# Arab Women, Education, Policy, and Empowerment:

# The Role of Gender, Culture, Religion, Traditionalism, and Class

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**Abstract:** This paper addressed the problem of Arab women's challenges that prevent them from pursuing their educational degree, freedom, and career. This qualitative research aimed to discover Arab women's perspective on distance education and to find out how distance education increases their independence. The findings revealed that distance education is a solution to empower Arab women to be independent and to surmount their cultural barriers which prevent them from pursuing their education. As policy implication, higher education administrators in the Arab world can systematically implement online learning for the empowerment of female students.

**Key words:** policy, Arab women, gender, world values, culture, Middle East, empowerment, online learning, distance education, higher education

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Problem Statement

There is a paucity of research on the relationship on the one hand of Islam, gender, culture, and education, and on the other hand economic, social, and political change (Inglehart, 2004). Some authors argue that with the end of the age of ideology, civilizational conflicts, including bloody clashes, will become more widespread between Muslims and non-Muslims (Huntington, 1993 & 1996) to which many disagree. For example, Edward Said (2004, p. 293) criticized that the "clash of civilizations" thesis is a clash of ignorance, which is "racism, a sort of parody of Hitlerian science directed today against Arabs and Muslims". Far from inciting a bloody clash, the Muslim Iranian president Mohammad Khatami, for instance, called for a dialogue among civilizations (UNESCO, 2014). Nobel Laureate in Economics Amartya Sen (1999) said that far from being a clash of civilizations, most cultures in the world are characterized by diversity. This paper joins the dialogue for the inclusion of Islam and gender in our research in our efforts to understand, describe, and change social realities through policy recommendations for the empowerment of Arab women.

Literacy rate varies greatly in the Arab region. Still, it has some of the lowest adult literacy rates in the world

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and "high rates of illiteracy among women persist in the majority of Arab countries (Hammoud, 2006, p. 86). "[G]ender parity in the Arab world [is] one of the lowest in the world except for South and West Asia" (p. 87). Culture shapes the way by which people view the world. "[T]he veil of an Islamic woman in Saudi Arabia" could "relate to… environmental adaptions… [or] a consequence of symbolic creations" (Scupin, 2000, p. 50). "Westerners might consider…Saudi Arabian women [with head scarves and covering their faces] as oppressed. Traditional Saudi women might feel Western women are denied the respect and protection that is every woman's right" (Bassis, Gelles, & Levine, 1988, p. 79).

Evidence-based research demonstrates that the strongest stress on traditional and survival values is found in the Islamic Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Welzel, Inglehart, & Klingemann, 2003). In the MENA Arab world, wives and mothers in families practicing traditional patriarchal cultures have difficulty in taking time away from their husbands and children due to their domestic roles and different family responsibilities (Omar, 2005). "The emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible and must remain so as long as women are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to housework, which is private. The emancipation of women becomes possible only when women are enabled to take part in production on a large, social scale…" (Engels, as cited in New Women in New China, 1972, p. 4). On the one hand, grounded on fact-based multi-year global surveys of cultures, the religion of Islam in general as well as individual identification as Muslim in particular decrease the emancipative values of a person; on the other hand, however, the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims closes among young Muslims, especially young Muslim women, with high level of education (Welzel, Inglehart, & Deutsch, 2005). Cultures change. Evidence-based research shows that there is no total dichotomy between Muslims and the West, as those who went to western countries to immigrate or to study have integrated to some extent to western culture, their basic social values being about half way between those in their countries of origin and of destination, proving that individuals' cultural traits are elastic (Norris & Inglehart, 2012). Hence, for all the above reasons, there is a need to shed light on the importance of distance education to enable Arab women to achieve their educational goals in the patriarchal Middle Eastern societies (Alexander & Welzel, 2011). "Any attempt to provide religious justification for refusing girls their right to education…[is] a betrayal of the very principles that religious leaders have the role to defend" (Dioup, as cited in Carter, 2014, p. 181).

### 1.2 Importance of the Study

For all the above reasons, there is a need to study non-Western societies, especially as they relate to the status of women in general, and in this paper, the educational status of Arab women in particular. This concern relates to embracing diversity and adopting the ethics of social justice (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Given our positionality as supporters of women's right to education, the three co-authors of this paper believe that we must expose and describe the social realities in which Arab women find themselves which promote or hinder their opportunities for education as well as create transformative opportunities in educational experiences. We frame our research objectives and research questions in such as a way as to promote critical inquiry and thereafter share our research findings and recommendations with the affected communities and other stakeholders.

### 1.3 Research Questions

The questions this paper addressed were the following: What are some traditional cultural barriers Arab women experience, when they seek to further their education? How do online courses empower Arab women?

### 1.4 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this paper were twofold: one, to examine the cultural barriers with which Arab women are confronted, when they seek to further their education; and, two, to find out how distance education can empower Arab women.

### 1.5 Theoretical Framework

Moore's (1991) Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) guided this study for two main reasons. First, this theory applies to the learner's individual requirements who cannot attend face-to-face or traditional classes. Second, transactional distance learning takes place in a setting when instructors and learners are physically separated.

### 1.6 Conceptual Framework

Arab women refer to women who come from West Asia and North Africa, coexisting with people of other backgrounds. Note that not all Arab women are the same: there are intra-state differences as well as interstate differences among Arab women along a spectrum from social conservatism to social liberalism (Ty, Alkarzon, & Hunting, 2010). Each Arab woman is unique. Power refers to "a whole series of particular mechanism, … which seem likely to induce behaviors or discourses" (Foucault, 2007, p. 60). Empowerment refers to the process of gaining such inducement to behavior or discourse. Gender refers to social roles that women and men are expected to play in society, noting that gender roles vary in each society from one historical moment and context to another (Ty, Glowacki-Dudka, & Berger, 2012). Traditionalism refers to "persisting values and attitudes" stressing "family and community relationships, which inhibits individual freedom and initiative", and "keeps premodern societies backward" (Scupin, 2000, p. 286). Education can be formal, non-formal, and informal: it can take place in the classroom and the students obtain a degree or a diploma, it can be a short-term course leading to a certificate, or learning that takes place at home, in organizations, or in any other setting, respectively (Ty, 2011). Ever changing through time and space or history and social context, culture refers to "that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 1871, as cited in Scupin, 2000, p. 38). Forming part of human knowledge, religion principally comes from "sacred texts" (Scupin, 2000, p. 13). Religion serves the social function of influencing the beliefs and practices of the people, affects social change, or is a social product people invented to maintain order (Ty, 2013). Social class refers to the level of economic wealth. In layperson's term, there are the rich, the middle class, and the poor or low income. For example, capitalists, wage earners, and the unemployed belong to different social classes.

## 2. Survey of Related Literature

### 2.1 Distance Education

Distance education is a form of education in which learners are physically separated but are connected through telecommunication systems. With distance education, students are engaged in online or distance learning, using different media, such as but not limited to electronic blackboard, live video stream, electronic mail exchanges, and live chat. Distance learning provides an opportunity which enables learners to manage geographic distance and time to receive their education and interact with instructors and learners (Lorenzetti, 2007). Distance learning is institution-based formal education influenced by changes in technologies, economics, politics, and society (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).

### 2.2 Distance Education in the Middle East

There are three modes of distance learning. The first is Dual Mode in which traditional higher education institutions offer both face-to-face classes and distance education for learners (UNESCO, 2002). The open learning centers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Palestine) are examples of Arab institutions that use dual mode in their distance education approach. The second mode is Single Mode in which distance education institutions carry out their educational activities according to the need for distance learning (UNESCO, 2002). Al-Quds Open University in Palestine adopts the single mode in approaching Palestinian students. The third mode is Virtual Mode in which local universities provide world-class education without boundaries so that students do not have to leave their countries to study abroad (Al-Radhi, 2008).

### 2.3 Impact of Distance Education on Arab Women's Education

Despite the implementation of distance learning programs in Saudi universities, a void still exists there (Aljabre, 2012). The growing number of women joining new programs and the growing number of students denied admission due to overcrowding show that there is room for growth. Aljabre (2012) reveals that technological development has spurred the growth of distance learning and gave students who otherwise might not have the opportunity to receive higher education or continue on to postgraduate degrees. Saudi educators realize the benefits of technology and use it throughout the country's universities. Distance learning in the Arab world in general and in Saudi Arabia in particular opens up doors to women that have been closed.

Research reveals that women who obtained higher education levels were able to gain self-confidence and job opportunities, but women with low education levels had limited job opportunities and less self-confidence (Kwapong, 2007). In fact, education paves the way for women to participate, develop, and improve various conditions in their own communities. Education increases women's self-confidence to be more creative and to be decision makers instead of relying on others in their decisions (Ojo & Olakulein, 2006). There are few studies that deal with Arab women's perspectives regarding online courses. Therefore, this study fills the gap in the literature, by examining how Arab women's interaction in distance education can help surmount their traditional culture and increase their opportunities for further education.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

The research design of this paper is qualitative and it "uses systematic observation and focuses on the meanings" that Arab women give to their social context, "their social actions", and education (Thomas, 2002, p. 42).

### 3.2 Participants and Setting

This qualitative study presents case studies involving seven participants from different Middle East countries: one from Algeria, one from Egypt, one from Libya, one from Palestine, two from Saudi Arabia, and one from Sudan (see Table 1). The study took place at a university in the Midwest of the United States.

**Table 1    Pen Names in Alphabetical Order of Arab Women Interviewed and Their Countries of Origin**

| Number | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pen Name | Amany | Mai | Mariam | Noor | Sabiha | Sabreen | Yasmeen |
| Country of Origin | Saudi Arabia | Saudi Arabia | Sudan | Palestine | Algeria | Egypt | Libya |

### 3.3 Data Collection

The data were collected from case studies involving face-to-face ethnographic interviews and artifacts. Through ethnographic interview, each Arab woman was interviewed "in an effort to learn as much as possible about them and their behavior" (Thomas, 2002, p. 42). Qualitative data were gathered from field notes, English translations of Arabic transcripts from interviews, and analytical memo, after which they were used for data analysis.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Coding was started by reading through the transcripts line-by-line to find out all the ideas, themes, or issues they suggested. Here a smaller set of promising ideas and categories to provide the major categories and themes for the final findings were used (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The most frequently used codes in the transcript were "culture" and "individual learning". We used the terminology most often employed by our research collaborators. The analytic process started after the codes and categories were created, thereafter we were engaged in meaning making and making sense of what was observed and transcribed. Thereafter, we started to write our memos, using informal language to let our ideas flow (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The memos enabled us to picture our research topic as an activity purposefully undertaken and enjoyed by our research collaborators. We realized that we have only begun to scratch the surface on how Arab women find a solution for their situation on distance learning. This allows us to be "more creatively [link] up specific events and observations to more general analytic categories and issues" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 154).

After data collection, concepts emerged from which themes were woven together about the social contexts and online-learning experiences of Arab women to create a story. This research only began to scratch the surface on how Arab women find a solution for their situation through distance learning. As far as artifacts are concerned, graphs and charts show changes or improvements in Arab women's learning style through distance learning.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Cultural Barriers

Cultural restrictions such as collectivism and masculinity force Arab women to struggle for the respect of their individuality and womanhood. For instance, Amany, from Saudi Arabia, is a mother of three kids and married to a very conservative and strict husband. Without any assistance from her husband, she has to perform all house responsibilities. Her husband did not allow her to have a babysitter for her kids while she was in her classes. He believes that mothers are the only ones who can take care of their kids, as this was the way he was raised in his country. Amany said: "My husband cannot do anything for himself; he cannot make even a cup of tea. It is shameful in our country that men cook or enter the kitchen to help their wives." He believes too that women cannot go out and leave the kids with their dads. She cannot go out and leave him alone at home. He might need her to prepare a cup of tea or food for him. Amany said: "As I am taking evening classes from 6–9 and my daughter doesn't take a bottle, I must feed her." This is another issue she is facing with her little baby as the baby needs her mom to be around during the time of the class. In this way she found online class was the only solution for her.

Mai, 30 year old, comes from Saudi Arabia where single women cannot leave and return home late or sometimes even leave home at all.

Mariam, who hails from Sudan, is married to a medical doctor. Her husband spends at least three night-shifts weekly. She has to take care of her children. This is considered the mother's responsibility in the Arab world.

Noor is a single Palestinian who came with her parents and two brothers to study in the US. Her parents and two brothers put some restrictions on her, especially when going out at night. From a traditional cultural perspective, Noor, as a woman, has to take care of the house and her parents. She has to cook food, wash clothes, clean the house, and take care of her parents. From a cultural viewpoint, as a woman and single, she has difficulty going out of her residence, even for evening classes. Thus, she depends on her two brothers to escort her to the university campus. Thus, online education represent a practical solution for her cultural barrier.

Sabiha, who is from Algeria, has taken two online classes. She is married and her whole family and her in-laws do not want her to go out to attend classes at night, especially as most graduate courses are offered at night.

Sabreen is a single mother from Egypt. She has two children: one is eight years old and the other is ten years old. Her husband died from a car accident. She has a bachelor degree in English from Cairo University, but she never applied for a job, because she dedicated her life to her husband and her two children. She used to depend financially on her husband. After the death of her husband, Sabreen started living with her parents who are religious and conservative. They inquire when she goes outside the home. This makes the Sabreen's movement very difficult.

Yasmeen, from Libya, single, 20 years old, belongs to a large family and she is the oldest among her siblings. In addition, Yasmeen stated: "I live in Rockford and my parents and my culture do not allow me to travel far distance by myself especially because I am a girl even though I am 20 years old." Again, this participant gave evidence about how online classes provided her with a good opportunity to solve her cultural restrictions regarding her movement.

Based on all the foregoing examples, Arab women who were interviewed clearly experienced several traditional cultural barriers that hindered their active pursuance and furtherance of their education. Attending face-to-face classes is a problem for all of them.

**4.2 Online Courses Empower Arab Women**

The Arab women from different countries concurred that online courses were very helpful in supporting their individual learning, helping them earn degrees, have a career, and improve their economic situation. They have been in the U.S.A. for one to four years. They have never experienced online classes in their countries. This has been the first experience for them to be involved in online environments.

For example, Amany from Saudi Arabia has been in the United States for almost three years. Amany found online classes as a solution for her to pursue a degree, saying: "Online classes are helpful for me because Arab women have lots of responsibilities so it would be easier for them to attend online classes rather than regular classes." She talked about her first experience with online classes and said: "The teacher was like an instructor, giving us instructions, material, and assignments to do. Online class helped me to teach myself and encouraged me to seek information by myself." Noor, a participant from Palestine, said that she has been in the U.S.A. for one year.

Concurring with Amany, Noor said the following about the instructor: "I appreciate how organized my instructor was on providing the material of the class and her fast feedback regarding any problem that I might have had as beginner toonline classes." Amany appears satisfied with this type of learning and she was excited

when she was talking about how the instructor played the facilitator role and how she was enjoying being central to the learning process. This type of learning, from her view, is a good chance to be able to search for and find information. As her instructor developed the environment that motivates her and her classmates to learn, Noor is very happy and satisfied with her first online instructor. Noor appreciated her efforts to give the students the guidance that helped them to learn, saying:

She was actually very nice. She gave me CDs of all the slides, so in case I couldn't go online, I could just look at them, look at the slides though the CD, and print them out, print all the slides out … she had the PowerPoint, she was talking, she recorded herself talking on the PowerPoint, so you watched it on the computer just like you would be sitting in a classroom, and the professor talking to the PowerPoint. So I printed off my PowerPoint slides ….and then I read them, so I did that and then my notes…She used to ask us to find some other sources that can help and motivate us to learn.

The material the instructor provided the students helped them take notes and do their assignments. When the learner is self-directed, setting his or her own goals and standards, the instructor becomes a facilitator who reviews learner-set criteria, timelines, lists of resources, and collaborations. Students in this situation have choices in their education; they are responsible for their learning. They measure their own achievement, and they have power in the classroom and can become more independent. Mai and Yasmeen shared some other experiences related to individual learning, saying how they started to be more independent. Talking about being in the United States and about the most helpful aspect in online classes, Mai said:

The most helpful aspects from online classes were the individual learning…. For me individual learning was a new type of learning and I thought it was a good type, and I liked it. In the past I wasn't able to find the information that I need because the instructor should do everything. I even wasn't spending any time to look or find what I need. I was thinking is just wasting time to search and find what you need by yourself since it is available.

In her previous academic life, Mai did not have the ability and the motivation to search for the information that she needed. She did not know how to start searching for information, lacked initiative, and lacked opportunity for initiative-taking. She was thinking that it was a waste of time. After her experience with how to be more independent in her learning, she understood how searching for information was helpful for her academic life. The same thing happened with Yasmeen, when she mentioned with a smile on her face, about how she became more independent and how she was able to look for information by herself. This study includes artifacts that show improvement in Arab women's learning style through distance learning. Thus, the participants benefit from online courses not only in terms of content-learning but in tools which helped them to be more active in their own learning. Online learning helped them to make their own decisions about what and how they will learn, construct new knowledge and skills, by building on current knowledge and skills, and understand expectations. They were encouraged to use self-assessment measures, monitor their own learning to develop strategies for learning, work in collaboration with other learners, and produce work that demonstrates authentic learning.

Mariam, who is from Sudan, has taken three online classes. Her classes are offered at night. She said that "offering online classes saved my career and I consider them to be the only way to achieve my dream of getting a university degree." She recommends that there should be more synchronous classes in order to interact with students and this opens the opportunity for students to know and learn from each other in a better way.

Due to the availability of online classes, Sabiha, who is from Algeria, was able to attend classes, which will lead her to receive her Master's degree in Economics. With that degree, she will be able to be financially

independence, as she will be able to pursue a career related to Economics. She feels that she has to fulfill assignments more than in face-to-face classes. Thus, she recommends that teachers or instructors should reduce the quantity of assignments in order to improve the quality of online learning. She feels that focusing on the quality of assignments is more important than focusing on the quantity.

Sabreen, who is from Egypt, is left alone with two kids; she decided to pursue her career in order to improve her qualifications and get a job. Sabreen found online classes to be a significant solution that can cope with the restrictions her parents imposed on her. She is taking online classes and considers online classes as the "only opportunity" to pursue and improve her career. Sabreen loves the asynchronous classes, because she can post her comments at any time. She recommends more faculty interaction with students, as they act as facilitators and not as teachers.

When asked about being in the United States for two years and about her experience with online classes, Yasmeen, who comes from Libya, said:"I have a good experience with online classes because it made me more independent and search for information on my own using resources such as books and other sources." Yasmeen shared how online classes helped her to solve her problem, saying: "I believe online classes are very helpful for me to pursue my degree. I feel that they give me the flexibility and I need that." Online classes gave Yasmeen the flexibility to help her family because of the size of her family and because her dad has a low income. Online classes helped her to go to her job in the morning and do her class assignment whenever she is able.

In summary, all the Arab women interviewed expressed that online courses provided them opportunities to further their studies, which would otherwise not be possible, due to several traditional cultural impediments.

## 5. Summary, Conclusion, and Implications

### 5.1 Summary

Different opportunities for educational advancement are rooted in historical, social, and cultural contexts. Arab women from more traditional families tend to stay at home, as they cannot leave home without a family escort. Hence, they have limited opportunities to further their education. This study responded to the need to find an appropriate way to empower Arab women achieve their educational goals by overcoming the obstacles caused by their traditional culture in their countries. Across all the case studies, the main findings for this study show that Arab women found distance education as a solution to surmount traditional cultural barriers to their education and thereafter to pursue their own careers and their economic situation, leading to their empowerment (see Figure 1).
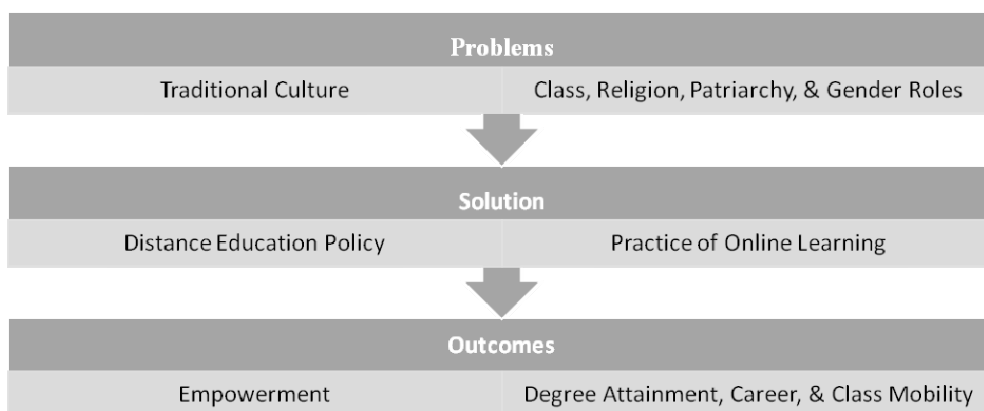


**Problems**

| Traditional Culture | Class, Religion, Patriarchy, & Gender Roles |

**Solution**

| Distance Education Policy | Practice of Online Learning |

**Outcomes**

| Empowerment | Degree Attainment, Career, & Class Mobility |

**Figure 1    Arab Women's Education: Problem, Solution, and Outcome**

### 5.2 Conclusion

There is a need to go beyond stereotypes and to promote social action that leads to positive social transformation that empowers Arab women. Here, connecting theory, research, and practice, the three co-authors assert our commitment to envision a pedagogy of engagement as a model of research for social change in a community of practice. With online learning and distance education, there is a cultural capacity to create space to provide possibilities of change to make the vision of the near future that give more Arab women the opportunity to further their education a reality. The co-authors recognize that the individual and social contexts of each Arab woman are different, noting that each person has multiple identities across time and space. In many instances, there is no "me" without reference to one's own family or the group, in this case, the Arab community. Hence, learning is social and is a product of collective action and community participation, instead of individual rationality only. With online learning, more and more Arab women from more traditional families can engage in further education. When Arab women have the opportunity to get a diploma, they become empowered to pursue a career that provides them with economic advancement as well.

### 5.3 Implications

The limitation of this study is that there were only a handful of research collaborators. Hence, in terms of future research, more participants with a larger sampling size are needed in order to establish a general trend of Arab women's perspectives on distance education to generalize the study about the online learning experiences of Arab women who come from the Middle East. Further research can discover if there is a link between class and education for Arab women. In short, to what extent can Arab women who come from poor families or from rural villages have the opportunity to further their education through distance education in comparison with Arab women who come from rich family and who live in urban settings? Also, further research can be conducted to discover if there is correlation between traditional practices of religion on the one hand and income level and geographic setting on the other hand, especially as differences may impinge on educational and social mobility. For policy implications, both public policy makers and higher education administrators need to realize that online learning could be one solution for female students in the Middle East and promote the increase in the availability of online courses. For practice, Arab women and their families must consider online learning as a way by which to surmount their cultural barriers. This research is useful for women from Arab countries, because it encourages higher education administrators to reconsider their philosophy and approaches to online learning, curriculum, and higher education system humanism.

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