

Colonial legacy, women's rights and gender-educational inequality in the Arab World with particular reference to Egypt and Tunisia

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Abstract One aspect of the call for democracy in the recent Arab region uprisings is the issue of women's rights and gender equality. Three cultural and ideological forces have continued to shape the gender discourse in Arab Muslim-majority societies. They are: "Islamic" teaching and local traditions concerning women's roles in a given society; Western, European colonial perception of women's rights; and finally national gender-related policy reforms. This paper examines the past and present status of women and gender-educational inequality in the Arab world with particular reference to Egypt and Tunisia, prior to and post colonialism. Special attention is given to colonial legacy and its influence on gender and education; to current gender practices in the social sphere with a focus on women's modesty (*hijab*); to international policies and national responses with regard to women's rights and finally to female participation in pre-university and higher education. These issues incorporate a discussion of cultural and religious constraints. The paper demonstrates similarities and differences between Egypt's and Tunisia's reform policies towards gender parity. It highlights the confrontation of conservative versus liberal ideologies that occurred in each country with the implementation of its gender-related reform policy.

Keywords Women's rights · Education · Gender equality · Egypt · Tunisia · Arab region

Résumé Héritage colonial, droits des femmes et inégalité des sexes dans l'enseignement au sein du monde arabe, notamment en Égypte et Tunisie – L'un des aspects de la revendication démocratique exprimée lors des récentes révoltes dans le

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monde arabe porte sur les droits des femmes et l'égalité entre les sexes. Trois influences culturelles et idéologiques continuent à marquer le discours sur l'égalité des sexes dans les sociétés arabes à majorité musulmane : l'enseignement « islamique » et les traditions locales quant aux rôles des femmes dans une société donnée ; la perception occidentale, reposant sur la colonisation européenne, des droits des femmes ; enfin, les réformes des politiques nationales relatives à l'égalité des sexes. Les auteurs de l'article examinent le statut ancien et actuel des femmes ainsi que l'inégalité des sexes dans l'enseignement du monde arabe, en se référant en particulier à l'Égypte et à la Tunisie, et ce avant et après le colonialisme. Ils se penchent notamment sur les aspects suivants : l'héritage colonial et son influence sur l'égalité des sexes dans l'enseignement ; les pratiques actuelles d'égalité des sexes dans la sphère sociale en abordant en particulier la pudeur féminine (*hijab*) ; les politiques internationales relatives aux droits des femmes et leurs réponses nationales ; enfin, la participation féminine à l'enseignement préuniversitaire et supérieur. Ces thèmes induisent une discussion sur les contraintes culturelles et religieuses. L'article illustre les similitudes et les différences entre les politiques réformatrices en faveur de la parité des sexes en Égypte et en Tunisie. Il éclaire la confrontation des idéologies conservatrices et libérales, qui survient dans tout pays appliquant une politique de réforme liée à l'égalité des sexes.

Zusammenfassung Koloniales Erbe, Frauenrechte und die Benachteiligung von Frauen in den Bildungssystemen der arabischen Welt unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Ägyptens und Tunesiens – Die Forderung nach Demokratie im Zuge der jüngsten Volksaufstände in der arabischen Region beinhaltet unter anderem auch den Aspekt der Frauenrechte und der Gleichstellung der Geschlechter. Der Geschlechter-Diskurs in den vom Islam dominierten arabischen Gesellschaften wird seit Langem durch drei kulturelle und ideologische Kräfte geprägt. Nämlich: Die „islamische“ Lehre und die lokalen Traditionen bezüglich der Frauenrollen in einer bestehenden Gesellschaft, die westliche, europäisch-koloniale Wahrnehmung von Frauenrechten und schließlich einzelstaatliche politische Reformen, die sich auf die Geschlechterrollen beziehen. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Ägyptens und Tunesiens werden in diesem Artikel die Stellung der Frau früher und heute und ihre Benachteiligung in den Bildungssystemen in der arabischen Welt vor und nach der Kolonialisierung untersucht. Besondere Beachtung finden das koloniale Erbe und dessen Auswirkungen auf Gender und Bildung, die aktuellen geschlechtsspezifischen Gepflogenheiten in der gesellschaftlichen Sphäre, hier vor allem die weibliche Bescheidenheit (*hijab*), sodann die internationale Praxis und die nationalen Reaktionen im Hinblick auf die Rechte der Frau und schließlich die Partizipation von Mädchen und Frauen im Bereich der Hochschulvorbereitung und der Hochschulausbildung. Dazu gehört auch eine Diskussion kultureller und religiöser Zwänge. In dem Artikel wird aufgezeigt, worin sich die politischen Reformen zur Förderung der Geschlechterparität in Ägypten und Tunesien ähnlich sind und worin sie sich unterscheiden. Insbesondere wird auch auf die Konfrontation zwischen konservativen und liberalen Ideologien im Zuge der Umsetzung der Reformpolitik zur Gleichstellung der Geschlechter in beiden Ländern eingegangen.

Resumen Legado colonial, derechos de la mujer y desigualdad de género en la educación en el mundo árabe, con especial referencia a Egipto y Túnez – Entre los

reclamos de democracia en los recientes levantamientos en la región árabe aparecen los derechos de la mujer y la igualdad de géneros. Tres fuerzas culturales e ideológicas han estado delineando el discurso de género en las sociedades con mayoría árabe y musulmana: las enseñanzas “islámicas” y las tradiciones locales concernientes al papel que debe desempeñar la mujer en una sociedad determinada; la percepción occidental, europeo-colonial de los derechos de la mujer, y, finalmente, las reformas nacionales relacionadas con políticas de género. En este trabajo, los autores examinan la situación pasada y actual de la mujer y de la desigualdad de género en la educación en el mundo árabe, con particular referencia a Egipto y Túnez, pre y postcoloniales. Los autores otorgan especial atención al legado colonial y su influencia sobre temas de género y educación; a las actuales costumbres de género en la esfera social, enfocadas en la modestia femenina (*hijab*); a políticas internacionales y respuestas nacionales en cuanto a los derechos femeninos y, finalmente, a la participación femenina en la educación preuniversitaria y superior. Estos temas también abordan las presiones culturales y religiosas. Este trabajo muestra similitudes y diferencias entre las políticas de reformas de Egipto y de Túnez que se encauzan a la igualdad de géneros. Y también realiza el enfrentamiento entre ideologías conservadoras y liberales que se produjo en cada país con la implementación de su correspondiente política de reformas relacionadas con temas de género.

Резюме Колониальное наследие, права женщин и гендерное неравенство в образовании в арабском мире: особое внимание на Египет и Тунис – Одним из аспектов призыва к демократии во время недавних восстаний в арабском регионе является проблема прав женщин и гендерного равенства. Три культурологические и идеологические силы продолжают определять направление гендерного дискурса в арабском обществе, где доминируют мусульмане. А именно: «исламское» учение и местные традиции относительно роли женщин в данном обществе; западное европейское колониальное понимание прав женщин; и, наконец, национальные реформы относительно гендерной политики. В данной статье изучается как в прошлом, так и в настоящем статус женщин и гендерное неравенство в образовании в арабском мире с особой ссылкой на Египет и Тунис, как до, так и после эпохи колониализма. Особое внимание уделяется колониальному наследию и его влиянию на гендерный вопрос и образование; текущей гендерной практике в социальной сфере с акцентом на положении женщин (*хиджаб*); международной политике и национальному пониманию прав женщин и, наконец, участию женщин в среднем и высшем образовании. Эти вопросы находятся в центре культурологических и религиозных дискуссий. В данной статье показываются сходства и различия между реформами, проводимыми в Египте и Тунисе и направленными на политику гендерного равенства. Здесь подчеркивается конфронтация консервативной и либеральной идеологий, что и произошло в каждой стране при осуществлении реформы, связанной с гендерной политикой.

Introduction

After decades of submission and compliance, Tunisians and Egyptians have recently succeeded in removing autocratic regimes that were once perceived as being unshakable. Their determination has inspired the region; further uprisings have taken place in several Arab countries (Yemen, Bahrain, Oman, Syria and Libya). Clearly, the Arab Middle East region is experiencing a momentous period of transition, calling for democracy. However, what kind of democracy is a question that remains unanswered. Will this “democracy” be achieved through a theocratic, a civilian or a military state? In this context, women and other vulnerable members of the population have also demanded their rights as equal citizens. It is well known that the pre-revolution regimes in Tunisia (since 1956) and Egypt (since 1952) have embraced progressive secular ideas especially with regard to women’s rights. Yet, according to a variety of international and regional reports, Arab countries, including Egypt and Tunisia, are in urgent need of gender-oriented educational reform in order to achieve gender parity.

The Arab Republic of Egypt today covers a territory of 1,001,450 square kilometres. Its population in 2007 was estimated to be 80.1 million, most of which are Arabs with small minorities of Bedouins and Nubians. It is the largest country in North Africa, with a projected population of more than 98.6 million by 2020 (UN 2009b, p. 193). Muslims constitute 90 per cent of the population, though there have been critical cultural/political differences among Muslim groups (Ramadan 1986; Ibrahim 1987; Voll 1994). Approximately 9 per cent of the population are Coptic Christian and 1 per cent is other Christians. There are also important cultural differences along rural/urban and social class dimensions. The vast majority of Egyptians lives along the banks and in the delta region of the river Nile; thus, while its overall population density is not very high (73 people per square kilometre), its large cities (particularly Cairo and Alexandria) are densely populated. The provinces¹ surrounding these two cities are considered to be “urban”, while the other 26 provinces (not including the Luxor region) are considered rural provinces (see Arab Republic of Egypt Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics 2004).

From 1996 to 2006, the male proportion of the population increased to 51 per cent and the average family size declined to 4.18. The total fertility rate (children born per woman) decreased from 3.5 in 2000 to 3.1 in 2005 (Egypt State Information Service 2009). Nonetheless, the adult literacy rate during the period 1997–2007 is much higher for men (74.6 per cent) than for women (57.8 per cent) (UN 2009b, p. 183). According to the World Bank (2011c), the gender gap in enrolment rates for Egyptian secondary education was 4.8 in 2004, which consequently reduces the opportunities for female participation in post-secondary education. Although this gap has decreased from 18.2 in 1990, the rate of gender reform in Egypt has been painfully slow (World Bank 2011c).

The Republic of Tunisia, with a population of approximately 10,549,000 in 2010 and an area of 162,155 square kilometres, is significantly smaller than Egypt.

¹ Provinces are called governorates in Egypt.

However, Tunisia has been a leader in the region in terms of gender equality and reform from the 1990s to the present. Tunisia's population is 98 per cent Muslim, with small Christian and Jewish minorities. Furthermore, the male to female ratio in Tunisia is almost 50/50 (Tunisian National Institute of Statistics 2011). Tunisia gained independence from French rule in 1956. Since that time the Republic of Tunisia has actively promoted equality for Tunisian citizens, regardless of gender or faith. Therefore it is unsurprising that Tunisia had a gross secondary enrolment gender gap of -6.5 in 2003, which improved to -7.3 in 2008 (World Bank 2011c).

Both Egypt and Tunisia are Muslim-majority societies with heavy political involvement with the Middle East. This article examines the issue of gender and education in these two countries in relation to their ties with the Arab Middle East region. Depending on national and international documents and reports as well as on available literature and statistical data, this paper compares the past and current women's status and gender inequality in education in Egypt and Tunisia. It begins with a historical overview of colonial legacy, education and the status of women in Arab countries in general – and in Egypt and Tunisia in particular – which highlights the influence of colonialism on gender and education in this region. This is contextualised in the interplay of cultural and ideological forces that have continued to shape the discourse of gender equality and women's rights in Arab Muslim-majority societies, to include a) "Islamic" teachings and local traditions concerning women's roles in a given society, b) Western, European colonial perception of women's rights and c) current international policy for women's rights and its national responses. This is followed by an examination of gender-educational inequality in the Arab Middle East region and female participation in pre-university and higher education in Egypt and Tunisia.

Colonial legacy, education and the status of women

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, the period of colonisation of the Arab world, mainly by France, Britain and Italy, began. The French colonised and "protected" Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon and Syria. The British occupied Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq; whereas the Italians occupied Libya. While Algeria was a settler colony, Morocco and Tunisia were protectorates, where, de facto, European colonial rule prevailed.

Although under colonial rule access to schools in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was largely restricted to European settlers, their families and those nationals necessary to the administration, considerable numbers of religious institutions existed throughout this region and remained largely intact. Therefore, as Middle Eastern and North African countries gained independence, the existing structure of religious institutions combined with the colonial educational system provided a framework from which the modern educational systems arose (World Bank 2008). According to the World Bank (2008), integration of the old and new systems was the key challenge for early reformers in the 1950s and 1960s.

The colonial powers had constructed a secular legal system replacing the religious/Islamic laws, the *Shari'a* (Daun and Arjmand 2002). They "gradually

increased their control over education in the region. This control took the form of imposing French and English as the languages of instruction at all levels” (Benhamida 1990, p. 295). For example, during the occupation in Egypt, the British strove to anglicise the language of instruction – and the corps of teachers – in the government schools in Egypt (Ali 1995; Reid 1974, 1977). Lord Cromer² sought, successfully, to promote the learning of English (vs. French and Arabic) and brought in teachers from England (Erllich 1989, pp. 24–25). According to Bill Williamson there was a slow shift:

English gradually came to replace French as the principal foreign language, but the devaluation of Arabic was seen by nationalists as another indignity inflicted on them by the British, and this sense of indignity was clearly reinforced by authoritarian teaching methods, a lack of contact between English teachers and their pupils and the way in which the British cut themselves off socially from the Egyptians they governed (Williamson 1987, p. 82).

The situation was not much different in other Arab countries, but the Anglo-French plan backfired. It inspired, activated and articulated the struggle for independence around Arab nationalism. According to Akrawi and El-Koussy (1971, p. 181),

Arab nationalism ... began as a movement for liberating the Arabs from Ottoman rule, continued after the First World War to free the countries from the four Western powers (France, Great Britain, Italy and Spain), and then had to face the rise of the State of Israel, which poses a continuing problem. But the struggle for independence was only one aspect of Arab nationalism. It has tried for a hundred years to revive the Arab culture, to create an Arab consciousness and some form of Arab national unity, and to renovate the whole social and economic fabric of Arab life, which has been torn apart by centuries of invasion, foreign rule and neglect.

In terms of women’s status, the colonial influence varied and national responses took different forms. However, a better understanding of women’s status prior to, during and after colonialism in Arab Muslim-majority countries requires a discussion of the different cultural and ideological forces that have severely shaped the ongoing discourse of women’s rights and gender equality. These forces are influenced by three factors. One is “Islamic”³ teachings and local traditions concerning women’s roles in a given society; another is a Western, European colonial perception of women’s rights; and the third one is national governments’ reform policy in response to international/Western pressure versus local cultural

² British Consul-General in Egypt from 1883–1907.

³ Susan Douglass and Munir Shaikh (2004, p. 5) explain that “Muslims and non-Muslims alike frequently use the adjective, Islamic, to elevate cultural expressions to the position of normative or consummate institutions or practices ... [P]ublic commentators often fail to make any distinction between that which pertains directly to Islam and its doctrines, and actions its adherents perform in the cultural or social realm.”

traditions/norms. The first two factors are discussed in the following; the third one is addressed in the subsequent section.

Women's rights and social practice: Islamic/local traditions versus European colonial perception

As Christina, Mehran and Mir (1999, p. 355) explain, “any discourse about female education in the Middle East must take into consideration the fact that the teachings of Islam, combined with indigenous customs and traditions, play a crucial role in determining the status of women and their education in the region”. However, this should also be placed in the socio-economic political context and dynamics. According to Nawar Al-Hassan Golley (2004, p. 522), “religion cannot and should not be seen independently of the socioeconomic and political context within which it unfolds. Like any other human activity ... it is subject to change, at least in its function.”

Thus the distinction between what is purely Islamic and what are considered entirely cultural and social practices/actions of Muslims will always be debated among Muslims and non-Muslims. This is especially the case when taking into consideration that cultural traditions and social norms in Muslim-majority societies combine the values and principles associated with Islam but also adapt and integrate the indigenous habits and customs of people (Muslims and non-Muslims) in a given society (Megahed 2010a).

For example, among the different interpretations of Islamic law there is one that contends that women have the right to be educated at high level, to possess and dispose of property, to undertake a trade or profession and to vote and serve as government officials (AWIR and MEPC 1998; Ali and Ali 2006). Although these “civil rights” were to have been granted to women by Islam more than 1,400 years ago, some Islamic communities and societies do not in fact implement all or most of them. It is argued, especially by those active in Muslim feminist movements, “that many extant Islamic practices derive from patriarchal interpretations of the *Qur'an* in male-dominated societies where the prevailing norms influenced men's largely biased interpretations of the holy book” (Ramazi 1995; see also Bennoune 1995; El-Saadawi 1995).

The West commonly perceives women in Muslim-majority countries to be the victims of oppression, hidden behind the veil and secluded from the world. Gender segregation and *hijab* (head cover) stand as the most visible “Islamic” practices that are viewed by some as contradicting Judeo-Christian or “Western” ideas of liberty and modernisation.⁴ Golley has argued, however, that gender segregation was common in ancient Judaic, Greek and Byzantine cultures. He further explains that in the pre-Islamic world, the veil served to differentiate between “respectable” women

⁴ For example, the majority of Muslim women wear the *hijab*, some by personal choice such as in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and others. But in Saudi Arabia, law prescribes wearing of the *hijab*. The scope of reasons why Muslim women cover their heads (and other parts of their bodies) is wide, ranging from personal choice or duty to God to coercion/oppression by family members, religious leaders and/or government officials.

and “available” women and was worn by upper-class women until the early 20th century (Golley 2004, p. 525). In fact, today the veil is as much a political symbol as a religious one.

The *hijab* has come to dominate the discussion of women’s status in the Middle East. Whether in academia, the media or politics, the *hijab* is ever-present. This kind of issue has helped to create a visible pattern, as if the region as a whole were suffering from an identity crisis, as nations seek to find a balance between accepting and rejecting a certain conception of modernisation and the Western ideology behind it. Clearly, many women throughout the Arab world have turned to the veil as a symbol of political protest and a rejection of Western culture. Meanwhile it is true that for many other Muslim women the veil is a symbol of religious piety and for yet others it is a combination of both submission to God’s will and resistance of Western culture.

Furthermore, Pat Mule and Diane Barthel (1992) argue that in a traditional gender-separated society, the veil offers women the ability to move freely in the public sphere that has traditionally been the domain of males, such as the workplace and the classroom. However, Mule and Barthel also contend that the influx of Western culture and ideologies has presented Arab society with new challenges. Traditional gender roles conflict with the image of the modern Western woman. The *hijab* is a visible distinction of “Islamic” culture when compared to the unveiled women of the West. This kind of thing is not new but in fact rooted in the colonial past.

In Algeria, for example, according to Susan Marshall and Randall Stokes (1981), French colonial powers attempted to undermine traditional culture and social structure. In order to completely dismantle the existing political structure and remove the traditional political elite, French nationals dominated government administration at every level. Furthermore, France consistently undertook measures to suppress Algerian indigenous and religious culture. Operating under the belief that women’s liberation coincided with modernisation, French efforts focused heavily on women’s liberation and equality.

Traditions and institutions under direct threat from colonial powers tended to become the most important symbols of resistance. As a result, there was a backlash against all things European, including the emancipation and equality of women (Marshall and Stokes 1981). A 2004 World Bank report, *Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women in the Public Sphere*, explained that popular resistance movements associated gender-related reforms, introduced from the top, with the reigning socio-political elite that had allied itself with the French. Thus, gender-focused reform became associated with the Western conception of modernisation and was often a central point of Algerian government opposition (World Bank 2004).

Tunisia, however, as a protectorate, remained politically autonomous, and French interference was rather limited. The government remained, at least theoretically, in Tunisian hands. By consequence, the transition to independence was much smoother in Tunisia. Marshall and Stokes (1981) explain that this resulted in the Tunisian government’s ability to confront and break down long-standing traditions. Since gaining independence from France in 1956, Tunisia has aggressively

reformed the status of women and the traditional family structure. Furthermore, the traditional cultural constraints on women – associated with ethnic norms and/or conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings – were removed or undermined. For example

as a part of a secularization effort, which began under the presidency of Habib Bourguiba (1956–1987), the Tunisian government banned all political groups formed on a religious basis; one of the groups banned as a result of the law included the Movement for Islamic Tendency (which was later renamed *Al-Nahda*) (International Women's Rights Action Watch 2002).

In 1957, Tunisia became the first and only Muslim state to abolish polygamy. The Tunisian government based the decision on the *Shari'a*, which states a man must treat all his wives equally. The Tunisian government claimed that this was humanly impossible. Furthermore, Tunisia's Personal Status Code, enacted in 1956, in addition to the 1986 abolition of the *hijab* and the abortion legislation of 1973, is arguably the most extensive but certainly the most controversial in the region. According to Valentine Moghadam 1993 (cited in Makar 1996), "Tunisia's Personal Status Code of 1956 is unique in the Muslim World as it applies a modernistic interpretation of Islamic law and a daring interpretation of the traditional laws in a feminist way." Currently, the wearing of *hijab* is forbidden in government offices. In addition, Tunisia's current abortion law, dating from 1973, authorises the performance of abortions during the first three months of pregnancy (International Women's Rights Action Watch 2002).⁵

In Egypt, with its semi-independence from the British in 1922, the state had a large number of educated male and female professionals. Barak Salmoni (2003) stated that post-independence Egyptian officials, much like their Turkish counterparts, viewed education as an ideological tool in the nationalist movement. This perception was further promoted after the 1953 revolution. Throughout history, reform movements have sought to garner the support of women through policies of gender reform. Egypt was no different. During the 1930s, men and women alike celebrated the public presence and participation of "unveiled women" (Salmoni 2003). However, Salmoni explains that by the late 1930s through to the 1940s, educational gender parity began to decline with the reaffirmation of traditional female domestic roles. From the 1950s through to the 1970s, many of the newly-independent governments sponsored gender equality and women's liberation in efforts to forge new national identities (World Bank 2004).

Whereas Algeria rejected all things European, Egypt maintained a stable political elite, the members of which modelled their nation after the modern European societies with which they had become so familiar. Egyptian writers and politicians, such as Abadir Hakim, viewed the education and equality of women as a necessity. The maternal role of women ensured that women were responsible for the shaping and nurturing of future generations. Therefore, an educated and moral woman was

⁵ "Tunisia is often viewed as one of the most progressive Islamic states. While the Constitution stipulates that the president must be Muslim and the state religion is Islam, the government has also taken steps to secularize the country and move society away from Islamic fundamentalism" (International Women's Rights Action Watch 2002).

necessary in the production of cultured young men dedicated to the nationalist cause (Salmoni 2003).

Perceptions of women's roles and rights have changed over times in Egypt due to the political and socio-economic transformation shifting the country from a socialist- to a capitalist-oriented society and the re-emergence of Muslim (radical and non-radical) fundamentalist groups. For example, during the 1970s Sadat's government sought to address Egypt's pressing economic problems by encouraging Western European and North American investment. At the same time, Sadat inadvertently empowered once again a group known as the Muslim Brotherhood, which dates back to 1928. The Muslim Brotherhood rapidly gained influence, particularly among university students, as a political force opposing the Nasserists' socialism advocates. Different Islamic groups grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood in which many of these groups have since been opposing legal and social reforms, especially those concerning women's rights. In Egypt, as Nemat Guenena and Nadia Wassef (1999, pp. 6–7) explain,

[t]hroughout almost three-quarters of a century, the Muslim Brothers [and other fundamentalist groups] stood at different junctures in relation to the government ... While national liberation and political independence were causes that inevitably brought the association and the state together, any attempt by the state at social or legal reform was met with opposition, especially if it fell within the realm of [Islamic] *Shari'a*.

Nadje Al-Ali (2002) illustrates a clear example of the Government of Egypt's efforts in undermining the influence of conservative Islamist opposition to civil rights for Egyptian women. The Islamists opposed the reform of Personal Status Law initiated by the president's wife Jehan Al-Sadat. Nonetheless, the reformed law, which granted women legal rights in marriage, divorce, custody, etc., was implemented in 1979 by presidential decree. In the same year, another law that introduced changes to women's representation in parliament was also implemented. According to Al-Ali (2002, p. 8) “[these] reforms spearheaded a two-pronged strategy of undermining the strength and legitimacy of Islamists and demarcating the state's social agenda from that of the Islamists as a form of internal and international mobilization against them”.⁶

During the 1980s and under Mubarak's regime, due to strong opposition from the Islamists, women lost part of their gained rights when the 1979 Law was amended or rather repealed by the 1985 Law (Al-Ali 2002; also Brandt and Kaplan 1995). Currently and according to the Egypt State Information Service, several legal reforms were undertaken. For example, a Republican decree was issued by means of

⁶ Brandt and Kaplan explain that “Law No. 44, promulgated in 1979, represented a leap forward in Egypt's personal status laws. It required husbands to obtain notarized certificates of divorce – though they were still entitled to divorce without judicial approval by simply repudiating the marriage before a witness – and gave wives the right to be informed of a husband's decision to divorce or marry an additional wife (Islamic law permits a man to marry up to four wives). Significantly, Law No. 44, following the Hanafi view of Islamic jurisprudence, gave the wife a right to divorce if she was not informed of a subsequent marriage or if it harmed her, though court approval was not necessary for husbands to enter polygamous marriages. By right, a wife could seek a legal separation if continued married life caused her unbearable harm” (Brandt and Kaplan 1995, p. 112).

which the first female judge was appointed in January 2003. Moreover, amendments were made to the Egyptian nationality law in order to give the Egyptian nationality without preconditions to children born to Egyptian women who are married to foreigners (Egypt State Information Service 2010a, b). Furthermore, “in 2005 Egypt granted women expanded divorce rights. But efforts to change the law to allow women to travel without the permission of a husband or father were dropped by the government for fear that they were too radical to pass” (Kimani 2008).

In terms of education, Michele Brandt and Jeffrey Kaplan (1995) clarify that Islamists have not produced a backlash against female education due to the fact that Islam stresses education, including religious education for both men and women. For example, in Egypt the female enrolment rate in pre-university education increased from 88.1 per cent in 2001–2002 to 90.3 per cent in 2004–2005 (Egypt State Information Service 2010a, b). In Tunisia, female enrolment in pre-university education reached 98.5 per cent in 2009–2010, with increment from 97.1 per cent in 2005–2006 (Tunisian National Institute of Statistics 2011). However, education as a means for cultural change and/or cultural perpetuation has constituted the main terrain of confrontation between progressive versus conservative ideologies, in that “[m]any of the Islamist groups in Egypt and elsewhere, while confronting the government, rely upon educated, activist women as part of their movements” (Brandt and Kaplan 1995, p. 105).

Contradictions between the Egyptian government and Islamist ideologies concerning women's rights have reached school settings. Many confrontations occurred during the 1990s through to 2010, in relation to school girls and *hijab* (head cover, veil) or *niqab* (face veil and the head-to-toe garment). For example, in the mid-1990s “the government linked accounts of school girls forced to wear veils by conservative teachers and school personnel to a broader Islamic campaign. In response, it issued a prohibition against veils in school without a written request by a child's parents ... Courts rejected the veil prohibition. Earlier, they had rejected a government ban on wearing the ‘*niqab*’ ... in school” (Brandt and Kaplan 1995, p. 106). As a renewal of its prohibition against the veil in school, the Egyptian Ministry of Education issued Ministerial decree 6/2006, restating the need of a request by a child's parents to wear the *hijab* in school (Almasry Alyoum 2006). Furthermore, in October 2009 the Egyptian Minister of Education, Yousry Algamal, announced the activation of the Ministerial decree of 1995 which banned both female teachers and students from wearing the *niqab* inside classrooms. This time, the decree was supported by the Egyptian Administrative Court in January 2010; the court decision was issued in response to a petition filed by 50 female students who protested against the ban (Moheet 2009; Shorouk News 2010). Clearly, the wearing of *hijab* and *niqab* was discouraged and unwelcomed by Mubarak's regime. However, it has been and still is very encouraged and celebrated socially and widely practised among Egyptian women in schools, universities and other public spheres.

International policy for women's rights and national responses

International support for gender-educational equality has existed for some time. Of special interest in this section is the General Assembly of the United Nations'

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) held in December of 1979. CEDAW represented a conscious effort on behalf of the international community to recognise and eliminate gender inequalities. However, the convention met with limited success in the Middle East and North Africa. “Egypt ... entered reservations with respect to Article 2, articulating the commitment to eradicate discrimination; Article 9, delineating equal citizenship rights; and Article 16, containing provisions for the elimination of discrimination in marriage and the family” (Brandt and Kaplan 1995, p. 118).

Egypt’s reservations towards the CEDAW provisions were explained by the assumption that Islamic law had already “liberated [women] from any form of discrimination”. However, Article 16 was the only provision for which Egypt expressly stated that a reservation was necessary to comply with the *Shari’a* (Brandt and Kaplan 1995, p. 118).

Egypt remains one of the most secular societies within the Middle East and North Africa region. However and as explained earlier, conservative movements have had an impact on female status and practices for decades. As an example and according to Bradley Cook (2001), although the right to free, basic education has been granted to all Egyptians by the constitution, the resurgence of fundamentalist Islamic beliefs has had a profound effect on women in education. Many women, including those who choose to attend post-secondary education and university, opt to wear the veil. Yet education has increased the average age of marriage. In the meantime, early marriage is rarely practiced in today’s society due to the high cost of marriage, which few young men and women can afford. In Egyptian society, marriage is the optimum goal for women. Thus, for an unmarried young woman pursuing her education, the *hijab* offers an escape from the disgrace or shame often faced by unmarried women.⁷

Similarly, and despite Tunisia’s progressive stance on women’s rights and gender issues, the Tunisian state held reservations towards Articles 9, 15 and 16 of the 1979 CEDAW (see Brandt and Kaplan 1995; International Women’s Rights Action Watch 2002).⁸

Tunisia was reluctant to enact any legislation that might conflict with the Tunisian constitution. According to the Tunisian government, Tunisia’s reservations were only a temporary measure until the Articles of the Convention could be fully integrated into the constitution. Brandt and Kaplan (1995) explain that the Convention did not contradict or conflict with the Tunisian constitution; therefore, Tunisia’s reservations were based upon political and religious concerns regarding the sovereignty of the state. It is worth mentioning that although Tunisia has legally

⁷ A young Egyptian woman who attended university felt that the veil offered her the freedom to pursue her education without facing shame or criticism. Before wearing the veil she was uncomfortable talking to men outside the classroom from fear of public opinion, however after deciding to wear the veil she felt greater security, and took comfort from the fact that no one was going to accuse her of immorality (Mule and Barthel 1992).

⁸ Article 15 articulates that “States Parties shall accord to women, in civil matters, a legal capacity identical to that of men and the same opportunities to exercise that capacity. In particular, they shall give women equal rights to conclude contracts and to administer property and treat them equally in all stages of procedure in courts and tribunals” (UN 2009a).

abolished all forms of gender discrimination through the nation's progressive legislation, the International Women's Rights Action Watch (2002) has reported that as of 1991, 70 per cent of illiterate Tunisian women were unaware of their legal rights.

In addition, women's educational rights have also received global attention. For more than two decades, the international "Education for All" (EFA) movement has emphasised equality and quality of education. In 1990 the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, sought to provide a new direction in education by creating flexible and inclusive educational systems, in addition to achieving education for all by the year 2000 (UNESCO 1990). However, slow progress was made, thus the *Dakar Framework for Action* was outlined at the World Education Forum of 2000 held in Senegal. The Dakar Framework reaffirmed the commitments of EFA and, with a focus on female education, pledged to provide quality education for all by 2015. Furthermore, EFA sought to achieve gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015 (UNESCO 2000). It called for a new direction in education, with special focus on cultural diversity, problem solving and the interdependence of the global world.

As reported by UNICEF (2007, p. 14),

Tunisia first began its literacy programme in the 1960s, with the aim of reducing the illiteracy rate, which in 1956 was estimated to be 84.7 per cent (96 per cent for females). The Government of Tunisia intensified its efforts following the Dakar Education for All Forum in 2000 by turning the literacy programme into an adult education programme that imparts literacy skills and practical childcare skills.

In its Post-Beijing National Plan of Action 1997–2001, the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs in Tunisia stated that "the major victims of illiteracy are women, and a national plan has been set up to combat illiteracy entirely among women between the ages of 15 and 45 by the year 2006 ... the goal is to lower the women's illiteracy rate from its 1992 figure of 30 per cent to 17.3 per cent in 1997" (Republic of Tunisia 1997).

Though the Tunisian Education Act of July 2002 declares the provision of "free education" to all citizens, "regardless of gender, social origin, skin colour or religion" (Tunisian Education Act 23 July 2002, p. 5 and p. 6), illiteracy rates continue to be higher for girls than boys in urban and rural areas in all age categories (International Women's Rights Action Watch 2002).

With the gender gap in adult literacy (aged 15 and above) still present in the region, it was estimated during the period 2000–2004 to include a similar magnitude of only 60 per cent for women versus 80 per cent for men in Algeria, Iraq, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Tunisia (UNICEF 2007, p. 14). In Egypt, the adult literacy rate during the period 1997–2007 was much higher for males at 74.6 per cent than for females at 57.8 per cent (UN 2009b). In addition, illiteracy rates over the years from 2003 through to 2005, though decreased, show a higher percentage among females, aged 15 and older, as shown in Table 1.

To further examine gender inequality, the following section focuses on female participation in pre-university and higher education.

Table 1 Illiteracy rates (15+) during the period 2003–2005 in Egypt

Year (as at 1 January each year)	Males	Females
2003	22.0	47.0
2004	20.4	45.8
2005	18.3	43.8

Source Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), cited in Egypt State Information Service (2009)

Gender-educational inequality: female participation in pre-university and higher education

Education has always been highly valued in the Arab countries of North Africa. Alexandria in Egypt was home to the world's largest and most extensive library, set up in the 3rd century BC. Ancient Egyptians constructed monuments of such mathematical precision that they remain awe-inspiring even in today's world; their construction techniques continue to baffle modern science. With the introduction of Islam in the 7th century AD, the educational traditions of the ancient world thrived. The Arab world gave the world Algebra, the concept of zero and the decimal system. As medieval Europe slipped into intellectual stagnation, Arab scholars preserved the classical knowledge of Ancient Greece, Persia and India. Schools (*Madrassa*) were open to men and women, the rich and the poor. John Daniel (2003) reports that teachers in the classical Arab world included women, highly valued for their poetry and their skill in medicine.

As the Ottoman Empire crumbled and European powers became more involved in the region, educational quality began to decline. At a meeting of Arab education ministers in January 2003, Daniel (2003) reminded the assembled education ministers from around the Arab world of the historical significance of education in Arab culture. He quoted the Prophet Mohammed who said: "It is the duty of every Muslim man and woman to seek education."

The *Arab Knowledge Report 2009* clearly acknowledges that the "inequality between men and women is longstanding and rooted in history. Ending discrimination means upsetting many delicate balances that have become immutable principles" and that "political and cultural pressures and social constraints form multiple and complex restrictions ... contradictory to those of justice, equality, and freedom" (Arab Knowledge Report 2009, p. 49).

Although progress has been made, North African and Middle Eastern countries still lag behind the rest of the world in educational standards. Recently, however, educational reform movements have gained momentum in the Middle East and North Africa region. With the support of national and international agencies and non-governmental organisations, governments in the region have begun to take action in order to improve educational quality, enrolment rates, literacy rates and gender equality.

The demographic profile of Arab countries is such that around 35 per cent of the Arab population in 2010 were under the age of 14. While this figure has declined

from 38.1 per cent in 2000, the Arab world remains home to one of the largest populations of school-aged youth in the world. Somewhat below this the regional average, the figures for Tunisia are approximately 23.4 per cent of the population are under the age of 14, while in Egypt an estimated 32.8 per cent of the population are under the age of 14 (Population and Development 2011, p. 14). Due to the large proportion of school-aged youth, the provision of universal access to education in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa is a unique challenge.

Development initiatives, such as Education for All and more recently Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), aim to improve educational access, quality and gender equity in the region. In a meeting of Arab Ministers of Education in Beirut in 2003, the lack of knowledge, educational freedom and female involvement in the region were highlighted. Furthermore, the current Education for All initiative was described not as a development, but as an effort to recover the great educational traditions of the Arab world. High female illiteracy rates and the lack of female participation in public life were identified as major weaknesses in the educational development of the Middle East and North Africa. Thus, "in order to lift injustice, education must have quality" (Daniel 2003). The same issues were reaffirmed in the Arab Knowledge Report (2009). The report declared that the high illiteracy rate of women combined with low enrolment rates especially in higher education were found to be the most glaring examples of gender inequality in the Arab world. The report acknowledged the need for a dynamic approach to gender-oriented educational reform.

According to the *Global Gender Gap Report 2009*, countries of the Middle East and North Africa continue to lag behind global averages in education statistics. In the Global Gender Gap Index 2009 rankings, Tunisia is ranked 109th, while Egypt is 126th (Hausmann et al. 2009, p. 9). Not only have both Egypt and Tunisia failed to improve, they have actually moved down in the rankings. However, they are not alone: the Middle East and North Africa region as a whole ranks last on the global

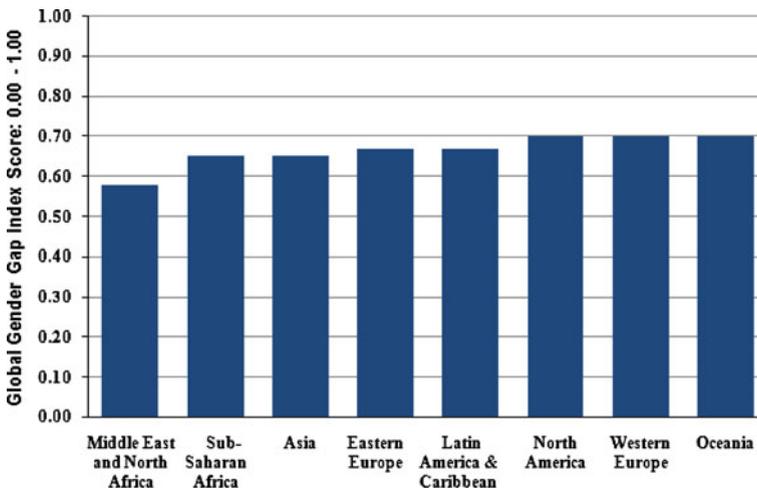


Fig. 1 Regional performance on the Global Gender Gap Index 2009. *Source* Hausmann et al. (2009, p. 17)

index, having closed approximately 58 per cent of its gender gap (see Fig. 1). This compares to around 65 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia; 67 per cent in Latin America and Eastern Europe; and over 70 per cent in Oceania, Western Europe and North America (Hausmann et al. 2009, p. 17).

Tertiary overall gross enrolment rates (GER), are slightly better. The Middle East and North Africa region reported a regional GER of 25.8 in 2003; this figure – while not outstanding – is consistent with the global average (World Bank 2008, p. xvi and p. 15). The World Bank (2004) contends that while the Middle East and North Africa region has experienced rapid educational development, extremely low levels of enrolment and educational standards during the 1960s and 1970s continue to play a role in the poor statistical performance of the region (World Bank 2004).

Although literacy rates remain mediocre at 77.7 per cent in Tunisia and unemployment rates remain high at 14.2 per cent (World Bank 2011c), the Tunisian government remains committed to the universal provision of access to education. The Tunisian Education Act (2002) made education a national priority, in addition to guaranteeing educational access to all. As of the 2008–2009 school year, 2.01 million students are enrolled at pre-university level. That accounts for 97.7 per cent of the eligible population, with 98 per cent of females enrolled compared to 97.4 per cent of males (Tunisian National Institute of Statistics 2011).

In post-secondary and university education, there are clear signs that the number of Tunisian women entering post-secondary education is rising (International Women's Rights Action Watch 2002). In the 2008–2009 academic year, more than half of all university students were women, representing 59.5 per cent (see Table 2). However, despite gender parity in Tunisian higher education, school administrations still tend to be male-dominated (Brandt and Kaplan 1995).

In Egypt, the government has perceived education as being the most important mechanism for women's empowerment (Egypt State Information Service 2010a, b). In 2004–2005, the total number of students enrolled in pre-university education was 16.3 million, which accounts for 90.1 per cent of the school-age population. The female enrolment rate reached 90.3 per cent, slightly higher than that of males (90 per cent). At the tertiary level, the total number of enrolled students in university and higher education reached around 2.5 million students in 2006–2007; among these, female students represent only 46 per cent (Strategic Planning Unit, Ministry of Higher Education 2010, p. 30). In recognition of gender inequality in higher education, the Strategic Planning Unit (SPU) at the Ministry of Higher Education in Egypt stated in its 2010 country report that “while there was a slight increase in women's enrolment in Higher Education between 2002/2003 and 2005/2006 (from 45 per cent to 46 per cent), this percentage still needs further improvement” (ibid., p. 32).⁹ Table 2 provides a comparison between Egypt and Tunisia in terms of

⁹ The SPU 2010 report states that percentages of female participation in higher education are lower still in Egyptian provinces such as Assiut, Suez Canal and Aswan, where in 2005/2006 female enrolments were 34 per cent, 41 per cent and 40 per cent respectively (ibid., p. 32). The report further explains that women's enrolment in higher education is influenced mostly by the unequal distribution of higher education institutions across provinces. Thus, it is unsurprising to find the lowest female enrolment rates in the Upper Egypt provinces which are not only the poorest in the country but considered socially and culturally to be more conservative and protective toward women (Megahed 2010b).

Table 2 Pre-university and tertiary education in Egypt and Tunisia

Pre-university education	Egypt (2004–2005)	Tunisia (2008–2009)
Total number of students	16.3 (million)	2.01 (million)
Total enrolment rate	90.1%	97.7%
Male enrolment rate	90%	97.4%
Female enrolment rate	90.3%	98.5%
Tertiary education	Egypt (2006–2007)	Tunisia (2008–2009)
Total number of students	2.5 (million)	349,142 (thousand)
Percentage of female students	46%	59.5%
Number of public universities	18 ^a	13
Number of private universities	17	–
Number of public and private post-secondary institutions	151	192

Sources Egypt State Information Service (2010a, b); Strategic Planning Unit, Ministry of Higher Education (2010, p. 20); Tunisian National Institute of Statistics (2011)

^a Including Al-Azhar University

female enrolment in pre-university and tertiary education as well as the total number of universities and higher education institutions.

According to the World Bank (2011c), Egypt and Tunisia report similar GERs in post-secondary education. In 2007, the GER for higher education in Tunisia was 31.6, while the nation boasted a gender gap of -12.6 , as the percentage of female students (59.5%) considerably exceeded the percentage of males (40.5%). The GER for higher education in Egypt was 28.9 in 2007 and the gender gap in higher education was 7.1 in 2004 (most recent statistics available).

Both Egypt and Tunisia continue to improve gender equality in education. Access to primary/basic education in both countries is nearly universal. However, disparities remain and it is clear that full gender equality in higher education has yet to be reached, especially in Egypt. Many women continue to enrol in traditionally female areas of study such as humanities, education and nursing. For example, in 2006–2007, the proportion of women in the fields of engineering and basic sciences nationwide in Egypt was approximately 28 per cent and 54 per cent respectively. In contrast, female enrolment was much higher in the fields of humanities (72 per cent), Arts (73 per cent) and education (72 per cent) (Strategic Planning Unit, Ministry of Higher Education 2010, p. 66). These statistics are alarming, since the fields of sciences (versus that of humanities) provide better job opportunities, due to growth in the domain of technology.

Despite growing enrolment rates in higher education, unemployment rates remain high in both Egypt and Tunisia but also in the region as a whole. The unemployment rate for females is much higher than for males. The gap between female and male unemployment rates (17 per cent versus 10 per cent) is much wider in the Middle East and North Africa than in other world regions (World Bank 2009, p. 6). In Egypt, 19.2 per cent for females versus 5.9 per cent for males were unemployed in 2008. In Tunisia, the most recent data available show that in 2005

female and male unemployment rates reached 17.3 per cent and 13.1 per cent respectively (World Bank 2011a, b).

It is worth mentioning that “the unemployment rate is much higher in the 15–24 age group. In 2006–2007, over 20 per cent of young men and 30 per cent of young women in the Middle East and North Africa were unemployed; whereas the world average was 12.5 per cent for young women and 12.2 per cent for young men.” As reported by the World Bank (2009, p. 6), the highest rates of youth unemployment, where again the unemployment rates of young women are significantly higher than those of young men, are found in Jordan (48 per cent for young women versus 24 per cent for young men), Egypt (40 versus 21 per cent) and Syria (39 versus 21 per cent). High youth unemployment rates, among many other factors, have been identified as a main cause for the recent revolts in several Arab countries. It is not surprising, then, that young men and young women have taken the lead in these uprisings. Genuine democracy and social justice (including gender parity), can thus no longer be neglected as basic human rights in the Arab Middle East region.

Conclusion

North African countries are associated with the Arab culture of the Middle East not only due to a shared language and religion but also due to their common struggle for independence and revival of “Islamic” teachings and Arab culture. Our examination of gender inequality and the status of women in Egypt and Tunisia is thus contextualised in the interplay between three cultural and ideological forces that have continued to shape the discourse of gender equality and women’s rights in Arab Muslim-majority societies. We have examined women’s rights and social practice in the context of “Islamic” teachings and local traditions versus Western, European colonial perceptions. In addition, we discussed national governments’ gender-oriented reform policies in response to international pressure.

The case studies of Egypt and Tunisia demonstrate similarities and differences between the two countries’ respective reform policies towards gender parity but also highlight the confrontation between conservative and progressive ideologies which occurred in each country with the implementation of their respective gender-related reform policies. Colonial legacy and Western perception of Muslim women – perceived as victims of oppression, hidden behind the veil and secluded from the world – have reinforced the opposition to gender-related reform policies in the two countries. Tunisia has aggressively reformed the status of women and family law while Egypt has improved women’s social status and legal rights more cautiously.

Unlike other Arab countries, Tunisia was a protectorate, with limited French interference. Thus, opposition to its gender-related reform was less associated with the Western, colonial perception of modernisation. Nonetheless, in order to implement its reform agenda, the Tunisian government banned all groups formed on a religious basis and promoted “a modernistic interpretation” of Islamic law. By contrast, Egypt has experienced opposition to its gender-related reforms from different “Islamic” groups. Though some legal reforms were undertaken,

confrontation between fundamentalists and the government has continued into the present and reached school settings.

Considering the dual role of education as an agent of change and/or perpetuation, female education in the Arab region has been supported by fundamentalist groups, national governments and the international community. Egypt and Tunisia have achieved universal access to basic education and have dramatically reduced the gender gap in secondary education. However, disparities remain in which gender equality in higher education has yet to be reached.

Egypt and Tunisia, like other developing countries, have pursued educational policies geared towards increasing access to education, and, having achieved success, they have shifted their focus to improving the quality of education. However, to date, high female illiteracy rates, lack of freedom and democracy, socio-economic disparities and high unemployment rates especially among women continue to constitute major challenges for the educational and socio-economic development of the Arab Middle East region. The recent uprisings were thus inevitable. In their transition towards democracy, Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab countries need to promote genuine gender-oriented educational reforms. In the meantime, different religious and non-religious interest groups need to give up their conflict over power at the expense of women's rights and shift their efforts towards promoting freedom and equity for all.

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