

Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

Topic A: Educational lag in Middle Eastern and Northern African women due to socio-religious aspects

Introduction

Among the universal declaration of human rights, the right to education can be found. Although, in many countries, education is available for a great number of people, there are some countries in which a debate is open regarding the accessibility of education for women. The sources that present this debate are mostly related to the power of the patriarchy, alongside the religious customs and beliefs of the population in the Middle East and Northern Africa.

Education is a very important factor since it contributes to the national economy. In a recent study, made by the UNESCO and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2002, called the "Financing Education — Investments and Returns, Analysis of the World Education Indicators" in countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia. It was proven that by increasing schooling, the economy had grown by 3.7% annually. Private initiative in these countries has less access to highly qualified labor, which derives in less competitiveness. This slows down the whole country's development and doesn't favor the empowerment of women and girls in the region.

Fighting the problem legally

Middle Eastern and Northern African countries (MENA Region) have created new laws and policies to close the gender gap but unfortunately, it has not been enough. Girls among the ages 14-16 are forced to assume a maternal role; because of this, some are unable to receive any type of education or find the solution in dropping out of school. In 2014, Egypt implemented a law which allows women to receive assistance in motherhood, within Article 10 of the 2014 constitution; this clause is directly derived from Article 18 of the 1956 constitution. "The State protects and supports (takfir al-da'm) the family, in accordance with the law, and protects motherhood and childhood. Article 25 of the UDHR similarly declares that: motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance," (POMEPS, p. 23). These laws are the key to provide aid to girls who have kids, which could allow them to focus on their studies, while at the same time being able to assume their motherhood.

In a study by UNESCO's Institute of Statistics (2012), enrolment for both boys and girls at an elementary level was found to be almost the same (the Gender Parity Index (GPI) of the net attendance of this group is 0.9931). In contrast, when talking about secondary or pre-university levels, the gap widens. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), concluded observations on the combined fourth and fifth periodic reports of Egypt (5th February 2010). According to this report, one of the main focuses is the concern on the descent of girls' enrolment at both primary and secondary school, as well as the high drop-out rate at secondary school and university. Considering that only primary education in countries such as Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, Tunisia among others was mandatory, parents consider their superior education unnecessary.

Given this problem, Egypt made radical changes regarding education by making not only primary education mandatory and accessible but all sorts of pre university levels. The 2012 Constitution, extended compulsory education to include the secondary stage/installment. The same is stipulated in Article 19 of the 2014 Constitution. Therefore, what is labeled as *المرحلة الثانوية* primary education, in

Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

Egypt, according to the Constitution presently in force, covers all preuniversity education. (British Institute of International and Cooperative Law, 2016).

Egypt within its international legal obligations is required to direct education towards human personality and respect for human rights. In 2014, Egypt reinforced a series of changes within the Constitution to fulfill their obligations to prevent any type of discrimination against women. This is referred to in Article 13; the principle of non-discrimination against women, which must also apply to the content of educational material, which at the same time shall not perpetuate stereotypes. This helps reform education by teaching young people respect and values, along with a gender perspective.

Women have been demanding a change in two main aspects: private and public. In the private sphere we find rights in marriage, divorce, and domestic violence, while in the public sphere, we find education as in starting to open to political participation which derives in a broader representation of women in congresses. The latter has been proven unsuccessful due to multiple causes, among these the large scale of sexual harassment and repression to female activists, along with the opposition of conservative Islamic politicians. This lack of voice in politics limits any further advance in improving or developing laws.

Female activists' struggles

The Middle East contributes less than other regions in terms of statistics and information on women's participation in politics. In this region, female social participation is not of interest to government officials; countries like Saudi Arabia did not accept women within their political structure until 2015. Unfortunately, there are not many people who watch over the rights of girls and women, whose right to education is affected by the ideology that has predominated in the Middle East.

Political unrest and threats to women and girls' rights has increased female activism, demanding their voices to be heard. Women nowadays are demanding their rights, specifically the one to be heard. By getting more involved in politics, these activist groups need to double down on their commitments, making sure that women and girls understand what they're fighting for. After Egypt's revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood tried to erase all the gains activists had already achieved. Even the women, who were enjoying their new respected rights, weren't necessarily able to live them because they are disempowered by strong social norms and traditions, such as their rejection to women being involved in politics or having a voice. Monitoring groups such as the Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement (EACPE) have found that husbands, fathers, or brothers will sometimes tell women the candidate or political party they should vote for instead of doing it themselves.

Laws in MENA Region are restricting women's right to education and are the perfect example of the lack of interest on behalf of the authorities. Beyond financial support, activist groups in the region expect for the international community to realize that fundamentalism and extremism also afflicts them.

Building teachers' capacity to promote gender equality in education.

Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

The quality of education is a constant problem throughout the MENA Region. “(...) Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa Egypt, young people frequently cited the poor quality of teachers, overcrowded schools, and lack of basic supplies in schools” (World Bank, p. 58). The inappropriate school facilities, the lack of scholar on teachers, and a lack of female teachers, poses an image to young boys and girls on the affair. Likewise, the shortage in availability on safe and reliable transportation to schools is a constant situation for girls all around the region.

There are many early dropout rates from girls in Morocco and on the republic of Yemen. The low education quality from poor facilities, crowded classrooms, and inappropriate teaching, contributes to the constant and repeated dropout rates as well as the low achievement levels.

Teachers may not view themselves as role models, however as the students spend a great amount of time within their school and interacting with their teachers, they become role models to them; this can either have a positive or negative outcome. Professors educate not only in subjects such as math, physics, chemistry, biology, among others, they instruct values, respect for themselves and others but also ideas. This is why all- female activists encourage hiring more women to assume a teaching role, creating a better image of educated and working women.

It was found that female teachers represent 42% at the secondary level in contrast with 52% at the basic level of education. A higher number of capacitated female professors is needed for many reasons, not only to close the gender disparity in the teaching workforce. Female teachers are also better role models for girls and have a greater capacity when faced by girls, especially when they reach puberty. The increasing number of female educators in MENA region encourages parents to send girls to school because of the learning outcomes that these women represent. The discrepancy of the number of male and female teachers at a secondary level varies depending on the country, but the lack of female teaching force in countries like Iran is alarming.

Education after Malala

Malala Yousafzai as a young girl publicly spoke against the restrictions that were made on girls' right to education. In 2007, the Swat valley was overtaken by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP or Pakistan Taliban); they began imposing very strict Islamic laws (Shari'ah, laws or conduct guides for Muslims) closing and destroying girls' schools. At the same time, they banned women from any role in society and started carrying out suicide bombings.

On October 9, 2012, a TTP gunman on her way home shot Malala in the head from school. After she survived the attempt, the incident was made public which arose several protests and her cause was heard worldwide. Her story represents many girls' situation, which is why after becoming the youngest Nobel laureate, UNESCO Malala Fund for Girls' Right to Education was created.

Malala's Fund involves 10 countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Mauritania, Nepal, and Tanzania among others, which main objectives are: expand access to education for girls and women, especially those hardest to reach and affected by conflict and disaster. As well as improve the quality and relevance of education, ensuring that content, teaching practices, learning processes and environments are gender-sensitive and strengthen policy and capacity to ensure safe learning environments (UNESCO, 2018).

Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

Empowering adolescent girls and young women through education

Education would represent a huge opportunity for women and girls to challenge their culture and have the choice to do, as they want with their reproductive and sexual life, while also providing new work opportunities for them. Likewise the potential to contribute to the economy not only to their household but also to society. Along with the strong increase in years of schooling, fertility rates in the MENA Region have been decreasing at a constant rate since the 1980s. Thanks to agencies like the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), 15 million USD have been designated to breaking the cycle of exclusion and vulnerability in which Middle Eastern and Northern African women have been living in their entire lives. Not only funding, but also promoting gender-transformative opportunities for female civilians will strengthen social and governance structures, ensuring the country's ownership and accountability.

Afghanistan National Solidarity Program (NSP), creates elected gender-balanced Community Development Councils, and empowers them to select, design, and manage small city projects. On the evaluation of the NSP found that, not only did it improved villagers' access to services, the program has increased the involvement of women in many aspects of community life. At the same time, senior women have gained respect, and men have become more open to female participation in local governance (Beath and others, 2010). On the same way, education can provide women with opportunities to engage more in politics, in their rights, and how to enforce them.

Scholarship programs are one method of encouraging girls to outstand at school and pursue better grades as well as non- traditional subjects. An experiment conducted by Michael Kremer, professor at Harvard, showed that scholarships had several unexpected benefits.

As expected, the test scores of all the girls in the selected schools improved, even those of girls who were unlikely to win. Teacher attendance also increased. Perhaps, as a result, some evidence suggested that the test scores of boys improved as well, even though the boys were not eligible for the scholarships (World Bank, p. 134).

Exclusion leads to economic, socio-cultural and political inequalities. Poverty, gender-based violence, and poor education quality arrive at a time when through their adolescence, girls begin to manifest sexual and reproductive health issues. Societies tend to pay the price of educational inequality: high child and maternal mortality, poor nutrition, vulnerability to exploitation and lack of voice in public life. Women and girls' education represents development gains for all, like improved family health and education, decent jobs, higher incomes, and greater civic participation.

Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of
Women

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Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of
Women

Glossary

Broader: covering a large area; wide.

Compulsory: put into force by laws or rules; obligatory

Civic: related to city ship, having a sense of public responsibility.

Derive: develop from, have as an origin.

Discrepancy: a state of difference or inconsistency; variance.

Disparity: clear and obvious difference, lack of similarity; inequality.

Fundamentalism: strict attachment to any st of basic ideas or principles.

Gender Parity Index: an index designed to measure the access of education between female and males; released by the UNESCO.

Latter: being the second mentioned of two, last.

Monitory: providing or caring warning.

Perpetuate to preserve, to cause to continue or prevail.

Unrest : dissatisfaction or turbulence.

Guide questions

-According to your country which are the religious customs that hurt women? Have they change along the years? What does society do to stop them or preserve them? Does the government get involved in this situation?

-Which are the worst decisions your country has declared to diminish women?

-Are women in your country allowed to go all the way through education levels? If so, how? If not, why not?

-What kind of private or state initiative prevail in your country? Are they contributing to your country's economy?

-What kind of activities lessen the whole country's development and doesn't support women's empowerment?

-What kind of laws has your country created in order to close the gender gap?

-Which government facility regards for educational changes for both boys and girls equality and what are these changes about?

-Has the Political Constitution of your country changed to offer women equality rights?

-What kinds of changes do women demand in your country? Have they been listened? How many of them have been approved?