democracy.”

Building upon some of these debates and critiquing Western orthodoxy on the linkages between democracy, culture and development, with case studies from around the world, was a volume entitled *Development and Democracy: Theory and Practice*, edited by Adrian Leftwich (1996), and in which a case is built to show “the centrality of politics and the state in development, not governance and democracy.” Galal Amin, an Egyptian Professor of Economics at the American University of Cairo, was even more scathing of en vogue views of development processes which did not take into account human rights and ethics in his 2006 *The Illusion of Progress in the Arab World: A Critique of Western Misconstructions*.

Referencing the specific context of the crisis of aid during conflict situations, Joanna Macrae (2001: 170) argues that: “The uncertain legitimacy and weak capacity of recipient states confined aid responses to the projectised, decentralized and supply-oriented models of relief, which connected poorly to developmental objectives and the resumption of development aid. It is not simply bullishness or an anti-development stance on the part of humanitarian actors that leads some to reject an emphasis on capacity-building and sustainable development: it is a reflection of the particular political and economic context of conflict situations.”

In other words, part of the responsibility for these combined socio-cultural and political developments is definitely shared. None more so than in the region of the Mediterranean which has one of the longest histories of colonialism and which, to this day, lives with the reality of newly-formed political entities, unequal economic growth and increasing income disparities among bulging populations – some of which have been vying for political power ever since.
Islamophobia and Its Discontents?

It is becoming increasingly difficult to convince many in the United States and Europe that Fundamentalism is not equivalent to Islamism (or political Islam), and that both of these movements should not be understood as synonymous with Islam or with the Arab world as a whole. The reason this is more and more of an uphill battle is a shared responsibility. On the one hand, many Arabs feel somewhat besieged by what is taking place around them in terms of the ongoing conflict with Israel, together with events in the non-Arab countries as well (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran), given their association with everything “Islamic”. On the other hand, continuing suicide attacks, attempted attacks on flights – and now outright military attacks by groups claiming an Islamic identity – and unfolding state insecurities in Yemen and the Sudan, reinforce a real fear in the Western world about Arabs and Muslims. And while we can consistently maintain that we need to distinguish first and foremost between Arabs and Muslims (the majority of Muslims are not Arab), the conflagration between the two in the minds of many in the western world remains widespread.

This being the case, attempting to draw the lines of distinctions with yet another phenomenon – that of political Islam or Islamism – requires stretching credibility and tolerance even further. As more and more youths are drawn into the nets of al-Qaeda and its many offshoots, emulators and even competitors, it is imperative that there is a better awareness of the range of such movements and their objectives.

Political Islam, a quintessentially political phenomenon characterised by the attempt to achieve state power and/or political dominion, has to be distinguished from fundamentalist movements. I argue that there is a very strong distinction to be made between those who, in their own religious beliefs, are oriented on a personal, social and cultural level towards being fundamental in their interpretation and who will sort out their own personal issues in their lives using religious texts, and those who will organise themselves politically into diverse party structures and either decide to go through a political process or indeed go against it. In fact, religious texts (interpretation, stories of prophets, etc.) become the most important way of understanding and acting in their lives. For many fundamentalist movements around the world, sticking to the “fundaments” in your own lives does not necessarily translate into being politically active. In fact, for many religious fundamentalists, politics is an altogether unpalatable enterprise, and purity and piety reside in staying clear of it.

Some fundamentalists tend to be involved in Islamist movements; many however do not. Today in many parts of the Arab world a number of Islamist politicians come from former communist and socialist political convictions. This should not be ignored. These people did not have a grand and sudden realisation that they had been wrong all along, and decided to embrace Islam. They have been Muslims all their life but they have also maintained a relatively

17. As we saw most recently with the young Nigerian youth who attempted to blow up a US flight in December 2009.
secular adherence all their lives. What has happened, however, is that they realised there was a gap between what they were believing in terms of social and political transformation and the dialectics thereof, and how the political Islamic context seems to be more appropriate to that dialectic. It is important to keep that in mind when talking about political Islam – not this vague concept of fundamentalism.

Islamism certainly has its adherents and sympathizers in several parts of the world, and some of the more extreme forms of it are arguably also active in Europe, and linking trans-nationally across the Mediterranean basin. But no matter how widespread the sympathy towards Islamism is amongst European Muslims, what is relatively more palpable and immediately problematic to the average such Muslim, is the extent – and near normalisation – of Islamophobic discourse, or hate speech. John L. Esposito argues that “a significant minority of the population in Europe and America [...] are increasingly appealed to by a lot of our Islamophobic political and media commentators.”

In her book entitled *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers* (2003), investigative journalist Barbara Victor links the political dynamics behind some Islamist activism and rhetoric with an evident break in the process of gender socialization. Victor shows how the interplay between political and economic and cultural realities can come up with a phenomenon hitherto unknown in the region – women suicide bombers. Victor identifies what she calls “a new level of cynicism” that has destroyed normal, everyday existence in the Middle East, along with the possibility for lasting peace. Tracing the roots of the women’s resistance movement back to a brief period of empowerment in the 1980s before conservative religious voices and related social movements rose to eminence, Victor shows how some young Palestinian women have decided to, literally, blow themselves into martyrdom.

An underlying text of Victor’s presentation concerns these young women’s feelings that they had nothing to lose. One can well imagine that this is the same sentiment felt by the male youth. While this context is very specific to the Palestinians, events in and around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict influence many Arab youths – although not in the direction of inflicting violence. Nevertheless, Victor’s exposé is an important pointer to an extreme form of rebellion against, or refashioning of, gendered socialization.

19. And it is indeed highly arguable that Islamism would garner significant sympathy amongst most European or American Muslims for that matter. Gallup spent 6 years interviewing nearly 50,000 Muslims from 35 countries representing the most comprehensive analysis to date of the wishes, desires, grievances, complaints and opinions of nearly 1.3 billion Muslims. The results were collected and analyzed by Prof. John L. Esposito of Georgetown University, and Dalia Mogahed, a senior analyst and executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, in *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York, Gallup Press, 2007). On sympathies, this is what Esposito has to say: “When asked, ‘What do you resent about the West and what concerns you about the West?’ they’re very clear about resenting the denigration of Islam and Muslims and painting them as extremists.” Source: http://www.counterpunch.org/wajahat03042008.html.
Realities of Gender Socialization in the Arab Region

The AHDR 2005 noted that the relatively greater denial of education opportunities to girls contrasts with Arab public opinion which "indicates that the majority of people believe that girls have a right to education on an equal footing with men [...] and favors letting women students choose their fields of specialization." Hence, there appears to be a gap between what some people in society think, or possibly aspire to, and what actually transpires. Given this reality check, it is worthwhile looking beyond the education figures to some broader and relatively less researched social and health-related phenomenon.

A 2006 United Nations report entitled Arab Youth Strategizing for the Millennium Development Goals documents some critical gendered realities in the region, based on a series of sub-regional consultations with youths. This report stressed that women represented 60% of the illiterate population of adults in the Arab region, while their share of GDP is, on average, only 29% (decreasing significantly in countries like Oman [16.6%] and Saudi Arabia [16.5%]).

Noted obstacles to women’s development included violence against young women (e.g. female circumcision), honor crimes and early marriage practices, which occur both in urban and rural areas. Young mothers themselves suffer from numerous physical and social challenges, being unable to continue their education and thus becoming marginalized in any job market, not to mention a series of reproductive health problems (which form 12.5% of the total health problems in the Arab region).

Another study conducted and presented through the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) indicated that 48% of people infected with HIV/AIDS are women. In most instances, the study asserts, these women are being infected through their husbands who either have extramarital affairs or are drug addicts. Effectively, therefore, HIV/AIDS adds a new and burning challenge to the dynamics of gender relations, and the realities of Arab girls and women.

Along similar and possibly “foundational” lines, a rare study looks at the determinants and causes of son preference among women delivering in one of Egypt’s northern cities, Mansoura. Son preference, and its impact on fertility rates and population sex ratios, is usually more extensively studied in South Asia. Indeed, the authors of this study point out that “sex preference in Egypt has received little attention, possibly because the overall sex ratio at birth is similar to the expected value. Egypt is in the early stage of fertility decline; hence, sex selective abortion is rare. [...] data dealing with the subject are scanty, which in itself is telling evidence of the lack of awareness of a problem that affects millions of girls.” Nevertheless, the authors assert that there is evidence of sex differentials from data collected on health, nutrition, education and socialization, which point to discrimination against the girl child and women.

Clearly, son preference signifies an attitude according girls and women a lower value than boys and men. Therefore, wherever son preference occurs, it tends to be accompanied by discriminatory practices against daughters, many of which have serious immediate and/or long-term consequences for their health and well-being. But son preference ties to education dynamics as well, in so far as families, when constructed with the constrictions of poverty, prefer to take their young daughters out of school rather than, or before, their sons.

On another note, and seeking to deepen the nuance, it is worthwhile looking at a psycho-social feature underlying the region’s gender socialization. In March 2006, Mostafa Afifi published a study assessing gender differences within depression in adolescents, comparing Oman and Egypt. His research highlighted that while gender differences in prevalence of mental disorders vary across age groups, conduct disorder is the most common childhood psychiatric disorder where three times as many boys as girls are affected. Yet, Afifi notes that during adolescence girls have a higher prevalence of depression and eating disorders, and engage more in contemplations of suicide and suicide attempts than boys. Afifi also alerts us that boys are prone to engage in high-risk behaviors and, indeed, are more likely to actually commit suicide. In adulthood, his study shows that women have a higher prevalence of most affective disorders and non-affective psychoses while men have higher rates of substance use disorders and antisocial personality disorders.24

Afifi concludes by asserting that male and female adolescents share common social risks correlated to their depressive symptom, that each sex has its own exclusive risk factors, and that gender difference correlates of depression also differ by country and culture. “This occurs,” Afifi notes, “because biology never acts alone to determine health inequities. Social determinants, including gender, exacerbate biological vulnerabilities and interact in additive or multiplicative ways with other social markers.”25

Such research findings highlight the contemporary dynamics of gender socialization in the region. An important realization is that while there are different pressures and expectations for boys and girls, and while adolescent girls and adult women are confronting continuing gender discrimination, inequities and disparities, adolescent boys, young men and adult men, appear to be having a rather hard time of things.

This feature is further enriched from a totally different theological perspective in an article by Professor John J. Pilch of Georgetown University. Pilch looks at gender socialization (though not quite using these words) in the Biblical era, and references a “culturally conditioned mandate” with regards to rearing boys and girls in the Mediterranean, located during Biblical times, with the objective of developing a more culturally sensitive interpretation of the Bible. One of the questions raised in this theological discourse revolves around appreciating that a certain amount of “beating” was considered legitimate for young boys.26 Centuries later, the acceptan-
of this behavioral aspect in upbringing is still widespread in the region, particularly – though
not only – when it applies to young boys, who are still being told simultaneously, that “a boy
does not cry.”

Concluding and Looking Ahead

The rhetorical question that needs to be raised here is whether the consistent elements of gender
socialization in the region and the confusing messages for both sexes can only lead to entrenching
processes of gender inequality. At the very least, it is safe to argue that gender socialization,
combined with the continuing discrepancies in education opportunities and outcomes, not only
provide a negative feedback loop but effectively contribute to entrenching patriarchal norms.

Political events and the endorsement of political leadership are often catalytic (if not neces-
sary determinants) of policy change in the MENA region as a whole. Indeed, education reform
programs in the region were often initiated with political events. To date, such reforms were
typically launched through a political or legal act. In most cases, countries prioritized forging
a common heritage and understanding of citizenship, inclusion of religion and instruction in
particular language(s), all as a means of enhancing national identity. All the governments in
the region have, at one time or another, put special effort into including girls in the education
system.27 While there is a continuous role for policy-makers and governments to play in the
region – by now beyond legislation and well into ensuring effective implementation in many
countries – it is increasingly clear that the socio-cultural terrain is where the real battles need to
be waged in a studied, deliberate and targeted fashion.

Influencing the way people think, believe and behave – that is, the culture – is the single most
complicated task of human development. And, yet, in policy and advocacy circles globally, this
particular challenge still remains largely considered as “soft” and, at best, secondary in any
consideration. What is maintained here is that within the current political climate, where more
young men and a (tiny) minority of young women are reverting to extremes of inflicting vio-
lence, and all of this is exacerbated by a socialization process that is cementing confusion in
gender roles and responsibilities, cultural change needs to be a high priority.

This culture shift has several key conditions. One of these is the importance of bridging the
activism gap between men and women. While this still remains anathema to many women’s
rights activists, it is nevertheless necessary that men become more engaged in women’s rights
work, and that women realize that their rights are incumbent on the systematic partnership
with men and on appreciating the specific needs and challenges that young boys and men
themselves are struggling with.

Another critical determinant of cultural change is that it has to be from within. Those who have
worked with human rights issues more broadly have had to learn the hard way that any change

27. MENA Report, The Road Not Traveled: Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa, Washington DC, The World Bank,
2008, pp. 138-139.
that appears to be induced “from outside”, even if responding to a dire need, and with perfectly sound reason, is destined for failure in many cases. Sustainable change has to be owned and operated locally. This points to the importance of identifying the “cultural agents of change” in any given society, which include both its men and women activists, but also religious leaders, youth leaders (sometimes they are one and the same), media figures, charismatic community mobilizers, and especially youths themselves – who are the most critical agents of change.

At the same time, it is a fallacy to think that there can be no linkages whatsoever between local ownership and external dynamics. International, especially multilateral, development partners have an important role to play in facilitating the bridge building between and among the cultural agents of change themselves on the one hand, and between them and their respective policymakers on the other. But in this day and age of technology and increasing speed of technology, international development actors (including academia) are already facilitating the building of bridges between youths trans-nationally. Some of this is already happening through a plethora of fora (including social websites), and the impact remains difficult to gauge.

All this points to the fact that “education” in the traditional sense of school enrolment, dropout rates, curricula development, and so on, is itself in multiple stages of transition. It remains to be seen how, and in what way, new forms of education, knowledge acquisition and information sharing will significantly change patterns of gender socialization in the Mediterranean. It is too soon to definitely assess the shifting sands we are standing on. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to either overestimate the power of entrenched patriarchy or to underestimate the capacity of women to significantly refashion their realities.
Bibliography


