Special Article

Women's Scholarship and Engagement in Muslim Societies

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The emotions experienced when one evaluates the current state of women's scholarship and engagement in the domains of educational policy, pedagogy and development is to experience both deep hope and immense apprehension at exactly the same moment. The optimism stems from the recognition that there has been nearly a century of political progress and the steady commitment of international organizations to ensure women and girls have access to, and can thrive in, educational spaces. In just the past three decades, from the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995, to the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals, to the Sustainable Development Goals, attention has been focused on women's rights, access to education and employment, and safety and security. Yet, the emotions of unease and trepidation are grounded in the shifting landscape of the first quarter of the 21st century, where rising authoritarianism, populist movements, and religious fundamentalism are emerging as central pillars supporting political, economic, and social changes. These changes increasingly harken back to a desire for women to maintain traditional notions of duty, chastity, and honor, often as a way to

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limit women's freedom and agency, but to also remake society in historically patriarchal structures.

This seesaw that encompasses the strides women are making in multiple fields through their intellectual and scholarly accomplishments, as well as the intensifying constraints their involvement in such arenas is facing, is not new. It is also not restricted to any one country, or region of the world. One common element of rising authoritarianism is in the restricting of women's access and opportunity in a variety of places. Anti-intellectualism, fears of curricula that address women's issues, and infringements on women's autonomy are escalating and women's engagement in public spaces are under duress. There is often an assumption that such activities are particularly prevalent in the non-western and non-white worlds, but that is far from the truth. The spread of misogyny and the reach of oppressive movements to constrain women's engagement in a multitude of spaces is clearly global, with very few countries omitted from the list. Unfortunately, while we might recognize the threat, we also tend to look for solutions to counter such attacks in the western or white world. This often means we ignore efforts in other spaces that might otherwise inspire and energize us.

In being invited to write this essay for the *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies,* for the Special Issue on *Women's Scholarship and Engagement in Policy, Pedagogy, and Development,* I hope to provide a broad-based overview of how the current global context impacts the ability for educational research conducted by women and female scholars. This is not solely to foster and generate ideas to promote individual and societal transformation, but to also offer new ways of thinking for continued progress and evolution of women's, girls', and female representation in a wide array of public and private spaces. Drawing inspiration from the history and activism of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and as it pertains to the systems and practices in Muslim societies and the Muslim diaspora, it is my hope that this essay presents a global framing that contextualizes the work in these regions and amidst these scholars.

In setting the stage for this essay, I would first admit that I am neither Muslim, nor have I lived in a majority Muslim region of the world. I did spend my formative years (ages 11–19) in India and have recently published a book, *Bangalore Girls: Witnessing the Rise of Nationalism in a Progressive City* (Baily, 2024), that focuses particular attention on the ways in which Hindu fundamentalists have engaged in public

and private actions that have increasingly marginalized, ostracized and discriminated against the minority Muslim population in India. My research, which has focused on women's agency and power is part of my own feminist identity, crafted, not as someone born in the United States, or who studied and settled in the US, but is in part due to the secular and liberating adolescence I experienced in India, and the influence of strong South Asian women of all castes, religions and linguistic backgrounds I was exposed to in those formative years. As such, the invitation to write this essay was an honor, in part due to the fact that I hope to make a case that there are a plethora of ways women are engaged in public arenas particularly in educational spaces that encompass policy, pedagogy and development.

GAINS IN EDUCATION FOR GIRLS AND WOMEN

For those familiar with the history of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the establishment of the world's oldest surviving university in Fez, Morocco by a woman is well-known (Lai et al., 2016). Established in 859 CE, Fatima al-Fihriya founded and funded the University of al-Qarawiyyin, as a "credible center for learning" (Lai et al., 2016, vii), instituting a commitment to women's scholarship and engagement from the earliest of times. Khoury (2023) traces the history of women's education in the Middle East to argue that conflicting and complicated experiences that focus on women's access to education creates a much more complex narrative than is often presented. I would argue that gendered narratives are oftentimes simplified to tell an easy story, and this is particularly rampant in colonized, non-white, or non-Christian spaces. It is easier for broad generalizations to be crafted in an effort to ensure the primacy of a single story (Adiche, 2009).

Historical ebbs and flows are natural. In the modern era, according to Zaatari (2022), the third wave of the Middle East women's movement emerged between the 1970s and 2001, and focused on issues that were particularly germane to the needs and desires of women to move into more formal roles in society. This led to greater activism around education, combating discrimination, engaging in legal reformations and transforming family gender dynamics. This led to the embrace of global movements, leading to the current state of educational attention, not just for women and girls, but more broadly for Muslim populations around the world.

In the current context, according to the Pew Research Center (2016), the greatest gains in education have been among Muslim populations. While there is still much work to be done (36% of Muslim adults have no formal schooling), the gender gap is narrowing. At least 10% of men and 6% of women who identify as Muslim have a post-secondary education (Hackett et al., 2016). Globally, Muslim women are closing the gender gap at all levels of education, with a larger increase across the numbers of years of schooling, and in some parts of the world, more young Muslim women "are *now more* likely than young Muslim men to have post-secondary degrees" (Hackett et al., 2016, p. 37, italics in original). This is particularly among nations that are a part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain).

The focus on parity as a marker of progress is not often an accurate representation of the quality of the experience of girls and women in educational institutions (Baily & Holmarsdott, 2015). Adely and Khoury (2023) illustrate how such indicators that are popular with global and national level institutions, oftentimes "reduce education to enrollment figures or to monetize education vis-à-vis employment" and, as such, have done a "great disservice to understanding the complicated developments and advancements of women in higher education in the Arab world" (Khoury, 2023, p. 360). This point is particularly poignant when Khoury reports on how in Turkey, even though women in engineering programs are admitted at lower rates and oftentimes with lower scores, they are usually able to outperform their male classmates upon graduation. Khoury (2023, p. 361) also points out that, while Iranian women outnumber men in tertiary education, such high levels of enrollment have led to calls from former leaders to "limit women's access to higher education." These calls are, in part, due to the perceived threat that is experienced by traditionalists who prefer to ensure that gendered social roles are maintained. As is the case everywhere, women's scholarship and engagement—as it pertains to policy and pedagogy with a focus on the development of women and girls across the Middle East—depends on the ways in which access, opportunity and equity are ensured in educational spaces from early childhood to tertiary levels. This includes formal, nonformal and informal learning sectors, and also through curriculum and content, research and scholarship and policy and practice. The progress that is made creates opportunities for women, but also presents threats or a sense of instability. This typically leads to a backlash that is evident in the rising misogyny that is growing popular among a wide range of increasingly authoritarian

governments. If we argue that parity in and of itself is not representative of girls and women's progress in education, how then might we understand the challenges that are emerging to women's scholarship and development in light of shifting priorities and allegiances with regard to women's access and opportunity?

In the following sections, I will briefly address the ways in which women's engagement in three critical areas of education, namely curriculum concerns; scholarship and research; and education policy are under duress in light of changing political headwinds. The world's steady commitment to women's active presence in educational contexts and settings is no longer a given. This is particularly important given the history and directions that are being taken to promote girls and women's education in Muslim societies to ensure continued positive trajectory and forward momentum.

CURRICULUM CONCERNS

A frequent target of authoritarian regimes is to control educational material. Through determinations of what should be taught, and when, and by eliminating topics and issues that might cause people to question the legitimacy of authoritarian powers, curricula control remains a potent factor of governmental concern. Women and girls have often pushed back against rigid representations of gender and have engaged in activism towards ensuring the presence of women and girls in curricula. In one example, Partow and colleagues (2024, p. 663) identify the removal of women poets, secular poets, and poets who wrote during the constitutional revolution in the early 20th century, who were removed from textbooks and replaced with the work of poets who were more closely linked to the Iranian government. In India, during the 2019 COVID pandemic, topics around secularism, democracy and citizenship were removed from civics curricula. In the United States, changes to textbooks that might address Black Lives Matter movements, or book bans are increasingly popular. These restrictive actions can limit the sharing of knowledge and exchange of information that promotes learning and development. Advocating for academic freedom and for curricular autonomy is a critical direction for women's engagement in educational pedagogy. Further, curricula that discuss gender continue to be an area of contestation in many parts of the world. There are larger concerns that curricula related to gender can cause consternation and contestation. Allam et al. (2023, p. 273) document

the cancelation of lectures at Qatar University where the speaker's views on "male guardianship and women's rights" were viewed as a threat to Qatari values. In addition, challenges to classroom pedagogical practices that promote the upending of "academic hierarchies" and exploring "positionalities" that might reframe traditional norms of gendered behavior on classrooms are also popular in particularly misogynistic and authoritarian contexts.

SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

Within the space of scholarship and research, female scholars in Muslim societies are taking on complex topics, using their presence in academic forums to change thinking. They are also disseminating their research in areas that offer critically needed perspectives. Taking a more ethnographic approach, research has expanded to address and move beyond religion as the sole way to interpret women's lives (Sehlikoglu, 2018). Instead, there are efforts to take on a more multi-faceted and fluid understanding of Muslim women's experiences. Coming from within the diaspora and within the wider context, these insider accounts support a body of scholarship that for too long has been reporting about, rather than emerging from within. Reframing the epistemological lens through which women's scholarship and agency, in the region and within the population, is crafted is critical to expanding the ontological underpinnings of what it means to be a Muslim woman in the current context. In terms of presence, Partow et al. (2024, p. 667) remind readers that "today, thousands of Iranian female scientists and scholars work in different universities around the world, which shows the success of generations of women resistance against the regime's gender apartheid." This visibility has opened up new opportunities for girls to aspire to participate in greater numbers in advanced graduate programs, and for boys and men to grow increasingly comfortable to see women leading the creation of knowledge through research and scholarship. Yet, despite these efforts and the greater value and visibility of women in scholarly endeavors, there is a sense that authoritarian discourses seek to exclude women from academic life. This is in part due to an unwillingness to accept any other truth beyond one that men are in possession of the "absolute truth" (Fenster & Hamdan-Saliba, 2013). Fenster and Hamdan-Saliba (2013, p. 539) continue to argue that this "exclusion is reflected in the exclusion and marginalization of Arab women themselves, and research on them, in the scientific and academic world.

EDUCATION POLICY

The ability to initiate, envision and implement policy is oftentimes the purview of leadership. Within education, the ability for leaders at every level of educational structures and systems to proffer solutions that are embedded within policy doctrines, highlights the authority with which one is viewed within the field. Inclusive educational policy depends on the experiences of a wide variety of diverse perspectives and it is critical to consider how policies are interpreted and practiced. For instance, Hilal et al. (2024, p. 23) found that while there are a number of aspirational policies such as those to promote greater women's leadership in schools, there is often teacher resistance to female leaders in schools. This resistance is despite the efforts to create a pipeline for female leadership in certain Arab societies. The attention to the development of policy to promote women's visibility in leadership roles has been significant. Yet, the implementation of the policy has been less clearly welcomed. While there are "genuine efforts to help improve the participation of women in leadership positions, the status quo still oozes with structural and cultural hindrances preventing women from effectively progressing into leadership positions." Hilal et al. (2024) then say that while many of these structural challenges are common across global contexts, "the double bias women face due the patriarchal interpretation of the Islam in the region and the male dominated cultural and social norms propagating gendered social roles and placing women at an inferior level in leadership compared to men" are more relevant to the Arab context (Hilal et al., 2024, p. 23). Despite this, there are other efforts in place where women who have had limited access to education, are now engaged in more active "protest pedagogy" as an effort to influence policy. In India, students and women helped each other understand how their lives intersected within the broader socio-cultural, political, economic context of India and the world. By working with each other, they were then able to engage in acts of public protest to ensure that their voices were heard particularly as it related to the potential loss of citizenship rights in India. Working with each other, they were better able to understand how they were exercising their active citizenship by upholding their constitutional right to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly (Kadiwal, 2021). The ability to engage in the creation of public policy and the willingness to use their voices in public spaces to influence policy are critical issues that women have been particularly engaged with.

WHEREFORE WOMEN'S CONTINUED VOICE AND ENGAGEMENT

Women's engagement in educational pedagogy, scholarship and research and policy is particularly important in times of rising authoritarianism. Women's participation in mass movements works to lift all boats and increasing "demands for electoral participation, economic opportunity, and access to education and health care" are all grounded in educational access and opportunity (Chenoweth & Marks 2022, p. 111). Yet, there is clear evidence that authoritarian leaders oftentimes reverse such programs. These efforts are in part due to the fact that "fully free, politically active women are a threat to authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning leaders—and so those leaders have a strategic reason to be sexist" (Chenoweth & Marks, 2022, p. 105). Much of the work that women are engaged with in educational spaces are occurring in a wide array of contexts and offer lessons on how to address key educational issues through a wide lens of experiences and perspectives. How do we understand the achievements that are emerging from scholars and thinkers in Muslim societies that can give us greater context and direction? What are some of the ways these lessons can help us counter nationalism and authoritarian movements? And how can we prepare for the next set of global challenges that will most definitely affect women and girls, especially when it comes to the next generational problems that we have not yet fathomed let alone addressed. Those are the vulnerabilities that we are seeking to counter in our work, and we have to find ways to continue to illustrate and illuminate them through the work of women's scholarship and engagement in these areas. Yet, while we applaud and appreciate the contributions of women in these spaces, the power of authoritarian leaders works to inhibit the progress that is made.

Mojab (2023, p. 209) spells out this tension in the most powerful ways. She recounts how in recent history, "women have participated, actively and on a mass scale, in the uprisings in Arab countries that began in December 2010 in Tunisia and spread throughout the region." Describing the women as motivated as individuals and coming together in part due to their desire to advocate for a better life for their families, they called for the "replacement of dictators with parliamentary democracy" but did "not address the socio-economic system and the class structure, which as a result were left intact [therefore] . . . while the poverty-stricken majority did not gain any ground, women lost even more as they were subjected to male police and security violence in the streets and squares" (Mojab, 2023, p. 209). If governments revert to theocracies, women's gains are restricted. As far as women's

engagement in educational endeavors is concerned, there is a need to ensure that as women, we can critique and understand the structures that have worked to "promote the status quo and entrench neoliberal economies of knowledge and neo-patriarchal sociopolitical institutions (Khoury, 2023, p. 361). Khoury further argues that for substantive gender quality in education in the Middle East, there is a need to disentangle the power structures that hinder the ability for meaningful solutions to be found. The efforts of female scholars, teachers, members of parliament, ministry officials, students, and public and private sector workers are all engaged in the processes of pedagogy, scholarship, research and policy. Understanding the threats inherent in authoritarian regimes can support the advocacy and change that has been championing education for women and girls across the Muslim world and diaspora in ways that support opportunities for equality for all women and girls around the world.

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