

Women and Society: Integrating Women's Perspective

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Historical Introduction

From the early beginnings, human thought paid attention to women and their role. The Greek philosopher Plato sometimes advocated women's contribution to shouldering the burden of political, and even military life, and at other times spoke of women's evil nature in *Timaeus*⁽¹⁾. Aristotle called for excluding women from political life and confirming her function to taking care of the affairs of men and the family⁽²⁾.

In our Arab history, with the advent of Islam, Quranic verses called for equality and preserved women's rights. Prophet Mohammed said, "Women are but the sisters of men". During the Qarmatian revolt and the Qarmati state between the third and fifth centuries A.H. (the 9th and 11th centuries A.D.), whose influence extended to eastern Arabia, greater Syria, Iraq and Yemen, there were civil laws ensuring full equality between men and women in rights and duties in all spheres of life, before that state was brought down at the hands of the Abbasid aristocracy. Al-Ghazali, the Arab-Islamic Imam, jurist and philosopher, called upon men in society to focus on thought and politics and to leave for women the household duties which "undermine mind and soul!" On the other hand, Ibn Rushd, who was also an Arab Islamic philosopher, advocated women's participation in producing and preserving the material and intellectual wealth of the community. He said: "The reason of the loss and perdition of urban centres is that women's lives pass away like plants, without contributing to the production or preservation of the community's material and moral wealth". Ibn Rushd suffered from much persecution by the establishment and fanatics at that time. These two different attitudes still prevail, with support from holy writ by each side⁽³⁾.

For example, a scholarly female activist in the dialogue about this issue is of the opinion that the three heavenly religions were antagonistic to women⁽⁴⁾. Under the title, "The Journey of Subjugation Starts from Genesis", another woman writes about "the suppression and injustice resulting from the view of women as inferior beings, and heavenly legislations encroaching upon the core of their human nature, and can only generate rebellion⁽⁵⁾".

Such feminist attitudes may. Undoubtedly, be considered protruding and extreme; but they also express some educated women's reactions to some types of conduct and interpretation of religious texts

which try to deprive women of their religious and worldly rights to be a human entity equal to men in rights and duties. For, what reaction can we expect from an educated woman to the opinion which links her morals to the clothes she wears? Such opinions are expressed by some contemporary clerics interpreting religion, who still consider women a source of evil and seduction.

The problem is that the system of traditional concepts concerning women still controls the women themselves. Although writings about the problems of women in the Arab community have begun more than a century ago, the change in both women and the attitudes and the mentality of men is still of limited depth ⁽⁶⁾. This has been renewing the production of women's traditional role in society with its various civil and political institutions. For example, an academic woman who used to be unveiled veiled herself and said: "Now, I shall not worry at all, for nobody will accuse me of being immoral, or think that I am dating a lover" ⁽⁷⁾. Thus, it seems that so far there is no conviction of women's capacities, role, participation and independence. Social opinions, concepts and values related to women have not kept abreast with the economic, social, educational and vocational changes that have taken place in our communities. Even when educated women in our society attain decision-making posts, they do not express the status of the masses of women and do not change things. An Arab female social scholar wonders whether women's political participation has produced a pattern of thought or attitudes to the questions posed, i.e. an educated political pattern of viewing things in a way that shows a style distinguished from men's style ⁽⁸⁾. An Arab academic woman says: "Women who attain decision-making posts make no essential changes. They rather carry out the policies of the existing systems, perhaps with more discipline than the males themselves."⁽⁹⁾ At any rate, these are thorny, controversial issues; and this is not the place to dwell on their details or identify their dimensions. However, they have formed the larger part of the thinking and social studies of educated and scholarly women. They also form the theoretical background as one of the main axes of the question of women's role in our Arab communities.

Even in the modern European age, and despite the age of Reason and Enlightenment, women's social, cultural and political positions remained backward. Despite the well-known interest of the Russian empress Catherine in thinkers and philosophers, this interest was not reflected on her fellow females.

If we move to the Arab legacy of our modern renaissance since the late 19th century, we shall find some sort of female cultural and social activity in the ranks of female aristocracy. This was embodied in women's press, and it included female notions and social visions that were focused on the issue of women and their liberation through eyes that were fixed on Europe. This was only natural at that time.

For example, we find Mayy Ziadeh, whose view was that women should receive education and be open unto foreign culture. We also find Ayesha Al-Taimouriyya, who called for Arab women's equal, enjoyment of what European had attained, and Hind Nawfal, who issued *Al-Fatat (Girl)* magazine in Alexandria in 1892. This was followed by more than 25 Arab women's magazines in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt before the breakout of the First World War. These included *Al-Mara'a (Woman)*, issued by Nadima Sabouni in Aleppo in 1892, *Miraatul Hassna*, issued by Mirriam Mazhar in Egypt in 1896, *Shajarattuddur* issued by Saadia Saadeddin in Alexandria in 1901, *Al-Sa'ada*, by Regina Awwad in Cairo in 1902, *Fatatutul-Sharq*, by Labiba Hashem in Cairo in 1906, *Al-Aroos*, by Mary Ajami in Damascus in 1905, *Al-Khedr* by Afifa Saab in Lebanon in 1912, and *Fatat Lubnan*, by Salima Abu Rashed in 1914, and others.⁽¹⁰⁾

All those magazines undertook to serve the cause of women and their rights. However, we could not expect women at that time to write serious social studies going beyond women to the public social concerns. Yet, they contributed to the preparation of an atmosphere that enabled women to breathe a different air.

The history of modern Arab thought cannot be written without having in the focal point women like Nazek Al-Malaika, Amina Al-Sa'eed, Salma Al-Jewshi, Hanan Michael, Fadwa Touqan, Fawzia Abou Khaled, Sumayya Saleh, Leila Baalbaki, Ghada Al-Samman, Mayy Sayegh, Fatima Al-Mernissi, Nawal Al-Sa'adawi, Suad Al-Sabah.

But, despite this impressive presence of educated Arab women, the obstacles of conventions, traditional stringent religious interpretations, continued to restrict women's contributions within the limits of trying to prove themselves and the issues of equality to men. Women's social studies evolved round the old, traditional questions of the liberation of women, rarely going further. This matter is not confined to the Arab community alone, but rather extends across the world at large.

Women and Society

Integrating Women's Perspective

Despite the presence of educated women today, the obstacles of conventions, traditions and some stringent religious interpretations continue to restrict women's contributions within the limits of proving themselves and the issues of equality to men. Women's social studies still deal with the old, traditional questions of women's liberation, work, and empowerment, rarely going any further.

“As far as we are concerned, all the states of the world are still developing states”. (*Marsha Freeman*) ⁽¹¹⁾

Undoubtedly, the main, essential question is the question of constructing the sound society for all of us, women and men. However, society and its issues, like the view of the world, is of a male nature in depth, as is well known. Therefore, the integration of the female perspective in understanding public social issues and problems, drawing policies and leading society may create essential changes in culture and vision of the world. This may be of a general benefit for mankind. However, the integration of this female perspective, is no easy task. It is not just arguments, conferences and lecturers within the ranks of educated women and interested men who agree with us in opinion. It is persevering social work by men and women, to whom this seems to be out of the ordinary.

A female activist describes the motives of this vision, or perspective, saying: “Let us look at our Arab homeland, at every country therein, and at the whole world, with its developed and developing states. What do we see? We see exacerbating political crises, wars, economic, environmental, cultural and intellectual crises ... which continue to explode into national, civil and international conflicts, wars and economic disputes. We know that we, as women, were no main party to this havoc. We have not participated in war decisions, nor in political and economic conflicts, nor in enacting laws, nor in philosophy and science. We have long been excluded therefrom. This gives us some consolation and strength to initiate questions and try to answer them, because it is our lot to feel responsible to life, our life and that of our children and the coming human generations, and to offer solutions to these problems, as well as a fresh vision of life.”⁽¹²⁾

This female social vision seems objective and fair. However, it ignores the fact that the men who have led, and are still leading, the world

do not behave as men, but rather as a concentration of economic, political and perhaps league interests. In this regard, nobody can decide with any certainty that the political behaviour of men could be different from that of women. It is most likely that in both cases, the political behaviour will be influenced by interests, the environment and the prevailing culture.

Yet, women are in fact at the very heart of the social upbringing, and the formation of character and values. This gives them the potential of a principal role in reformulating the concept of the homeland, citizenship, identity, political participation and moral conduct. They undertake, more than men do, the consolidation of the pattern of cultural continuity in the patriotic and national identity, and even international relations, through the pressure they can exert, and carrying out the task of teaching a new model of life, values and behaviour. If a woman's view of herself is changed and the new view is introduced into the upbringing, then something socially significant must change. The world communication and information revolution today gives women a greater chance to exercise this role.

One woman refers to this issue, saying: "We as women enter the field of science to formulate new identifications of reality, suffused with our ability, as women, to understand love and care, and to introduce them into the field of knowledge and authority. It is the love addressed to the others and to nature. It is capable of offering new moral values in whose framework it is possible to reformulate all knowledge and society."⁽¹³⁾

The question of caring for women as social factors capable of introducing distinguished social, political, national and international visions and solutions gains special importance in the current conditions of globalism, which is disintegrating identities, cultures, morals and values. Educated female scholars can enrich and enlighten potential options. This question attracts the concern of international statesmen and politicians preoccupied with making politics more ethical and fair.

Speaking about this question, the Canadian Minister of International Trade, Pierre Petergraud says: "It is no coincidence that many new social movements are being activated by women... Women have also endeavoured to abrogate or curtail the types of inequality from which they suffer, and to gain the right of decision-making in their lives freely. They also show everybody the brand-new issues and fields of social and cultural conduct. Indeed, thought cannot recognize the contemporary world now without putting their thinking and activity at the centre of its attention."⁽¹⁴⁾

In fact, of a total exceeding ten thousand civil, non-governmental organizations in various parts of the world today, nearly 60% were established by women. It is well known that most voluntary philanthropic work in the world is undertaken by women.

The question does not only concern the need for women's work and its mere economic output, but it also concerns their ideas and minds which have been absent and ignored for long ages. "We call for restoring woman's head to her, i.e. to consider her a human being, like man, made up of two parts, the head and the body".⁽¹⁵⁾

Development without the participation of women is an endangered development, according to the report of Arab human development of 2002. Here we stand before two views of the status of women in our country:

1. Women as a tool of development: A woman has always been viewed as a tool of development, or one of its means. Rarely was her humanity as such seen as a target for development. (Women are half the community, and enlightened guardians should involve this half and recruit it for development, and in more enlightened and secular cases, "give" it freedom... etc.
2. Women as a target for development: This means developing a woman's humanity and awareness as a target, not only a tool, of development. Making this a basic, independent target in development is the most important thing for the society we wish to have, since it constitutes the necessary preparation for the effective integration of women in the development process.

Many seminars and conferences have been held on the local, Arab, regional and international levels to discuss the status of women and how to improve their social and humanitarian situation. Many organizations and institutions have been preoccupied with the issue. I do not think we shall add anything new if we give yet another description of the status of women as suffering from harsh inequity. That goes without saying.

There is no doubt that, due to our concern as intellectuals who should be acquainted with the fields of liberation and the major modern

ideas, and though our interest, as politicians and reformers, in the social status of women, we have many large ideas about a large public question under the title of women's liberation. Now, this is undoubtedly an important subject, but it contains a large variety of dimensions. It is not wise to tackle them all in one go. What is required, and more beneficial for the cause of women's advancement in our country is the discovery of a new practical vision that extends beyond description to action.

If we develop new forms of organization, work patterns, and new procedural practices in the cause of women, and build on what has been achieved, then we shall strongly and confidently press forward. But if we only describe the status of women, we shall turn this matter into something like a vicious circle.

What is required is to think of a practically applicable programme to eliminate the restrictions that hinder the full, active and free participation of Arab women in the social, political, economic and cultural life.

The restrictions which women face in our communities may not be political and legal, but rather cultural, educational and family restrictions. Therefore, in order to create real changes in the social role of women in the educational, political and cultural spheres, it is not enough to improve the legal status of women. We must think of how to work in the actual social field around us, the field of conventions, traditions, religious teachings and the types of their interpretation.

We acknowledge the necessity of women's participation in development. We may enact positive laws that theoretically open the gates wide for such participation. In fact, such laws are already in place in some Arab countries; but what about the deeply-rooted traditions and conventions? How can we deal with them? What, in particular, about the prevailing religious interpretations in some closed circles that are represented by women, even though they are educated, which consolidate and sanctify such old traditions and conventions?

True, the change of some laws and legislations related to women may offer them new and important potentials. However, the material restrictions, traditions, cultural and emotional obstacles, and things forbidden by religious interpretations – all this may cause women not to know their rights, or to be reluctant to claim them. Unless these rights are declared and a legally binding commitment is made to implement them,

obstacles and restrictions will continue to besiege women in our communities forever.

What is important is not just to have laws, but to make these laws to overcome the force of traditions, i.e. to enable the laws to consolidate women's presence as participants, experts and leaders, on equal footing with men, in the process of policy-making, from the family and local settings to the national levels. Women should also take part in formulating and devising solutions of the educational and developmental problems. In order to achieve this, we should work to enable women to know these laws, and to have access to them.

We know that the subjugation of women has a long history, deeply-rooted in the economic, political and cultural processes. As regards women's social status, there are cultural, class and ideological differences within the same community, in between developed and developing communities. However, what is common at all these levels is the fact that women are in the second degree in the social, educational and developmental fields. Therefore, it is safe to concur with a prominent female scholar (from a developed country): "As regards the status of women, all the states of the world are developing states".

The women's movement has been present for over a century, and international organizations have been present for decades. Some progress has been attained in the situation of women; but what has not been attained yet is their participation in discussing and determining the terms of their material and moral existence and in making the main decisions as full partners, equal to men, in education and development. In order to cross the bridge, we must think of two things at least:

1. A new form of female activity concerned with developing a practical framework based on analysing the issues of education, development, culture and politics from the female perspective, not only of that of men sympathetic to the cause of women's liberation.
2. A new social, educational and developmental programme to deal with the cause of women, i.e. a new guidance model of work, paying attention to women, not just as a mere tool in the social context, but as a key factor and a target of both education and development. Undoubtedly, what is required is a fair society for all of us, women as well as men, a society where all institutions are open for the process of democratic participation. Relations in such society should show no phenomena of inequality on the

bases of class, gender or race. Women should participate in defining priorities, making decisions, and devising educational and developmental alternatives, side by side with men.

But, in order not to turn this into a hollow slogan and a tool of demagogic manipulation, the important thing is how to turn it into action, i.e. to define the actual measures conducive to such a desired society.

We have often reiterated that there is no solution for women's problems except within the framework of the comprehensive solution of the problem of development and progress. This may be theoretically and strategically true; but practically we have attained but small progress in solving the problem. This suggests that giving high-sounding answers is only a prevaricating way to avoid definite solutions. The principle of "all or nothing" is neither practical nor correct. In fact, the inequity, material and social oppression and the pressure of traditions suffered by women are equal to those suffered by men.

Can we dismantle such substantial theoretical questions and think in a more precise and practical way? Can we think, for example, of classifying the women's priorities which need to be solved?

The question is not just arguments, conferences and lectures to a category of educated women and interested men who belong to the enlightened sections of the middle class. It is rather how to respond to the situation and needs of women and simple people of the lower and poor categories, and how to reach and address them.

It is clear for any observer that theory and practice in both education and development show a male bias, starting from conduct and daily decisions and ending up in theoretical interpretations, analyses and the processes and implementation of public policies. This leads generally to discrepancies and inequality between men and women. Within this general framework, if we want to change this scene, will it be possible to revise the educational theory and the theory of economic development from the female perspective, and to integrate this perspective therein? Why not?

In fact, the contribution of educated, and even academic, women, to educational research is still small, even rare. Indeed, a panoramic view of our philosophical, sociological, educational and developmental legacy can hardly reveal any brilliant woman's name. The history of philosophy, sociology and educational thought tells us about male philosophers,

sociologists and educationalists, but it is void of female names in these fields.

Although women are directly concerned with the process of upbringing, since a woman undertakes the child from birth till his sixth year at least, which is the impressionable stage, as all psychological sciences and studies affirm, yet all the history of education and its theories do not reveal one woman's name. Today, female academicians in the field of education are mostly implementers and teachers of men's theories, even as most of these theories and educational teachings neglect women as a distinct identity and belittles their status.¹ Nothing is strange in that, for it is another phenomenon of the subjugation of women in a male-dominated history. Advertently or inadvertently, this male source of educational and environmental theories has contributed to the low status of women till today. This scene cannot be changed without the contribution of independent, educated women expressing their own opinions and readings, based on their own consciousness and experience, not on a concoction of the opinions of notable men.

In this way, the opinions of female scholars may become important sources for decision-makers, filling the vacuum neglected by male scholars, advertently or inadvertently, due to male bias.

As a specific example of male bias in economic theory, we call attention to the fact that the largest part of women's work in our communities and their like is unpaid and its value is not assessed or defined, whether by the husbands, folks, at home or in the field. Consequently, women working in fields are not calculated with the workforce as it is treated in economic theories. Thus, there must be a new reading. Women constitute only 10-25% of the workforce in the Arab homeland. In Syria, they account for 21.4% (in 2003), according to the concepts and standards prevailing in the calculation of the workforce. However, women's uncalculated efforts in household work, in family farms, child care, social relations and voluntary labour exceed 50% at least. (Through most of her life, a woman, unlike man, can never be unemployed).

¹ It is not strange that women should study these theories without comment. The critical sense of most women in our communities is still semi-absent. However, it is sad that some women in circles supposed to know better, adopt wrong, rigid religious theories and interpretations and concepts that despise women and belittle their human value. In my own experience of teaching at the university, during some lectures where such issues were raised, I often faced female students, and sometimes academic colleagues, who defended a wrong interpretation of man's trusteeship, polygamy and women's veils, and concepts casting doubt on women's potentials and eligibility to behave freely – a defense sometimes showing more enthusiasm than men.

So, what is to prevent the redefinition of the concept of labour in the economic theory, or even to re-read the economic theory from a woman's perspective?

Due to all these considerations, and in order not to repeat the old theses, impressions and meditations about women, it may be better to proceed from what gains have already been attained by women in our country, and to build thereon, so as to know the possibility of a new female vision.

Women's status has undoubtedly improved, in comparison to what prevailed previously. The following consistent gains at least can be registered.

1. Relative and gradual decline of illiteracy among women. The rate has fallen from 34% in 1970 to 14.2% in 2003.
2. Relative increase of women who are educated, employed politically conscious and active in the field of feminism in the Arab community.
3. Relative increase of women working in education.

Rate of Women's Participation in Pre-University Education

Year	Rate of Female Teachers In the Primary Stage	Rate of Female Teachers in the Intermediate & Secondary Stages
1996	65%	44%
2000	66%	48%

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, The Statistical Set of 2001

Graduates of Teachers' Colleges According to Gender

Year	Males	Females	Total	Female Rates
1996	989	1821	2810	65%
2000	890	2446	3336	74%

Source: *idem*

Faculty Members in Syrian Universities According to Gender in 2000

Classification	Males	Females	Total	Female rates
The four universities	5212	1568	6780	23%
Faculties of the Humanities ²	1112	442	1554	29%

Source: *idem*

4. Obvious increase of females registered in the various levels of education: The rate of female registration at the primary stage during the same period jumped from 59.8% in 1970 to 96.6% in 1998.

The rate of female graduates of the Faculty of Letters in the University of Damascus, for example, exceeded 70% of the total in 1999. In the College of Education, the rate was nearly 64%.

5. The legal structure and legislations dealing with women's affairs have overtaken social norms and conventions in most Arab countries (Tunisia, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan).

6. There was a relative rise in the level of acceptance by the public opinion of most women- related issues. (The issues we raise concerning women, their freedom, their rights and participation could not be raised with the same degree of depth in the recent past, for instance).

The Syrian Civil Code asserts in Article 46 a woman's full eligibility once she attains the age of legal maturity. Article 40 affirms a woman's right to have a name and a family name independent of her husband, while Article 15 asserts her right to do business with her money without permission of her custodian or husband once she comes of age.

In all their provisions, the law of government employees of 1985, as well as the Labour Law, treat working men and women on a par. They also give women special significant advantages related to motherhood.

² These include the Faculties of Letters and Human Science, Economics, Law and Education.

These rights, documented in the Constitution and the laws, were reflected in a notable improvement in the presence of women at all levels of education, and their actual participation in the economic activity, in decision-making positions, in the legislative and executive authorities, the diplomatic corps, the judiciary and the police force.

There were only four women in the first legislative session of 1973, then their rate in the People's Assembly rose to 8.8% in 1990, then to 12% in the last legislative session, thus putting Syria at the forefront of the Arab states, after it had been second to Tunisia.

In the judiciary field, women entered in 1975, but their role grew till their rate at various judiciary degrees and levels became 5.8% in 1994, and rose to 13.1% in 2003.

What does that mean in relation to our thesis of integrating the female perspective in social affairs?

These tangible developments in the cause of women in Syria, and in other similar countries of course, mean that women can strongly advocate their own cause, and take the initiative to enlist their own vision of education, culture, politics, development, existence and peace.

How can maximum benefit be obtained from this situation in the practical and procedural fields to bring about further progress doing women more justice?

From all the above, and on the basis of what has already been achieved concerning the social question related to women, and in order to be practical, the following measures may be viable and of important benefit to women, development, and to all of us men and women alike. They can consolidate a step forward in favour of women, and thus in favour of development in our communities.

1. The establishment of a department of women's studies in the universities, or an independent institute of women's studies.

2. The establishment of a national centre of women's studies to attract female scholars and academicians interested in women's affairs. This should not be left merely to local, voluntary or individual initiatives, or cultural events and celebrations.

3. Maintaining a share for women in the channels of decision-making, education and development planning, particularly in programmes related to women's images and the social and cultural upbringing, in general.
4. Instead of leaving men to the goodwill of male economic and political leaders, states can start gradually to allocate a portion of their budgets for development projects related to women.
5. Raising women's issues should not be confined to the elite. Seminars, lectures, workshops and collective meetings should be intensified. Issues of women's liberation should be persistently raised before the public opinion, and in conventional social circles. Cultural activities should be intensified among women at various levels, focusing on affording all women easy chances to know the laws and legislations relevant to their rights, lives and destiny.

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