# The Role of Women in Transforming Middle Eastern and North African Societies

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## Introduction

Women have a crucial role to play in transforming Middle Eastern and North African societies, but their task is not without difficulties. Not only does the Arab region have the world's lowest level of female politicians (an average of only 9.5 percent of the region's parliamentarians are women), women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) face a number of challenges that can be summarized as follows:

– *Economic challenges.* Even though the gender gap is narrowing, illiteracy and poverty remain major stumbling blocks to women's efforts to promote social and political development.
– *Cultural challenges.* Stereotypes concerning gender roles remain popular throughout the region, and most political institutions reflect a male-dominated and patriarchal culture. The way the media further propagates these stereotypes adds an extra burden on the women's movement and their efforts to achieve reform and change.
– *Political challenges.* Laws and policies restricting political rights and civil liberties, such as the freedom of expression and the freedom of association, represent another obstacle to transformation and change.

This chapter argues that it is women who are potential agents for change in the Middle East and North Africa: quantitatively, women are a valuable human resource of economic growth and development, and qualitatively, the women's movement is an intellectual resource for the Arab human renaissance.

The first section of this chapter introduces the paradox of women empowerment in Arab and Middle Eastern countries. The second section provides a brief overview of the socioeconomic and political profile of the region. The third section then examines the various challenges confronting women in the MENA region and the arenas and domains within which women struggle for freedom and opportunity. Finally, the fourth section explains why it is essential for women to be included in the development and transformation of the region.

## The Paradox of Women's Empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East and North Africa is largely perceived through the prism of religious and cultural traditions, limited political and civil rights and stagnating economic and social development (e. g., Huntington 1996; Fukuyama 2002; Lewis 2002). Special attention has been given to the role of women and their lack of equal rights and opportunities (e. g., Inglehart and Norris 2003; Moghadam 2004; Sabbagh 2007). But while many popular stereotypes associate the Arab world with veiled and oppressed women, gender segregation and religious fundamentalism, Middle Eastern women actually have a long legacy and tradition of activism. They represent a diverse and pluralistic variety of attitudes and viewpoints and define their own path toward emancipation (Karam 1999: 6–7).

The approaches toward women's liberation are as diverse as the MENA women's movement itself. Some activists are in favor of secular solutions, some are called "Muslim feminists" and others see themselves as Islamic reformers, calling for a different interpretation of religious readings. But they all fight for the improvement of women's rights and opportunities. They stand up for the modernization of family laws and for the criminalization of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women, including honor crimes. They stand up for the right of women to retain their own nationality and to pass it on to their children, and they want greater access to employment and participation in political decision-making (Moghadam 2004: 42). They take inspiration from the global women's rights movement but they represent their own way of liberation.

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Feminists and human rights activists have achieved notable successes in challenging the status quo. Today, most governments in the MENA region have signed the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CE-DAW), but they have done so with substantial reservations, arguing that the agreement is not compatible with the role of women within the family (i.e., personal status codes) (Connors 1996; Mayer 1995).

In recent decades, most Arab governments have taken substantial steps to improve the well-being of women. Efforts to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals have been impressive. The Arab Human Development Report recognizes that women's literacy rates "have expanded threefold since 1970; female primary and secondary enrolment rates have more than doubled" (UNDP 2002: 3). And several MENA states have nearly closed the gender gap in terms of access to health care and education (UN-ESCWA 2007; Sabbagh 2007: 8).

Still, the picture is somewhat different if one looks at women's economic and political participation. While in other parts of the world women have gained increasing access to paid labor markets, women in the Arab world have not. "MENA's rate of female labor force participation is significantly lower than rates in the rest of the world, and it is lower than would be expected when considering the region's fertility rates, its educational levels and the age structure of the female population" (World Bank 2004: 1). One finds a similar situation when looking at structures of political power: even though women's participation in legislative bodies has almost tripled over the past decade (1997–2007), compared to the rest of the world Arab women hold the fewest seats in national parliaments (IPU 2007) (see Graph 1).

The effects and costs of this paradox in women's empowerment can be felt in many ways, as gender inequality is an obstacle to a country's economic performance. Despite this fact, women remain a largely untapped resource in the region. They make up half of the population and, in some MENA countries, almost two-thirds of university students, yet they represent only about 18.3 percent of the paid labor force in the industrial and service sectors (World Bank 2004: 1–2; UN-ESCWA 2007).

Given this paradox between (a) rapid change in the situation of many women in the region and (b) their stagnant social and political

**Graph 1: Women's Representation in Legislatures Worldwide**
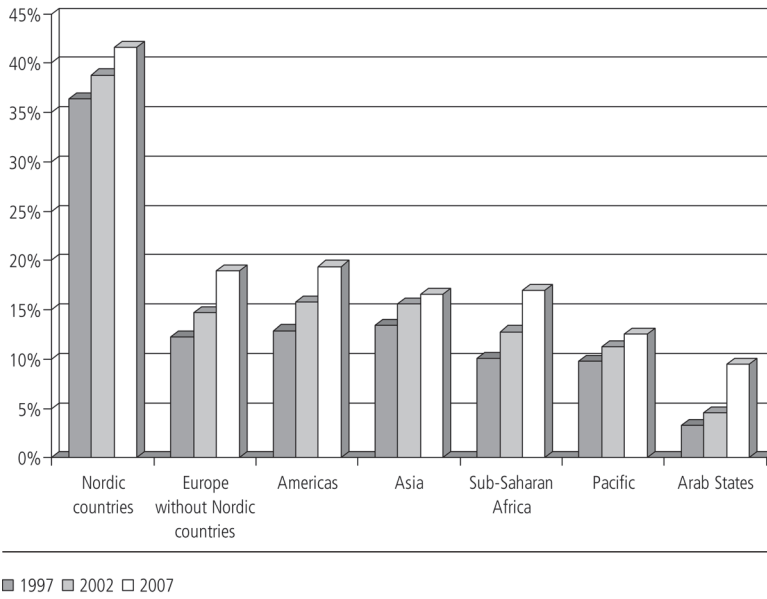
■ 1997 ■ 2002 □ 2007

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of October 30, 2007. World Average.

development, it is necessary to examine the question: What factors explain this paradox and what role can women play in processes of transformation in the region?

## Socioeconomic and Political Profile of the Region

It is difficult to speak of the Middle East and North Africa as a "region" per se, because the societies here present anything but a uniform and consistent picture. It is possible to identify certain common socioeconomic and political factors that influence development, but each country has its own unique history and preconditions for transformation. The same problem occurs when speaking about MENA women. Or as Amal Sabbagh puts it: "the Arab world is not a homogeneous region and there is no single archetype for Arab women" (Sabbagh 2005: 52).

Women's orientations vary by social class, ethnicity, age, education and urban/rural location. "The educated Saudi woman who has no need for employment, has a Filipino maid and is chauffeured by a Sri Lankan migrant worker has little in common with the educated Moroccan woman who needs to work to augment the family income and also acquires status with a professional position" (Moghadam 2004: 22–23). At the same time, women also divide along lines of ideological and political aspirations. Some women activists work together with liberal, social democratic or communist organizations; others support Islamist or fundamentalist groups (Moghadam 2004: 23).

Economically, the countries of the Middle East are viewed largely as "rentier states" (Beblawi 1987: 49) marked by weak economic growth. Although countries may differ according to whether they are rich in oil, rich in human resources or simply very poor, the combination of weak production structures and low levels of economic growth form the basis for the spread of unemployment and poverty in most MENA states (UNDP 2006: 20).

Politically, the regimes of the Arab region range from "secular republics" such as Tunisia to "theocratic monarchies" such as Saudi Arabia. Still, within most Arab states, the family or the tribe constitute the socially relevant unit rather than the individual or political parties. Using the concept of "neopatriarchy," Hisham Sharabi argues that the typical MENA state "is in many ways no more than a modernized version of the traditional patriarchal sultanate" (Sharabi 1988: 7).

Another factor that shapes the political profile in most of the region is a deficit in democracy and freedom. Analysts of the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies state that "Arab rulers are far more concerned with retaining rather than sharing power" (Zaki 2007: 14). The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI 2008) rates most MENA countries as having "unfavorable preconditions" for or even "serious obstacles" to democracy. And the first Arab Human Development Report (AHDR), published in 2002, concluded that the "freedom deficit undermines human development and is one of the most painful manifestations of lagging political development" (UNDP 2002: 2).

The AHDR 2002 states that, together with the democracy deficit,

the knowledge gap and gender inequality constitute the main obstacles to the region's development. At the beginning of the new millennium, about "65 million adult Arabs were illiterate, two-thirds of them women." These illiteracy rates are evidently higher than in many less-developed countries. The report warns that this challenge is "unlikely to disappear quickly" (UNDP 2002: 3).

According to Amartya Sen, human development should be measured by what people are actually able "to do" and "to be" and how they can make use of "the substantive freedoms—the capabilities—to choose a life one has reason to value" (Sen 1999: 74, quoted in Moghadam 2004: 3). The Arab Human Development Report 2005, "Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World," argues that even today women in the region are disadvantaged in terms of opportunities for acquiring these capabilities. Women's higher levels of "human poverty" prevent them from achieving equal levels of health, knowledge and income compared to men; moreover, women suffer from a "noticeable impairment of personal liberty" (UNDP 2006: 10–11). As the World Bank (2004) has shown, these inequalities have implications for the economic development of the region.

## Roadblocks on the Way to Women's Liberation in the Middle East and North Africa

In order to overcome economic and political stagnation in the MENA, the paradox of women's empowerment must be challenged, and progress must be made in achieving equal opportunity and freedom for women.

The main factors that shape women's everyday lives in the region, and that present the key obstacles to women's empowerment, are economic, political, legal and cultural in nature. Many scholars view the traditional gender paradigms that predominate in the Arab/Middle Eastern family as a significant barrier to women's liberation. In addition, there is broad consensus that authoritarian, patriarchal and tribal power structures, the lack of democratic rule and biased media within most MENA states represent major impediments to freedom and opportunity for women. One can argue that some of these factors are more important than the others and that they overlap with and

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influence each other. But what these factors seem to have in common is not only that they influence women's liberation, but these factors can themselves be subjects to change.

### Religion

Religion, especially Islam, is a crucial element in the cultural fabric of MENA societies. Many analysts who focus on the issue of religion maintain that Islam is the original cause of gender inequality in the region. If one looks at policies in Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, one can indeed seem to find evidence supporting this viewpoint, as restrictions against women are explained with religious imperatives. Emerging Islamist movements that politicize Islam do their part to foster this perception.

Using Islam as the central explanation for oppressive gender regimes has been opposed by scholars who point out that the perspectives of both "orientalists" and Islamists (political Islam) distort the religion. Muslim feminists such as Asma Barlas (2002) and Amira Sonbol (2003) defend their faith and argue for the "emancipatory content of the Qur'an, which they maintain has been hijacked by patriarchal interpretations since the early middle ages" (Moghadam 2004: 7). Other analysts such as Leila Ahmed wonder why Muslim women should be obliged "to make the intolerable choice between religious belief and their own autonomy and self-affirmation" (Ahmed 1986: 679).

Most of these arguments focus on the status of women in Islam rather than the status of women in actually existing societies. As a result, Azza Karam (1999: 13) argues for a shift in the debate: "What is at issue is not so much the religion per se, but a broader aspect of neopatriarchy, which may also be found in societies such as Latin America with its own notions of 'machismo' (the domineering and all-powerful male)." Or as Valentine Moghadam (1993: 14) puts it: "a sex/gender system may be identified, but to ascribe principal explanatory power to religion and culture is methodologically deficient, as it exaggerates their influence and renders them timeless and unchanging." Nevertheless, the Islamist movement as a political move-

ment (Tibi 2002) challenges women's liberties and therefore is addressed by many activists.

## Patriarchal Power Structures

Patriarchy is one if not the major challenge to Arab women's advancement. Patriarchal structures exist in the family, in clans and tribes, and in the state, and all these elements reflect and reinforce each other. Hisham Sharabi's "neopatriarchy" best describes this type of authority in many MENA countries, especially in terms of how it impacts women. He argues that neopatriarchy is the means by which Arab societies seek to protect culture and traditions against the pressure to modernize and change. According to Sharabi, over the past 100 years, the patriarchal structures of Arab societies have not been truly modernized but rather have been strengthened and maintained in "modernized" forms (Sharabi 1988: 4). He states further: "[T]he most advanced and functional aspect of the neopatriarchal state (...) is its internal security apparatus (...) [O]rdinary citizens not only are arbitrarily deprived of some of their basic rights but are the virtual prisoners of the state" (Sharabi 1988: 145).

Re-Islamization in Egypt and other states is another example of neopatriarchal dominance, as the state used political Islam to reinstate biased family laws and maintain control over women (Hatem 2000: 55). Sharabi regards the oppression of women as the cornerstone of the neopatriarchal system. Hence he views women's liberation as an essential condition for overcoming this system (Sabbagh 2005: 55).

## Traditional Family Structures

The "patriarchal family unit" is the foundation of traditions and customs in most MENA societies (Karshenas and Moghadam 2001). Most family laws treat women as second-class citizens in terms of their role within the family and their freedom of choice. The only exemption is Tunisia, the Arab model for equal rights and a liberal family code since 1956. But in the rest of the region, Muslim family

law (or personal status codes in North Africa) regulates marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. In all four cases "women have fewer rights than men (...) and are placed under male guardianship" (Moghadam 2004: 35).

The World Bank (2004: 11) highlights the linkage between the traditional gender paradigm—which regards women primarily as homemakers and mothers—and low female labor force participation: "A wife's disobedience can technically result in loss of support from her husband and a justification for divorce, with potential loss of custody of her children, which is normally given to the father once children are beyond infancy. Hence, interacting with the outside world without her husband's consent may involve substantial risk for a woman." The World Bank distinguishes four pillars that manifest the traditional gender paradigm:

1. The centrality of the family, rather than the individual, is the main unit of society. This emphasis on the family is seen as justification for equivalent, rather than equal, rights, in which men and women are presumed to play complementary roles. Both men and women view the family as important and as a cultural asset.
2. The assumption that the man is the sole breadwinner of the family.
3. A "code of modesty," in which family honor and dignity rest on the reputation of the woman. This code imposes restrictions on interaction between men and women.
4. An unequal balance of power in the private sphere that affects women's access to the public sphere. This power difference is anchored in family laws. (World Bank 2004: 10)

Amal Sabbagh (2005: 56) argues that women's primary role within the family actually jeopardizes women's access to full citizenship rights. The United Nations Development Fund for Women reports that "on paper in many Arab states, women are citizens, but there are many social rights and benefits that remain inaccessible to women except through the medium of the family" (UNIFEM 2004: 126).

Even in countries where the constitution or laws guarantee women the right to participate in politics, the traditional gender paradigm can be an obstacle to women's independent political engagement. "[I]n Algeria, men often vote for their wives, and women can rarely

object or influence the political decision that is supposedly being made on their behalf. In Upper Egypt, which has the highest voting turnout in the country, women are often transported to the ballots and forced to vote on the basis of family or tribe preferences" (UNIFEM 2004: 284). The imbalance of power within the patriarchal family regime may thus also help explain the low participation of women in national politics.

The latest changes in Moroccan family law are one promising example that the situation is changing. Since the early 1990s, the Moroccan women's movement has been campaigning for reforms to the personal status code, arguing that such reforms represent the "key to women's ownership of their own issues" (UNDP 2006: 12). These demands were strongly opposed by Islamist organizations, and only after King Mohammad VI issued a royal decree calling for the necessary reforms did women's efforts result in a new Family Code, which was enacted in 2004 (Moghadam 2004: 30).

## State Feminism

Since the time of national independence in numerous MENA countries, so-called "state feminism" (Hatem 1995) has contributed to the emergence of middle-class women. In Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and South Yemen, governments recognized women's formal rights to education, work and political participation (Hatem 1995: 187).

However, Laurie Brand argues that even though state feminism has benefited women, women remained "instruments or tools, and their 'liberation' was part of a larger project of reinforcing control within a series of states that continued to be dominated by what are generically referred to as patriarchal structures" (Brand 1998: 10).

The struggle of authoritarian regimes with modernization and globalization in the 1980s was followed by a shift away from state feminism in most Arab and Middle Eastern societies and the consequent rise of neopatriarchy and political Islam. What first looked like a backlash against the women's movement actually proved to be the opposite: women's political activism increased as a result of these changes, "an activism that was enhanced, ironically, by the region's

toughest political encounters. Political Islam has mobilized women both for as well as against its objectives in North Africa" (Karam 1999: 18–19).

## The Women's Movement and Political Islam

Political Islam has as many different interpretations of and positions on gender roles as any other political grouping or ideology. According to the Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) 2005, the position of the Salafist movements is that "a woman's place is in the home and that her role is to care for the family" (UNDP 2006: 21), while the Muslim Brotherhood supports women's political rights. However, the Muslim Brotherhood has not dealt with reforms of issues in personal status codes such as "polygamy, the woman's right to control over her own body and children, and divorce" (UNDP 2006: 128). And there are differences within the Islamist movements themselves: "The Muslim Brotherhood in Morocco does not have the same political strategies and practices as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria" (UNDP 2006: 208).

Responses by the various women's movements are also manifold. Women's associations such as "The New Woman in Egypt" and "The Tunisian Association of Democratic Women" view religion as a personal faith and therefore want religion to be removed from public life. They reject the Islamists' position that secularism is a foreign concept connected only to the Western experience (UNDP 2006: 128). Other associations in Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian Territories and the Gulf states have taken a modified position, demanding that "the door to independent religious thinking (*ijtihad*) be opened on questions connected with women in the belief that enlightened readings of the regulatory Qur'anic verses would establish a new discourse on women nourished by the Islamic heritage" (UNDP 2006: 129).

## The Image of Women in Public Life

Widespread bias in media coverage reflects the resistance to women's empowerment, as experienced by many women's associations. Most

media broadcast stereotypes about women's role in the private and public sphere and therefore reinforce these stereotyped images in society. Scholars and politicians agree that the media portray women as either "angels or whores" and that "these kinds of images play to cultural values about good women staying in their place, and strong women—like those who would get into politics—being basically untrustworthy and out of control" (Jordanian parliamentarian quoted in Karam 1999: 16–17).

Azza Karam argues that the unfavorable images of women in the media can be explained by the fact that Arab media are often directly or indirectly controlled, if not owned, by the respective governments: "This means that what gets portrayed in the different forms of media is that which is allowed and approved by the state and forms a large part of state ideology" (Karam 1999: 17). The AHDR 2005 critically noted that many Arab satellite channels produce primarily religious programs that disseminate the notion of women's inferiority (UNDP 2006: 159). Karam (1999: 17) argues that governments use gender issues in the media as a "bargaining chip" and therefore allow the "selective courting of the religious establishment on gender-equality issues."

This media coverage reflects the everyday challenges that women activists confront in MENA states through the defamation of women in the public sphere. The UNIFEM report "Progress of Arab Women" found evidence in Jordan, Egypt, Algeria and Yemen that female political candidates generally face more challenges than their male counterparts: "Women politicians are often the object of defamation, accusations of impropriety and scandalous rumors that destroy their public image. In a culture that holds honor, particularly that of women, in the highest regard, these tactics ensure that the public trust and faith in women candidates is eroded" (UNIFEM 2004: 284–285).

To counter this development, several Arab women's Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have engaged in concerted efforts to achieve greater diversity in women's images in the media and in politics. And changes are occurring. One example of a more pluralist and diverse approach toward women is provided by the Qatar-based television network Al Jazeera, which features live discussions on issues such as the role of women in society (Eickelman 1999: 79).

Another challenge to women's political empowerment is the defa-

mation of women's activism itself. Feminism and the women's movement are widely seen as a Western import that is alien to the Middle East. Some groups within Arab societies see evidence for their concern in the fact that Arab and Middle Eastern women's movements often collaborate with international organizations and use international instruments such as CEDAW as a basis for their arguments. The AHDR 2005 found that the "call from outside for reform, sometimes imposed by force, has elicited a negative reaction among some segments of society. This reaction, directed against a dominant Western-imposed women's empowerment agenda, is considered by such segments to be a simultaneous violation of Arab culture and of national independence" (UNDP 2006: 6).

### The Lack of Freedom and Democratic Rule

Added to the suspicions that Arab and Middle Eastern societies harbor against the women's movement in general, and the biased treatment of women in the political sphere in particular, is the fact that women's associations must also struggle with legal restrictions. The freedom to set up NGOs is restricted in most MENA states. Karam (1999: 14) states that "if and when NGOs are allowed to come into existence, the restrictions imposed on them are numerous and tend to range from not being allowed to work on any 'political' issues to having their finances curtailed and each decision subject to approval by a board which, according to legal stipulations, includes a government official or representative." These legal obstacles to the freedom of association imply that "politics is removed from the activities of civil society" (UNDP 2006: 21). The Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies argues that these regulations nullify the freedom of expression and perpetuate authoritarian rule (Zaki 2007: 8).

In addition to the democratic deficits of NGO regulations in most Arab and Middle Eastern states, the lack of democratic procedures within the political system and within political parties also impede the political participation of women. In most countries, laws do not prohibit women's participation in political processes. The problem is that these principles are not equally enforced and implemented in political life and in intraparty procedures.

On average, 9.5 percent of the region's national parliamentary seats were held by women in 2007, an increase of 6.2 percent since 1997. Still, these are the lowest figures for women's participation in legislative bodies throughout the world (UN-ESCWA 2007: 14; IPU 2007). The AHDR 2005 underscored the fact that just because women gained seats in parliaments does not necessarily mean that they are democratically represented: "it may in fact reflect concessions to a group of women supported by the state against other women on the fringes of dominant political forces" (UNDP 2006: 21).

**Graph 2: Women's Representation in Legislatures in MENA Countries (as of October 2007)**
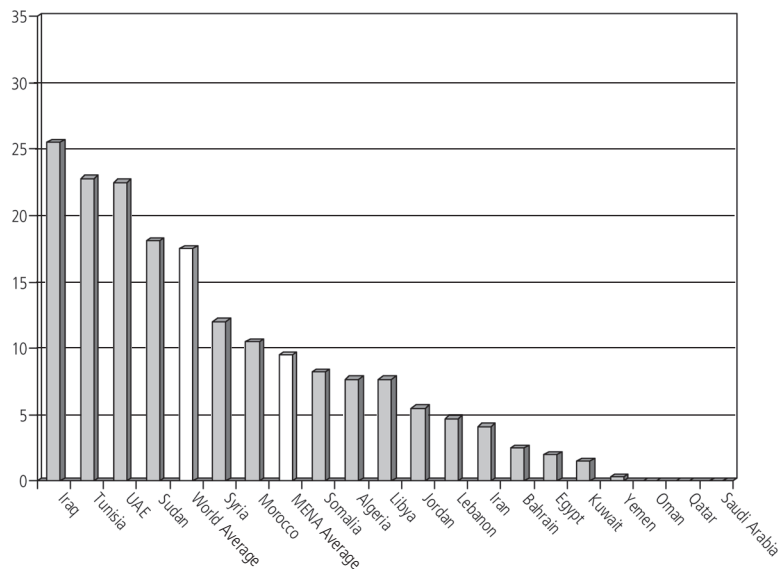


Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 30 October 2007.

Azza Karam argues that all these factors result in general political apathy among women as well as a "lack of interest or faith in political parties in the Arab world." She concludes that, as politicians, "women are thus faced with the challenge of party politicking and competition from within, presenting an alternative image of doing politics, as well as wooing an electorate that no longer believes in either the

political process, the party, or women as politicians. Even if the electorate has faith in the process, the possibility to articulate political concerns democratically and in a representative fashion, is itself largely illusive" (Karam 1999: 15).

**Women's Economic Participation**

In the Arab region, the participation of women in paid non-agricultural employment has stagnated since the 1990s. In 2004, women in MENA states accounted for only 18.3 percent of total paid employment in the industrial and service sectors, compared to an average of 30.6 percent in the entire developing world. A U.N. evaluation of the progress achieved toward the Millennium Development Goals found that the "gains in education attained since 1990 have not been translated into higher economic participation" (UN-ESCWA 2007: 13). Another United Nations report argued that "the low visibility and representation of Arab women in the labour force (...) is unfortunate given that the skills and knowledge they have acquired through improved educational achievements are not being utilized" (UN-ESCWA 2004: c). This poses the question: Why do Middle Eastern women not capitalize on their skills and favorable human development conditions and enter the workforce?

Valentine Moghadam (2004: 29f.) refers to the economic and employment situation during the oil boom from the 1960s to the 1980s to explain the history of the large gender gap in labor force participation. During that time, it was to some extent "rational" for women to stay at home. The high wages of the oil economy kept women "locked into a patriarchal family structure, affecting both the demand for and supply of female labour (...) [M]en were the breadwinners and women were wives and mothers, which was reinforced not only by the political economy but also by Muslim family laws."

At the same time, in other parts of the Middle East, governments promoted women's economic participation because most of the male labor force was working in oil-rich countries, while the "state bureaucracies were in dire need of educated females" (Sabbagh 2007: 8). The need for labor changed again during the economic crisis of the 1980s, and a "popular view emerged that men should receive

preference for the shrinking supply of jobs, because they had families to support. Several countries took very explicit actions against women's participation in the labor force, while popular movements and the media strongly emphasized the importance of women's domestic roles and contributions as mothers" (World Bank 2004: 4).

Today, new economic challenges require different policies. The successful education strategies of the 1990s have created a "generation of young women who are increasingly on a par with their male counterparts" (World Bank 2004: 5). Despite the fact that these young educated women demand the same opportunities and rewards, many social practices that codify women's place in everyday life remain entrenched.

## Women's Role in Processes of Transformation

The combination of the rentier character of oil economies, the attitudes of the neopatriarchal state and Muslim family laws creates a political-legal environment that is highly unfavorable and discriminatory toward women. Together with the propaganda of religious institutions and the media, these preconditions have been and remain obstacles to women's liberation. Educated young Arab women are valuable human resources and potential agents for change in the Middle East and North Africa, but the restrictions of neopatriarchal culture leaves their potential largely untapped.

Karshenas and Moghadam (2001: 51–74) provide empirical evidence supporting the argument that the "patriarchal family unit" can incur high economic and social costs for many MENA countries. Like the World Bank (2004) and numerous scholars, the Arab Human Development Report identifies gender inequality and women's exclusion as a significant barrier to human development in the region (UNDP 2002: 3). The report states that resistance to women's economic and political participation can hinder the region's progress in terms of economic growth, human development and democratization (see also Moghadam 2004: 9).

Despite the fact that women's potential for transforming MENA societies remains severely underutilized, a number of women have achieved much through their own efforts. "They have registered out-

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standing progress in education, made their mark through their merits and skills in work and business, asserted their capacity to assume leadership positions, increased their participation in economic activity and pushed forward their role in national public affairs in all Arab countries" (UNDP 2006: VI). While some women have established NGOs and associations, others have looked to the United Nations and various international conventions for inspiration and legitimation in striving to achieve cultural changes and legal reforms, and still others have looked to the Qu'ran to find evidence that speaks in favor of gender equality and empowerment (Moghadam 2004: 41).

These Arab and Middle Eastern women represent diverse approaches to and histories of women's advancement and give evidence for the rise of pluralism in Arab and Middle Eastern societies. These women seek opportunities to play their role in helping to transform their countries and societies, economically and intellectually, because they know that there can be "no democracy and no development without the effective participation of women" (UNDP 2006: 131). The current developments in terms of women's participation and engagement in politics are proof that things are changing in the MENA region.

After decades of excluding and marginalizing women from political decision-making bodies, the region has been witnessing remarkable changes in policies toward women's political participation since the beginning of the 21st century. As of February 2008, 18 MENA countries had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The most recent accessions include Oman in 2006, the United Arab Emirates in 2004, Syria in 2003 and Bahrain in 2002.

Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia recently adopted quota systems, which have brought a wave of women into national parliaments. "Iraq witnessed the most substantial increase of any Arab country when women's representation in parliament reached 25.5 percent with the 2005 elections. Jordan saw the percentage of women in national parliament rise from 1.3 percent in 1997 to 5.5 percent in 2006, while in Morocco it jumped from 0.6 percent in 1997 to 10.8 percent in 2006" (UN-ESCWA 2007: 14). Only in Yemen has women's participation in parliament declined, from 4.1 percent in 1990 to 0.3 percent in 2006 (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Women's Representation in Legislatures in MENA countries, October 2007**

| IPU Rank | Country | Lower or single House | | | | Upper House or Senate | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Elections | Seats* | Women | Percent | Elections | Seats* | Women | Percent |
| 110 | Algeria | 05 2007 | 389 | 30 | 7.7 | 12 2006 | 129 | 4 | 3.1 |
| 129 | Bahrain | 11 2006 | 40 | 1 | 2.5 | 12 2006 | 40 | 10 | 25 |
| 130 | Egypt ** | 11 2005 | 442 | 9 | 2 | 06 2007 | 264 | 21 | 0.8 |
| 124 | Iran | 02 2004 | 290 | 12 | 4.1 | – | – | – | – |
| 29 | Iraq | 12 2005 | 275 | 70 | 25.5 | – | – | – | – |
| 120 | Jordan | 06 2003 | 110 | 6 | 5.5 | 11 2005 | 55 | 7 | 12.7 |
| 132 | Kuwait *** | 06 2006 | 65 | 1 | 1.5 | – | – | – | – |
| 122 | Lebanon | 05 2005 | 128 | 6 | 4.7 | – | – | – | – |
| 110 | Libya | 03 2006 | 468 | 36 | 7.7 | – | – | – | – |
| 94 | Morocco | 09 2007 | 325 | 34 | 10.5 | 09 2006 | 270 | 3 | 1.1 |
| 135 | Oman | 10 2007 | 84 | 0 | 0 | N.A. | 58 | 9 | 15.5 |
| 135 | Qatar | 06 2005 | 35 | 0 | 0 | – | – | – | – |

| IPU | | Lower or single House | | | | Upper House or Senate | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Rank | Country | Elections | Seats* | Women | Percent | Elections | Seats* | Women | Percent |
| 135 | Saudi Arabia | 04 2005 | 150 | 0 | 0 | – | – | – | – |
| 108 | Somalia | 08 2004 | 256 | 21 | 8.2 | – | – | – | – |
| 60 | Sudan | 08 2005 | 436 | 79 | 18.1 | 08 2005 | 50 | 2 | 4 |
| 87 | Syria | 04 2007 | 250 | 30 | 12 | – | – | – | – |
| 39 | Tunisia | 10 2004 | 189 | 43 | 22.8 | 07 2005 | 112 | 15 | 13.4 |
| 41 | UAE **** | 12 2006 | 40 | 9 | 22.5 | – | – | – | – |
| 134 | Yemen | 04 2003 | 301 | 1 | 0.3 | 04 2001 | 111 | 2 | 1.8 |

* Figures correspond to the number of seats currently filled in parliament.

** Senate Data from November 2007, IPU 2007.

*** Kuwait: No woman candidate was elected in the 2006 elections. One woman was appointed to the 16-member cabinet sworn in July 2006. A new cabinet sworn in March 2007 included two women. As cabinet ministers also sit in parliament, there are two women out of a total of 65 members. One female minister resigned in August 2007, bringing the number of women to one.

*** UAE: One woman candidate was elected in the 2006 elections. Eight women were appointed to the council.

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of October 30, 2007.

In some countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, remarkable changes in the political representation of women have recently taken place. Starting with one female minister in 2004, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) sent nine women to its 40-seat consultation council (*majlis*) after the first national elections in 2006. Kuwaiti women attained comprehensive political rights in 2005, though they did not win any seats in the country's 2007 parliamentary elections. In the same year, Bahraini women managed to take at least one out of 40 seats in parliament.

## Conclusion

As they work to foster freedom, opportunity and a better future in the Middle East and North Africa, women have achieved gains and suffered backlashes as they encounter the paradox between rapidly changing societies and social and political stagnation. The effective participation of women is essential for economic and political development in the region, and the Arab women's movement itself is an example of modernity in opposition to the neopatriarchal culture of MENA societies.

As shown above, approaches toward women's liberation are as diverse as the Arab and Middle Eastern women's movement itself. Some activists are in favor of secular solutions while others see themselves as Islamic reformers, calling for a different interpretation of religious readings. But they all fight for the improvement of women's rights and opportunities (e.g., family laws, citizenship, economic and political participation). They want the Arab women's movement to be recognized as an intrinsic Middle Eastern form of emancipation, independent of Western pressure. And they want women's liberation to be acknowledged as equal in importance to the values of freedom and democracy, because development and transformation are possible only when men and women exist on equal footing. As the AHDR 2005 states: "[T]he rise of women, in both intellectual and practical terms, remains an essential axis of the Arab project for a human renaissance. The advancement of women—viewed both as struggle against despotism on the inside and appropriation from the outside—is part of the construction of a renaissance that will bring about freedom, pride and vigour for all Arabs, men and women" (UNDP 2006: 6).

The women's movement struggles with the challenges it faces politically, legally and culturally. But it is growing and has the realistic potential to be a real agent of change for progress and freedom in the Middle East and North Africa. In the words of Hisham Sharabi (1988: 154): "The women's movement (...) is the detonator which will explode the neopatriarchal society from within. If allowed to grow and come into its own, it will become the permanent shield against patriarchal regression, the cornerstone of future modernity."

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