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Rethinking female empowerment in the MENA region

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What is empowerment? How can women across the MENA region become empowered? Is it possible for Western born concepts — such as female empowerment — to travel across complex contexts and patriarchal/male-dominated cultures? Despite the fact that the past three decades have witnessed soaring interest in gender issues in general and women’s empowerment in particular, the MENA region has remained adamantly immune to recurring waves of change — especially in regard to women’s rights. Although Arab women played a pivotal role during the Arab spring and there was hope that the sociopolitical transformation that swept the region would lead to positive change in regard to women’s social status, the collapse of several Arab states combined with the recent intensification of ethnic and religious conflict in many parts of the region have considerably diminished much of these prospects. Improving women’s social status across the region has proved to be a challenging task not only theoretically, but also from a practical standpoint. While agreeing on a definition for female empowerment has proved to be a challenging task among scholars and policy practitioners, working out a universal framework that is applicable to different settings has proven to be an even more daunting task.

Despite the fact that there is no universally accepted definition of empowerment, it is commonly viewed as “a process of change during which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability.”¹ Studies focusing on female empowerment can be classified based on two main approaches: developmental or individualistic/personal. While many policy, advocacy and nongovernmental organizations have focused on female empowerment from a developmental standpoint (i.e., typically education, health, access to leadership positions and political participation), feminist activists and academics have continued to emphasize the importance of personal/grassroots empowerment and warned against the dangers of constraining women’s empowerment to the exercise of power in economic and political realms.² Advocates of personal empowerment lament the lack of transformative power to alter gender relations embedded in the development discourse and have called for a more nuanced approach that takes into account the cultural complexities and structure of power relations on the grassroots level.

While the developmental approach has gained much momentum across the MENA region over the past few decades, aiming to promote women’s rights and ultimately democratize the region by improving women’s political and educational opportunities, the Arab world continues to have some of the lowest average gender equality scores,³ with only modest improvements for women’s rights. Despite the centrality of improving the conditions of women across the region in regard to health, education, and political and economic participation, it is becoming increasingly clear that these improvements have not contributed to ameliorating women’s social status across the region. The inability of the developmental approach to women’s empowerment to penetrate the cultural fabrics of Arab societies and directly challenge the dominant patriarchal structures clearly demonstrates the weakness of these Western-born approaches to make a real difference in the lives of these women. As suggested by its definition, empowerment is mainly about producing a change as a result of exercising and gaining full control over individual choices, a concept that remains highly controversial across the MENA region. There are many challenges still facing Middle Eastern women on a daily basis, from honor killings, domestic violence, personal and family laws, citizenship laws and sexual harassment to discrimination in the workplace, gender wage gap, and unequal access to political and leadership positions. In order for women to become empowered, dominant cultures and the socialization processes associated with the cultural values that lead to the solidification and persistence of injustices against women⁴ must be profoundly understood and gradually dismantled. Despite the myriad setbacks facing Arab women, change has to happen from within Arab societies to directly challenge these obsolete structures. As maintained by one of the leading Middle Eastern scholars, “Arab women carry many burdens, the worst being the popular stereotypes that serve to establish the positional superiority of Western women and constitute a worse injustice against Arab women than the patriarchal oppression they must face in their own countries.”⁵ Over the past few decades, attempts by Western/liberal feminists to impose their views on women’s empowerment have led to the further solidification of patriarchal structures and increasing polarization pertaining to women’s rights in the region.

The U.S. and other international actors should support women’s endeavors in these countries and give them the freedom to decide which route would be most suitable to achieve their goals, whether it is Islamic feminism, a modified version of liberal feminism or a mix of both. Women’s roles post-Arab spring are critical not only for promoting women’s social status in the MENA region, but most importantly, to stand as the main moderators of the process of societal change shaping the whole region at present. Finding areas of convergence among feminists in the U.S. and the Middle East will

not be possible until both parties acknowledge that there is no one single formula for success and that change can come in different forms and manifestations.

1 N. Kabeer, "Resources, agency, and achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment," *Development and Change* 30 (1999): 435–464.

2 J. Rowlands, "A word of the times, but what does it mean? Empowerment in the discourse and practice of development," in Haleh Ashfar, ed., *Women and Empowerment: Illustrations from the Third World* (Basingstoke:Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 1–11.

3 Gender equality scores such as GEM, GII, GDI and GEI continue to produce identical results in regard to women's status in the Arab world.

4 M. Nausbaum, "Women and cultural universals," in Ann E. Cudd, and Robin O. Andreasen, eds., *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publications, 2005), 302–324.

5 S. Sabbagh, *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996).

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