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MEDIA AND MUSLIM WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

Muslim women today are generally viewed as weak, segregated and oppressed by the Western part of the World. There are more than two billion Muslims around the globe[1], and depending on the country they live in, the way women are treated is very different. The thesis will particularly concentrate on the status of Arab Muslim women[2] to try and understand their role in everyday life, and to see whether the media have facilitated their empowerment. In order to do this, the influence of Islam on women and the current condition of Arab Muslim women, such as the rights assured to them, were closely examined. Moreover, the roles of media (newspapers, novels, television, movies, and Internet) in the lives of socially and economically privileged Arab Muslim women (those who have access to mass media) have carefully been researched. The fact that media are a fundamental tool for Muslim women empowerment has been internationally acknowledged especially after the Arab Spring. Great changes are taking place. Arab Muslim women have found a neutral ground for expressing their thoughts and for carrying out their battles in the virtual space, nevertheless, the great efforts of female Arab Muslim activists may take at least another generation to yield.

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[1] Retrieved from http://muslimpopulation.com
[2] Women from: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen

Introduction

For too long, and especially after September 11th 2001, Islam has been directly associated to terrorism and to the image of a patriarchal religion that considers women as subordinate.

Still today, the words, "Muslim women" or "Islam and women", in the Western world, evoke images of submissive, uneducated and silent women deprived of all rights. When typing these words on the Google search bar, it leads to articles concerning Muslim women's rights, the *hijab* [3], forced marriage, rape, sex segregation, wife beating and other issues regarding the status of Muslim women. Clearly, the situation is completely different if the words "Catholic women", "Shinto women" or "Buddhist women" are looked up, as mainly positive articles are the first to appear. Searching for "Muslim women" on YouTube, also immediately verges to videos regarding the topic of the veil or status of Islamic women.
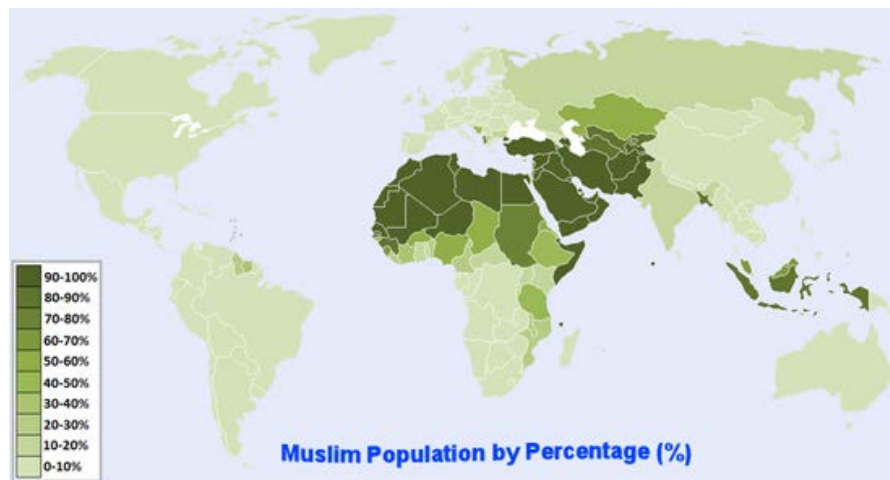
Figure 1- More than 50 countries of the world have a Muslim-majority population.

Certainly, there are many aspects of the culture, the tradition, and also interpretations of Islamic religion that have brought to the creation of this specific portrait of a Muslim woman, however, it is important to not sow the tares with the wheat. Distinctions must be made between different countries, and all aspects of issues must be considered so that both negative and positive sides may be

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[3] "Hijab: The headscarf worn by Muslim women, sometimes including a veil that covers the face except for the eyes." Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com

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acknowledged. It is too simplistic and biased to affirm, as the Web suggests, that all Muslim women are passive, treated as inferior and deficient in opportunities and rights.

The Holy Quran underlines diversity between men and women, but it never specifically states that one gender should be considered less valuable than the other. Difference in fact should not denote inequality, however the predominant interpretations of the Quran in favor of men, led to the affirmation that Islam is a patriarchal religion.

For example, women do not receive equal rights or opportunities as men in the Arab World, and the situation varies in each State. Most Arab Muslim countries severely control the political rights of all their citizens, particularly those of women. Until very recently, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait did not even consent women's rights to participate in elections.[4] However, with the exception of the Gulf States, many Arab nations recognized political rights of women around the same time as many western developing countries[5]. The Beijing Declaration[6], adopted during the fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, was just one of the first international efforts to instill and enforce political rights of Muslim women.

The 2003 UNDP Human Development Report shows that, with the exception of a few critical cases, Islamic world women are no more education deprived than men. However, education unfortunately does not result in similar employment opportunities for women.[7]

One very alarming problem in many Muslim countries is the lack of personal status codes, and therefore basic human rights are not truly guaranteed.[8] Furthermore, even though innovation has reached many Islamic States, tradition, along with horrific archaic practices such as child marriage[9], still prevail.

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[4] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p 21 http://hdr.undp.org
[5] UNDP, Human Development Report 2003 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), table 27.
[6] The Beijing Declaration may be retrieved on http://www.un.org
[7] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p17 http://hdr.undp.org
[8] *ivi*, p190
[9] Trust.org, http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/womens-rights/child-marriage/infographic/

Women's sharing in media has grown all over the Islamic world, starting with newspapers and novels[10], shifting to satellite television[11] and lately, undertaking in the virtual sphere has seen an extraordinary boost.[12] Muslim women have started enjoying the cyber space, sending emails, writing blogs, or entering chat rooms and social networks to exchange ideas. The Arab Social Media Report states that social networks are offering a ground for transparency, accountability, and above all, parity between men and women.[13]

From the first few years of the new millennium, and especially since the Arab Spring revolutions, strong voices of Arab Muslim women have started to spread on the media. Images of women protesting alongside with men in Tahrir Square were broadcasted on television all over the world in 2010, individual videos of Arab women demonstrating can be retrieved on YouTube, campaigns for women's rights may be found on renown social networks, and images of Arab Muslim female athletes participating with their *hijab* at the 2012 London Olympics were all over the mass media.

The era of subservient and unopinionated Islamic women has been taken over by that of politically, socially and culturally aware and unstoppable Muslim women.

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[10] Retrieved from http://www.azzaman.com
[11] More information may be retrieved on https://www.aswat.com/files/WomeninArabMedia_0.pdf
[12] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005, p15 http://hdr.undp.org
[13] More information may be retrieved on http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/

Women and Islam

Women in Islam

In Islam, it is believed that Adam and Eve originated from the same soul and were equally guilty of sin, and thus Allah forgave both in the same way ([Noble Quran 2:36, 7:20-24[14]]).

Amongst the many Muslim women who have had an important role in history, Khadijah, the wife of Muhammad whom he cherished and adored, was the first person to convert to Islam. Furthermore, Ayshah, another wife of Muhammad, was one of the greatest sources of Hadith literature. A woman's role of mother and wife are extremely sacred in Islamic society.

Regarding the five pillars of faith, or the religious obligations, such as the Daily Prayers, Fasting, Poor-due, and Pilgrimage, a woman is no different from man[15]. Women actually have some advantages over men in some circumstances. For example, women are exonerated from fasting during pregnancy and while nursing their baby if there is any kind of threat to her health or the baby's.[16]

Women in the Quran and the *Sunna[17]*

There is no difference between men and women in the Quran for what regards their relationship to Allah, as both are promised the same reward for good behavior and the same punishment for evil conduct[18]. The Quran says:

"Who so does that which is right, and believes, whether male or female, him or her will We quicken to happy life." [Noble Quran 16:97][19]

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[14] Allah's Word, http://www.allahsword.com

[15] Islam's Women, http://www.islamswomen.com

[16] *ibidem*

[17] "In Islam, it is the traditional part of Muslim law, based on the words and acts of Muhammad, and preserved in the traditional literature." http://dictionary.reference.com

[18] Islam's Women, http://www.islamswomen.com

$$\text{مَنْ عَمِلَ صَلِحًا مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهُ}$$

$$\text{حَيَوٰةً طَيِّبَةً ۖ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُم بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا}$$

$$\text{يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾}$$

The expression "believing men and women" is often used when addressing all the believers, without any discrimination between genders, in the Quran:

> "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward." [Noble Quran 33:35][20]

$$\text{إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَٰتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ}$$

$$\text{وَالْقَٰنِتِينَ وَالْقَٰنِتَٰتِ وَالصَّٰدِقِينَ وَالصَّٰدِقَٰتِ وَالصَّٰبِرِينَ}$$

$$\text{وَالصَّٰبِرَٰتِ وَالْخَٰشِعِينَ وَالْخَٰشِعَٰتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ}$$

$$\text{وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَٰتِ وَالصَّٰئِمِينَ وَالصَّٰئِمَٰتِ وَالْحَٰفِظِينَ}$$

$$\text{فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَٰفِظَٰتِ وَالذَّٰكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا}$$

$$\text{وَالذَّٰكِرَٰتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُم مَّغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٣٥﴾}$$

The Quran also uses a beautiful metaphor to describe the relationship between men and women:

[19] Islam's Women, http://www.islamswomen.com
[20] *ibidem*

"They (your wives) are your garment and you are a garment for them." [Noble Quran 2:187][21]

أُحِلَّ لَكُمْ لَيْلَةَ ٱلصِّيَامِ ٱلرَّفَثُ إِلَىٰ نِسَآئِكُمْ ۚ هُنَّ لِبَاسٌ لَّكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لَّهُنَّ ۗ عَلِمَ ٱللَّهُ أَنَّكُمْ كُنتُمْ تَخْتَانُونَ أَنفُسَكُمْ فَتَابَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَعَفَا عَنكُمْ ۖ فَٱلْـَٔـٰنَ بَـٰشِرُوهُنَّ وَٱبْتَغُوا۟ مَا كَتَبَ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ ۚ وَكُلُوا۟ وَٱشْرَبُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمُ ٱلْخَيْطُ ٱلْأَبْيَضُ مِنَ ٱلْخَيْطِ ٱلْأَسْوَدِ مِنَ ٱلْفَجْرِ ۖ ثُمَّ أَتِمُّوا۟ ٱلصِّيَامَ إِلَى ٱلَّيْلِ ۚ وَلَا تُبَـٰشِرُوهُنَّ وَأَنتُمْ عَـٰكِفُونَ فِى ٱلْمَسَـٰجِدِ ۗ تِلْكَ حُدُودُ ٱللَّهِ فَلَا تَقْرَبُوهَا ۗ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ ٱللَّهُ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨٧﴾

This symbolizes that both husband and wife must cherish, protect, comfort and take care of each other.

Furthermore, the Quran encourages men to treat women compassionately and lovingly, and disapproves of men who on the other hand repress and mistreat women:

"O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dowry you have given them - except when they have become guilty of open lewdness. On the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them, it may be that you dislike something and Allah will bring about through it a great deal of good." [Noble Quran 4:19][22]

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[21] Allah's Word, http://www.allahsword.com
[22] *ibidem*

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا يَحِلُّ لَكُمْ أَن تَرِثُوا۟ ٱلنِّسَآءَ كَرْهًا ۖ وَلَا تَعْضُلُوهُنَّ لِتَذْهَبُوا۟ بِبَعْضِ مَآ ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ إِلَّآ أَن يَأْتِينَ بِفَـٰحِشَةٍ مُّبَيِّنَةٍ ۚ وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ فَإِن كَرِهْتُمُوهُنَّ فَعَسَىٰٓ أَن تَكْرَهُوا۟ شَيْـًٔا وَيَجْعَلَ ٱللَّهُ فِيهِ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا ﴿١٩﴾

According to a *Hadîth*[23], the Prophet has often underlined the importance of a good and caring wife:

> "The best property a man can have is a remembering tongue (about Allah), a grateful heart and a believing wife who helps him in his faith."[24]

According to Islamic Law, a woman has the right to possess and manage her own property and earnings. This right does not suffer any change whether a woman is single or married. Women have the right to be educated and to work outside the household if they choose to do so, as there is no formal declaration which prohibits a woman to search for employment in the Holy Islamic texts. Women also have the right to inherit from her father, mother, and husband. The Quran says:

> "Unto men (of the family) belongs a share of that which Parents and near kindred leave, and unto women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be a little or much - a determinate share." [Noble Quran 4:7][25]

لِّلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ ٱلْوَٰلِدَانِ وَٱلْأَقْرَبُونَ وَلِلنِّسَآءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ ٱلْوَٰلِدَانِ وَٱلْأَقْرَبُونَ مِمَّا قَلَّ مِنْهُ أَوْ كَثُرَ ۚ نَصِيبًا مَّفْرُوضًا ﴿٧﴾

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[23] "Hadith: In Islam, it is the traditional account of things said or done by Muhammad or his companions." http://dictionary.reference.com
[24] Islam's Women, http://www.islamswomen.com
[25] *ibidem*

The different economic responsibilities of man and woman in the *Fiqh*[26] are the basis for the disparity in inheritance rights. Men in Islam are entirely accountable for the protection and maintenance of their wives, children, and other underprivileged family members. The Quran states:

"...And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them." [Noble Quran 2:228][27]

وَٱلْمُطَلَّقَٰتُ يَتَرَبَّصْنَ بِأَنفُسِهِنَّ ثَلَٰثَةَ قُرُوٓءٍ ۚ وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَهُنَّ أَن يَكْتُمْنَ مَا خَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ فِىٓ أَرْحَامِهِنَّ إِن كُنَّ يُؤْمِنَّ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ ٱلْءَاخِرِ ۚ وَبُعُولَتُهُنَّ أَحَقُّ بِرَدِّهِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ إِنْ أَرَادُوٓا۟ إِصْلَٰحًا ۚ وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ ٱلَّذِى عَلَيْهِنَّ بِٱلْمَعْرُوفِ ۚ وَلِلرِّجَالِ عَلَيْهِنَّ دَرَجَةٌ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ۝٢٢٨

The "degree" that the Quran refers to is that of the *Quiwama*, maintenance and protection. It does not denote any supremacy of men over women before the law. It simply underlines the natural difference between genders, which gives right to the weaker sex to protection. Islam also emphasizes the significance of mutual agreement in family decisions.[28]

Motherhood in Islam

The status of a mother is of absolute importance and is honored in Islam. The Islamic religion orders kindheartedness, compassion, respect and obedience to parents and specially underlines the value of a mother.

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[26] Fiqh: "The Arabic term for Islamic jurisprudence. This is an extremely large and very complex topic of Islamic studies. The meaning of the word fiqh is understanding, comprehension, knowledge, and jurisprudence in Islam." Retrieved from http://www.islamic-dictionary.com
[27] Allah's Word, http://www.allahsword.com
[28] *ibidem*

"Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor. And out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility and say, "My Lord! Bestow on them Your Mercy even as they cherished me in childhood." [Noble Quran 17:23-24][29]

۞ وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّآ إِيَّاهُ وَبِٱلْوَٰلِدَيْنِ إِحْسَٰنًا ۚ إِمَّا يَبْلُغَنَّ عِندَكَ ٱلْكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَآ أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا فَلَا تَقُل لَّهُمَآ أُفٍّ وَلَا تَنْهَرْهُمَا وَقُل لَّهُمَا قَوْلًا كَرِيمًا ﴿٢٣﴾

وَٱخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ ٱلذُّلِّ مِنَ ٱلرَّحْمَةِ وَقُل رَّبِّ ٱرْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِى صَغِيرًا ﴿٢٤﴾

The Quran highlights the difficulties a mother undergoes, as well as the sacrifices she makes for her child, and underlines the need for a son or daughter to give back to their parents:

"And We have enjoined upon man, to his parents, good treatment. His mother carried him with hardship and gave birth to him with hardship, and his gestation and weaning [period] is thirty months. [He grows] until, when he reaches maturity and reaches [the age of] forty years, he says, "My Lord, enable me to be grateful for Your favor which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents and to work righteousness of which You will approve and make righteous for me my offspring. Indeed, I have repented to You, and indeed, I am of the Muslims." [Noble Quran 46:15][30]

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[29]Allah's Word, http://www.allahsword.com
[30] *ibidem*

وَوَصَّيْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ بِوَٰلِدَيْهِ إِحْسَٰنًا حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُ كُرْهًا وَوَضَعَتْهُ كُرْهًا

وَحَمْلُهُۥ وَفِصَٰلُهُۥ ثَلَٰثُونَ شَهْرًا حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُۥ وَبَلَغَ أَرْبَعِينَ سَنَةً

قَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِىٓ أَنْ أَشْكُرَ نِعْمَتَكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَىَّ وَعَلَىٰ وَٰلِدَىَّ

وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَٰلِحًا تَرْضَٰهُ وَأَصْلِحْ لِى فِى ذُرِّيَّتِىٓ إِنِّى تُبْتُ إِلَيْكَ

وَإِنِّى مِنَ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

The Prophet truly believed in treasuring and appreciating a mother, and according to diverse *Hadîth,* he has given immense rights to her:

> "Do good to and serve your mother, then your mother, then your mother, then your father, then the near relatives and then those who come after them."[Mazhari][31]

> "I know of no other deed that brings people closer to Allah than kind treatment and respect towards one's mother". [Al-Adab al-Mufrad Bukhârî 1/45][32]

Women are respected and empowered in their role as mothers within the Quran. The part played by a mother in Muslim families is extremely important, just as, if not more significantly than a father's role of provider and protector. A mother dedicates her life to fostering and loving her children. She is the closest person to the baby, ever since it is conceived, and has a primary influence in the education of the infant. Moreover, she is responsible for the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical well-being of a child. According to Islam, in return, children owe mothers affection, gratitude, companionship, respect, obedience, and loyalty.[33]

The incredible weight and responsibility that are placed upon a mother during pregnancy, giving birth and raising children make women extremely special. In a

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[31]Islam's Women, http://www.islamswomen.com
[32] *ibidem*
[33]The Islam Religion, http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/1639/

Hadith, the Prophet underlined that children achieve their admission to Heaven through good treatment of their mothers:

"Paradise lies at the feet of mothers." (Musnad Ahmad, Sunan An-Nasai, Sunan Ibn Majah)[34]

"Rahim" is Arabic for womb, and derives from the word mercy. One of Allah's names in Islamic tradition is "Al-Raheem", or "The Compassionate and Merciful"[35]. This underlines a unique connection between Allah and the womb, where humans get a small hint of God's qualities: the womb cherishes, nourishes and shelters infants in the first stages of life. A parallel between an affectionate Allah and a kindhearted mother can easily be made. The womb may be viewed as a manifestation of divinity in the world, and therefore mothers, women, have an inexplicable and unlimited value.[36]

Islam in Different Countries

All Islamic countries have had a different history which has led to the development of various forms of Islam. The following are just a few examples of the diversities that can be encountered within the same religion:

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is the only non-Arab Islamic country example that will be reported to illustrate one case of the development of Islam also outside the Arab region. Moreover, other references will be made to the country later in the thesis.

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[34]Islam's Women, http://www.islamswomen.com
[35] The Womb Relation, http://www.islamset.com
[36] Religion and Spirituality: Islam, http://islam.about.com/od/elderly/a/mothers.htm

Arab Muslims started conquering the Afghan tribes and introducing Islam around 640 AD. By the 10th century, the rule of the Arab Abbasid Dynasty had collapsed, and the Ghaznavid Dynasty became the first grand Islamic dynasty to rule in Afghanistan. In 1220, the Mongol forces of Genghis Khan took control. In 1504 the region fell under a new empire, the Mughals of northern India. Later, in 1747, indigenous Pashtuns, began a period of nominal rule in Afghanistan that lasted until 1978.[37]

Afghanistan is almost completely populated by Muslims, and Islam influences all aspects of everyday life, providing a system of laws and foundations for social principles. Afghan Islam is founded on the role of the *mulla*[38], a spiritual leader who has complete control over religious activity in the village, including institutions such as circumcision, marriage, and burial. The Afghan society is composed of different ethnicities and tribes, and the Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group. Tribes are of paternal descent, and the ancestor of all Pashtuns is believed to be Qays, who supposedly received Islam directly from the Prophet Muhammad. Pashtuns therefore deny having a pre-Islamic past. Being Muslim is consequently inseparable from their tribal heritage and therefore, Islamic customs and tribal ones overlap. Nevertheless, conflicts between tribal codes and Islamic law do exist, leading to the necessity of the interpretation of the Quran, which is carried out by the *mulla*.[39]

Egypt

Islam expanded in Egypt during the Fatimid Caliphate (909- 1171 AD) and the Ayyubid Dynasty (1171- 1250 AD), making Egypt an important cultural, political and social power in the Islamic world.[40] Its supremacy increased further when the Mamluks took control in 1250 AD. The 1798 French expedition led by Napoleon changed Egypt's political landscape. Muhammad Ali, who reigned from

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[37] History of Afghanistan, http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/History/Afghanistan-history.htm
[38] "Mullah: A male religious teacher or leader in Islam." Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com/
[39] Islam and Islamism in Afghanistan, http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/ilsp/research/mendoza.pdf
[40] Retrieved from http://en.egypt.travel/product/index/islamic-egypt

1805- 1848, opened up a new path towards modernization, as he wanted to establish a powerful, European-style State.[41]

Egypt today has a predominantly Muslim population, which is almost completely *Sunni*[42]. The most renowned Islamic political organization in Egypt is the Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1928 by Hasan al Banna. The organization primarily appealed to urban civil servants between the1940s and 1950s; however, the 1952 Revolution changed the social origins of Islamists. After the early 1970s, the Islamic revitalization attracted followers from a vast range of social classes. Today, most activists are university students or graduates. There is also a largely uneducated urban and rural lower class population which is deeply devoted to Islam, but they only have a rudimental knowledge of the religion.[43]

Egypt may be considered quite liberal compared to other Islamic countries. During the Mubarak era, the production and sales of alcohol to non-Muslims and foreigners has always been allowed. There are suspects that the change in regime, with the new President Mohamed Mursi, may lead to the creation of less liberal policies and the establishment of a more strict Islamic government.[44]

Kuwait

In the early 16th century, Portuguese invaded the Arabian Gulf and constructed a fort where Kuwait City now stands. Until the 18th century, Kuwait was a transitory home for many Arabic nomads due to its geographical position. In the mid 18th century, the Utab clan, from what is now Saudi Arabia, began to inhabit Kuwait. Within a span of fifty years, the town flourished into an important trading center.[45] The Ottoman Empire ruled Kuwait as part of Iraqi Basra province from late 17th to late 19th century. Later, the Treaty of Protection placed Kuwait under British

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[41] Retrieved from http://www.sacred-destinations.com/egypt/egypt-islam.htm
[42] "Sunni: the Muslims of the branch of Islam that adheres to the orthodox tradition and acknowledges the first four caliphs as rightful successors of Muhammad" Retrieved from http://www.merriam-webster.com
[43] Retrieved from http://www.sacred-destinations.com/egypt/egypt-islam.htm
[44] The Daily News Egypt, http://thedailynewsegypt.com/2012/07/24/a-ban-on-the-sale-of-alcohol-to-egyptians/
[45] Retrieved from http://www.everyculture.com/Ja-Ma/Kuwait.html#b

control, and all issues regarding civil and commercial law were codified in the 1960s inspired by European standards.[46]

The Constitution, adopted in 1962, affirms in Article two that Islam is the State's religion, and that Islamic Sharia is the main source of legislation. Freedom of religion is guaranteed to believers of other religions, provided that no prejudice takes place against Islam.[47] Moreover, it also states that judges are to adjudicate according to custom and principles of Islamic jurisprudence. There is a majority of *Sunnis* (the rest are *Shia*[48]), and the most important School of Law is the *Maliki*[49] School.[50]

As Kuwait is located in the Arab Peninsula, the cradle of Islam, the religion is very important in the country. Separating Islam from social and political life is rather incomprehensible to Kuwaitis.[51]

Lebanon

Islam spread in Lebanon in the late 600s AD. Under the Umayyad Caliphate, Lebanon kept its original characteristics, because the Umayyads were not very concerned about converting Lebanese people to Islam. The Mamluk Islamic dynasty ruled in parts of Lebanon in the late thirteenth century. Meanwhile, from the 11th to the 13th century, the *Shia* Muslims migrated from Syria, Iraq and Arabian Peninsula to Lebanon seeking refuge.

The Ottoman Empire ruled in Lebanon through local leaders and divided the country into districts to weaken the country. Furthermore, sectarian divisions were also created to increase religious conflicts.

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[46] Retrieved from http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal/kuwait.htm
[47] Kuwait Government Online, http://www.e.gov.kw/sites/kgoenglish/portal/Pages/Visitors/AboutKuwait/CultureAndHeritage_ReligiousPractices.aspx
[48] "Shia: the branch of Islam that regards Ali as the legitimate successor to Mohammed and rejects the first three caliphs." Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com
[49] "Maliki school of jurisprudence: The Maliki school of thought was headed by Imam Malik ibn Anas al-Asbahi. Maliki school was originally the School of the people of Medina. Maliki School deduced Islamic law from the following sources: the Quran, the Sunna, The practice of the Medinites (people of Medina), and Consensus of the Companions. Maliki School started in Medina, and later spread to many places in the Muslim world. It is the second most spread Muslim school of law in the World." Retrieved from http://www.gamji.com/article4000/NEWS4601.htm
[50] *ibidem*
[51] Religion of Kuwait, http://www.kuwaitiah.net/religion1.html

Lebanon became an intellectual and commercial center in the second half of the 19th century. During World War I, the Ottoman forces occupied Lebanon and appointed a Turk ruler over the country. In 1918 Lebanon became a French colony. France proclaimed the independence of Lebanon in 1941, and in 1943, Lebanon formed its first democratic government of independence.[52]

Today, Lebanon is the only Arab country without a state religion. Over half of the Lebanese population is Muslim, and is divided into four different sects[53]: the *Shia*, the *Sunni*, the *Alawite*[54] and the *Ismailis*[55], including the *Druze*[56]. The Constitution as well as other norms protects religious freedom. These demand the State to respect all religious groups, to declare equality of rights and duties for all citizens without discrimination, and require a balanced distribution of power among the major religious groups.[57]

Morocco

Islam was brought to Morocco in the late 600s, during the Arab invasion led by the Umayyads of Damascus. In the late 700s, after adopting Islam, the Berbers formed Islamic dynasties and ruled in the country. Morocco was under the dominion of Portuguese, Spanish and French since the 15th century.

Due to the presence of Europeans, and particularly the French influence (Morocco gained independence from France in 1956), Islam is often practiced in a less strict way in the country, especially in large cities such as Casablanca. For

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[52] History of Lebanon, http://www.lgic.org/en/history_600.php
[53] The CIA Factobook, https://www.cia.gov
[54] "Alawites: a Middle Eastern sect of Shiite Islam prominent in Syria. The Alawites take their name from Imam Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, also the 4th and last "rightly guided Caliph" of Islam." Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com
[55] "Ismailis: branch of Islam and the second largest part of the Shīa community. The *Ismaili* get their name from their acceptance of Ismail bin Jafar as the divinely appointed spiritual successor *(Imam)* to Jafar al-Sadiq. The Ismaili accept the initial Imams from the descendants of Muhammad through his daughter Fatima Zahra." Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com
[56] "Druze: a member of an independent religious sect chiefly in Syria, Lebanon and Isreal, established in the 11th century as a branch of Ismaili Shiism and containing elements of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam." Retrieved from http://dictionary.reference.com
[57] UNHCR, http://www.unhcr.org

example, alcohol is available[58], diversely from many other more strict Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait.[59]

Following the independence, a Personal Status Code founded on *Maliki* doctrine was issued.[60] Today, Article 6 of the Constitution declares Islam as the official state religion, nonetheless, religious freedom is guaranteed.[61]

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was never directly colonized even though parts of the State were under nominal Ottoman power since the 16th century. Turkish forces were at times stationed in Mecca, Medina, Jeddah and other cities, but the Ottomans only exercised limited control and local rulers had an elevated autonomy in internal affairs.[62]

The Islamic religion has deeply influenced the history of Saudi Arabia. During the 18th century, a religious scholar, Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, joined forces with Muhammad bin Saud, the ruler of the town of Diriyah, to bring Arabia back to the original and pure form of Islam.[63]

The Wahhabi Kingdom was truly established in 1902 when Abd al-Aziz al-Saud and his followers gained control of Riyadh, establishing the beginning of the Saudi-Wahhabi dominance in the region. Abd al-Aziz secured his territorial occupations and expanded further out of Riyadh in the following years. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was declared on the 22nd of September 1933 over those areas that had come under Abd al-Aziz's control by conquest and by forming many alliances.[64]

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[58]Morocco, http://www.magicmorocco.com
[59] Retrieved from http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal/morocco.htm
[60] *ibidem*
[61]The Washington Post, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-turn/2011/01/morocco_a_different_kind_of_muslim_country.html
[62]Retrieved from http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal/saudiarabia.htm
[63]The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/Islam/saudi_arabia_Islam_heartland.aspx
[64] Retrieved from http://www.law.emory.edu/ifl/legal/saudiarabia.htm

The Quran is the Constitution of the Kingdom, and Sharia is the foundation of the Saudi legal system. The majority of Saudis are *Salafi*[65] Muslims. Saudi Arabia is truly devoted to preserving the ancient Islamic tradition in all areas of society and government. Despite the fact that centuries have passed by, Saudis reject innovations and practice the religion rigorously, without acknowledging that progress has taken place in various aspects of everyday life.[66]

Brief History of Islam in Relation to the Role of Muslim Women

The Islamic religion introduced the notion of the *umma*[67] which replaced the tribal collective identity. Nonetheless, the Arab tribes, above all the Bedouins, conserved their authoritarian structures. Arab armies, along with their families, including women and children, went to war to conquest new territories outside of the Arab Peninsula. The army was quasi-tribal and the chief of it acted as an intermediary with the Caliphate.[68]

Even though Islam established respect for both genders and their individual rights, the social, economic and political arrangements of the conquests ended up forcing restrictions on the extensive view that the religion had reserved for women.[69]

Mudaw al-Rasheed, a Saudi Arabian professor of social anthropology, believes that the various rights that Islam had conferred to women, such as the right to inherit, were a hazard to the economic unity of the tribes, and therefore the clans that settled after the advent of Islam such as the Bedouins, prohibited their women from inheriting. They also obliged women to marry their paternal uncle's son or

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[65] "Salafi: Fundamentalist Sunni Islamic thought looking to the early leaders of the Muslim faith for inspiration. This pious example set by Mohammed and his companions, according to Salafism, is how society should operate." Retrieved from http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/salafi.htm

[66] Retrieved from http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/saudi-arabia-country-profile.html

[67] Umma: "the whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion." Retrieved from http://oxforddictionaries.com

[68] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005, p165 http://hdr.undp.org

[69] *ibidem*

other close relatives to make sure that there would be no dispersion of the tribe's economy and resources. Moreover, the following wars lead the Arab-Islamic Empire to found itself on a structure of gender segregation and also on polygamy.[70]

Aisha and Umm Salama, two of Prophet Muhammad's wives, survived him (after his death in 632 CE) and became important transmitters of *Hadith*. Khadija, Aisha and also Muhammad's daughter Fatima were all key public figures in the early years of Islamic history. Regardless of that, the Arabian society and patriarchal structures kept on regarding women as subordinate to men. [71]

Two important periods in history lead to some changes in this system. During the eighth century C.E., at the end of the Umayyad Caliphate and all through the Abbasid Caliphate, the Arab urban societies evolved. There was a spread of exogamy, and the importance of loyalties founded on occupation, class and region was recognized. Royal Ayyubid women in Egypt and the Levant were significant persons and used their wealth to assist schools and hospitals in the thirteenth century.[72] Nevertheless, these transformations were restricted by the fall of Baghdad and the decline of the Arab-Islamic civilization in 1258, when the Mongols put an end to the Abbasid period.

In 1453 the Ottomans defeated the Byzantine Empire and continued expanding into the Balkan area. The Ottoman Turkish Empire moved the capital from Bursa to Istanbul (Constantinople). Suleiman I's rule between 1520 and 1566 was the highlight of the Ottoman Empire, which was though soon weakened by the European industrialization.

Following the example of the Ottomans, the Moghul Empire formed between 1526 and 1857 in South Asia, while the Safavid Empire was created in Greater Iran between 1520 and 1736. By the end of the 19th century, all three Empires had declined.

The second important moment that brought to essential changes was the infiltration and influence of Western capitalism in the nineteenth century that lead to the creation of new institutions and social forces. This period opened up new forms

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[70] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005, p165 http://hdr.undp.org
[71] Retrieved from http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson3/lesson3.php?s=0
[72] *ibidem*

of employment for women in different fields such as education, journalism, as well as government, along with men.[73]

Despite women's progressive access to education and professional life, the concerns for good reputation and honor have not been altered by the structural changes, and different forms of patriarchal mechanisms continue to exist.[74]

Interpretations of the Quran

Many contemporary Arab and non-Arab female Muslim intellectuals have expressed diverse opinions about the unfortunate biased interpretations of the Quran and about the erroneous labels placed on the Islamic religion.

According to Fatima Mernissi, a famous Moroccan feminist writer, an idea of male supremacy has regrettably instilled in many Islamic cultures, strengthening the representation of Islam as a religious patriarchy which professes sexual inequality, and stresses female submissiveness.[75] She argues in "The Veil and the Male Elite" that religious justification of misogyny is at odds with the egalitarian intent of the Prophet. Mohammed tried to put an end to the misogynist tribal past, in which women were at times nothing more than possessions.[76]

Mernissi argues that with time, the attitude towards women descended from pre-Islamic tribal traditions ended up prevailing over the original Islamic ones. Moreover, Mernissi claims that some *Hadith* have been used as critical weapons by men, against female equality. For example, the *Hadith* transmitted by Abu Bakra, a companion of Prophet Muhammad, which stated that "Those who entrust their affairs to women will never know prosperity", degrade women. According to *Hadith* science, all transmitters of *Hadith* must be qualified and reliable, however Mernissi argues that after a meticulous study on the history of Abu Bakra, he may have had reasons for originating anti-female *Hadith*. Nonetheless, this particular *Hadith* and

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[73] Retrieved from http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson3/lesson3.php?s=0
[74] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005, p173 http://hdr.undp.org
[75] F. Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed, 1996, p.13-14
[76] *ibidem*

some others have become part of the tradition and many men rely upon them, going against the duty of all Muslims to question everything, even what is considered authentic.[77]

Asma Barlas, an academic educated in Pakistan and the United States, is also very concerned by the fact that misogyny is projected onto the Holy Quran. She believes that none of the verses in the Scripture ascertain men as being ontologically superior to women or entitled to require their submission. Barlas defines patriarchy as the politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males by "transforming biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male while making the women different (unequal), less than, or the Other"[78]. Asma Barlas believes that the Quran explains that Allah created "woman and man from a single self (*nafs*), appointed them each other's friend and guide (*awliya*), and put love and mercy (*sukun*) between their hearts."[79] Therefore, after a careful analysis on a broad range of matters in the Quran, Barlas affirms that the Holy Scripture does not endorse any form of patriarchy.[80]

However, Barlas is aware that the Quran does treat the two genders differently with respect to certain matters such as economic and social responsibilities. Regrettably, some interpret this as a symbol of disparity, even though the Quran itself does absolutely not link the different treatment of men and women to the claim that women are inferior. Difference, according to Asma Barlas, does not necessarily denote inequality.[81]

Shirin Ebadi, the first Muslim woman, and the first Iranian, to receive the Nobel Peace Prize has fought for the rights of women during her entire life. She is a Muslim who is strongly against the culture of patriarchy and misogynist interpretations of the Quran to justify oppression. She constantly sends out important messages to Muslim women around the world, reminding them to keep fighting, and to not believe that they are condemned to an inferior status. She encourages them to

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[77] F. Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, New York: Basic, 1991

[78] Z. R. Einstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality: Crisis in Liberal America*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1984, pp. 90

[79] A. Barlas, *Globalizing Equality* in F. Nouraie Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era,* The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p.100

[80] *ivi*, p.99

[81] *ibidem*

carefully read the Quran in such a way that oppressors will not succeed in misleading them through their restrictive commentaries and selective quotes. Ebadi persuades Muslim women to get educated, to compete in all areas of life, and constantly underlines that "God created us equal, and when we struggle for equality, we are doing what God wants us to do."[82] Shirin Ebadi believes that only by separating "Islam from despotism, and Islamic law from patriarchy, will make it possible to talk about an Islamic religion that is democratic" and respectful of human rights.[83]

Islamic Feminism

"Islam gives women a very high position and a lot of rights, but over the years the patriarchal system and political power have marginalized women and made them invisible - it's a gross misunderstanding which has to be corrected. Women should reclaim their rights given by Islam" –Yati, member of the Sisters in Islam.[84]

Islamic feminism is the promotion of Muslim women's rights through the Islamic discourse. According to the Sisters of Islam, traditionalist Muslims have manipulated Islam in such a way as to create a barrier to women's empowerment, and now, contrarily, Islamic feminism is applying Islam to promote gender equality.[85]

Islamic feminism theory explains that the Islamic religion is progressive for women and supports equal rights and opportunities for both genders. Their arguments, based on the Quran and *Hadith*, offer a culturally acceptable way to expand prospects for women.[86]

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[82] S. Ebadi, *A Perspective on Women's Rights in the Context of Human Rights* in *Globalizing Equality* in F. Nouraie Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era,* The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, pp.269
[83] *ivi*, p.272
[84] "Sisters in Islam" is an organization of professional Muslim women who promote rights of women in Islam, created in 1987. More information may be retrieved on http://www.sistersinislam.org.my
[85] The Solutions Journal, http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/900
[86] *ibidem*

Numerous Islamic feminists are strong believers in *ijitihad*[87], giving new interpretations of Islamic law through critical reasoning, and conduct their own *tafsir*[88] (Quranic interpretation) rather than just relying on the views of past scholars.[89] In the early centuries of Islam, the process of *ijitihad* was an important contributor to the forming of Islamic law, especially when the Quran and *Sunna* did not specifically address as issue.[90]

Islamic feminism has assimilated the ideas of many male and female Muslim intellectuals and activists. Diversely from what some may imagine, a number of the leading proponents of this ideology are actually illustrious male scholars who argue that Islam was initially an egalitarian religion, and remains so in many of its passages. Islamic feminists reason that the selective interpretation by patriarchal leaders, lead to an evolution of Islamic law that is unfavorable to women.[91]

Islamic feminism seeks to revive the parity conferred to women in the religion's early years by rereading the Quran, placing the passages in their actual historical context, and unraveling them from tribal practices and other primitive, local traditions.[92]

Renata Pepicelli, an Italian author and university researcher who has carefully studied the relationship between Islam and feminism, has contributed to this discourse as a non-Muslim. She believes that Islamic feminism can be seen as a "door of passage" into a "culture, a thought and an identity" for the western world.[93] According to Pepicelli, studying Islamic feminism does not mean studying the "Others" or the "Other Societies", on the contrary, it means learning about "My Society."[94] She underlines that amongst her friends, colleagues, students, and

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[87] "Ijitihad: in Islamic law, is the use of reason to arrive at knowledge of truth in religious matters." Retrieved from http://dictionary.reference.com

[88] "Tafsir: Science of explanation and interpretation of the Qur'an. It arose after the death of Muhammad to deal with ambiguity, variant readings, defective texts, and apparent contradictions in the scripture." Retrieved from http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com

[89] M. Badran, *Engaging Islamic Feminism*, in Anitta Kynsilehto (ed.), *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives*, Tampere Peace Research Institute Occasional Paper N. 96, Juvenes Print, 2008

[90] *ibidem*

[91] The Solutions Journal, http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/900

[92] *ibidem*

[93] B. Margot, *Foreign Bodies. Engendering Them and Us*, in R. Saunders (ed.), *The Concept of Foreign. An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002

[94] R. Pepicelli, *Islamic Feminism: Identities and Positionalities*, in Anitta Kynsilehto (ed.), *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives*, Tampere Peace Research Institute Occasional Paper N. 96, Juvenes Print, 2008

neighbors, many are Muslim.[95] She argues that Islamic feminism is a movement that can be found both in the East and in the West, in fact it is widely diffusing in Europe and North America. Moreover, many Islamic feminists live in the Western part of the world, and those who live in Muslim countries, often travel to the West for researches, conferences and other personal reasons. Furthermore, since 2005, many conventions on this subject have been held in Europe: Barcelona, Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin and Tampere. Pepicelli therefore believes that Islamic feminism cannot be read through the dual categories of East and West, but must be viewed as a phenomenon as a whole. Islamic feminists acknowledge the right for everyone to speak about women and Islam. Ultimately, Islamic feminism is encouraging debate between Muslims and non-Muslims.[96]

Islamic feminists are using the increasing levels of female education, as well as the amplified access to media in Muslim-majority countries, to modify the terms of Islamic debate. In order to help women living in rural areas, networks amongst Islamic feminists are forming all over the world, in such a way as to truly assemble all the needed justifications to shove back all the decades of archaic tribal culture and other retrograde ways of life, that have continued until the present time in the name of Islam.

Final Considerations

Islam is constructed on the divergent understandings, interpretations and explanations of the content of the many writings and sayings in the Quran. It is also founded on the various traditions developed over the centuries in different Islamic countries that have been strengthened to secure a precise order for society.

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[95] R. Pepicelli, *Islamic Feminism: Identities and Positionalities*, in Anitta Kynsilehto (ed.), *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives*, Tampere Peace Research Institute Occasional Paper N. 96, Juvenes Print, 2008
[96] *ibidem*

Some schools of Islamic jurisprudence, such as the *Hanbali*[97] School, played a central part in the establishment of more conservative norms endorsing the principle of discrimination between genders, through a biased reading of the Quran in men's favor. [98]

The interpretations of the Quran by those who believe in a patriarchal religion have led, over the years, to aggravate the phenomena of misogyny. In fact, while Islam itself does not promote patriarchy, the ancient tribal customs that pre-date Islam favored a male-dominated society, and men shaped the religion around these. [99] Traditional clannish customs enforced patriarchal family structure, the importance of individual sacrifices for the family, as well as the preservation of the honor. Tribalism flourished because the civil and political institutions that guaranteed rights were weak or inexistent.

Hisham Sharabi, professor of Arab culture at the University of Georgetown, explains that still today a key characteristic of Islamic society is:

> "the dominance of the father (patriarch), the centre around which the national
> as well as the natural family are organized … in both settings the paternal
> will is the absolute will, mediated in both the society and the family by a
> forced consensus based on ritual and coercion."[100]

As the Arab tribal society Islamized, it preserved its patriarchal structure, and interpreted the Quran so as to give priority to the passages of the Holy Scripture that best fit the social model of that time. The advent of Islam led fundamentalists to reject social transformations that did not conform to clannish practices, and

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[97]Hanbali School of Law: "Islamic school of legal thought (madhhab) whose origins are attributed to Ahmad ibn Hanbal in ninth-century Baghdad. The official school is found in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with many adherents in Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. Recognizes as sources of law: the *Quran*, hadith, fatwas of Muhammad 's Companions, sayings of a single Companion, traditions with weaker chains of transmission or lacking the name of a transmitter in the chain, and reasoning by analogy (qiyas) when absolutely necessary. It encourages the practice of independent reasoning (ijtihad) through study of the *Quran*and hadith. Rejects taqlid, or blind adherence to the opinions of other scholars, and advocates a literal interpretation of textual sources. Ritualistically, the Hanbali School is the most conservative of the Sunni law schools, but it is the most liberal in most commercial matters." Retrieved from http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e799

[98] Islam's Women, http://www.islamswomen.com

[99] International Affairs, http://suite101.com/article/women-in-the-arab-world-a363820#ixzz24ZqP3rKc

[100] *ibidem*

consecrated the immobility of the status of women, creating controversy around the true role of women.[101]

It is important that activists, such as the Islamic Feminist movement, try to restore the equality bestowed on women, like it was in Islam's early years. It is fundamental to re-examine the Holy Quran and the *Hadith* from a neutral point of view, situate the wording in their true historical framework, and not confuse them with tribal rituals and customs.[102]

In conclusion, Islam itself is absolutely not to be accused of being the basis for the Westernized image of submissive women deprived of rights and opportunities.

> "God enjoins you to treat women well, for they are your mothers, daughters, aunts." – Prophet Muhammad[103]

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[101] Patriarchy and Islam, http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/7/037_Martin.pdf
[102] The Solutions Journal, http://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/node/900
[103] The Wisdom Fund, http://www.twf.org

Women in the Arab World Today

The 2005 Arab Human Development Report[104] entitled "Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World", identified gender inequality as one of the major obstacles to human development in the Islamic World Countries, especially in the Arab region. Regardless of some of the legal assurances for women's rights to political and economic participation, their conventional gender roles are very deep-rooted, limiting women's employment and decision-making opportunities[105]. Sixteen Islamic world countries, located in the Middle East and in Northern Africa, have signed or ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women[106] adopted by the United Nations in 1979. Letters A and C of Article Two[107] of this Convention establish the principle of equality of men and women, however the reservations set by some countries to this article based on the justification that it conflicts with national legislation or with the *Sharia[108]*, make the entire document almost completely meaningless. Nowhere in the Arab world, women enjoy equal political, civil and social rights, or equal opportunities, with men. The situation varies from country to country, due to diverse cultural backgrounds, geographical position or history, and social classes create further differences among women in some countries.[109]

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[104] The Report may be retrieved on http://hdr.undp.org
[105] United Nations Development Program, http://www.arabstates.undp.org
[106] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2002, table 31: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The CEDAW may be retrieved on: http://treaties.un.org
[107] Article 2 of the Convention:
"States parties condemn discrimination against women in all forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end, undertake: (a) To embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation. (c) To establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination". http://treaties.un.org
[108] "Sharia: the Islamic Law based on the Quran" Retrieved from http://www.merriam-webster.com
[109] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005, p20 http://hdr.undp.org

Personal Status and Family Law

There are a variety of kinds of Family Law Codes throughout Islamic countries. There are also many differences amongst Arab Muslim States. Tunisia, for example, has a very modern Code, differing from many other Arab countries:

Since there had been extensive violence and rejection of female education during the colonial regime in Tunisia, many modernizing reforms, focusing on women's rights, emerged in the early 20th century. The amendments were supported by many middle-class and urban men and women who were united by nationalism.[110]

After the Tunisian population had fought against the French colonial regime and achieved independence, Habib Bourghiba, the first president of Tunisia, implemented alterations that were beneficial to women and therefore to the entire society. These were preserved and guaranteed in the 1956 Tunisian Family Law Code. Polygamy as well as the husband's right to repudiation was outlawed, and the Code made divorce available to both spouses. The minimum age of marriage for women was established at older than 17 years, and women were allowed to automatically assume guardianship of minor children in the event of a husband's death. In case of divorce, wives were permitted to assume several guardianship privileges if the male guardian had behaved improperly. The 1956 Family Law Code also gave women the right to manage their own assets, and granted women the possibility to pass on their nationality to their children with the consent of the husband.[111]

Yemen, one of the Arab World's economically most underprivileged countries[112], on the other hand, has a very discriminatory Family Code: Marriage, divorce and inheritance are all legislated by the 1992 Personal Status Law. Until 1999, the Yemeni civil law had set the minimum age of marriage at 15, however this was revoked in order to allow parents to decide when to wed off their children and therefore there is currently no legal minimum age for marriage in the country. Moreover, women cannot conclude their own marriage contracts, because the agreement takes place between the woman's guardian (always a male) and the groom. According to Article 40 of the Personal Status Code, wives are obliged to

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[110] Retrieved from http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson9/lesson9.php?s=11
[111] Retrieved from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12291315
[112] The CIA Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ym.html

obey their husbands.[113] Men are able to repudiate their wives, while women may only obtain a divorce under restricted circumstances such as desertion, impotence, or taking another wife without her consent. Polygamy is legal according to the requirements in Sharia law, which allows Muslim men to marry as many as four wives provided that they can maintain them financially.[114]

Women in Yemen are also discriminated with regards to parental authority. Islamic law sees fathers as the natural guardians of children, and mothers have no legal rights. Since 2009, women have been able to grant citizenship to children having a non-Yemeni father[115]

Furthermore, *Sharia* law provides for meticulous calculations of inheritance shares in Yemen. Women may generally inherit from their father, mother, husband or children, and from other family members. However, women who have married into a different tribe are prevented from inheriting property, in order to keep it under tribal ownership. Additionally, in an effort to protect family assets, rich families sometimes prohibit their daughters to marry outside the family.[116]

Iran is not an Arab State even though it borders with Iraq and is just separated by waters with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman. It is a very particular reality among Islamic countries. According to Shirin Ebadi, the role of women in society often amounts to their participation in the family structure. In the Constitution of Iran, there is a specific section entitled "Women in the Constitution" that states the following:

> "Family is the foundation of every society and the primary place for the growth and development of human beings. The concord of ideas and ideals in establishing a family is the primary source for the evolution and growth of humans and providing the possibilities for attaining such an aim is one of the duties of the Islamic government. In this interpretation of family, women have important and valuable

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[113]Retrieved from Amnesty International, https://doc.es.amnesty.org/cgi-bin/ai/BRSCGI/mde310062012en?CMD=VEROBJ&MLKOB=30466775050
[114] Social institutions and Gender Index, http://genderindex.org/country/yemen#_ftnref39
[115] *ibidem*
[116] *ibidem*

responsibilities as mothers who assume their leading role in raising religious children."[117]

Furthermore, Ebadi underlines that even the twenty-first amendment of the Constitution, regarding the rights of women is made of five resolutions, of which four are strictly related to women's rights in the family and their duties as wives and mothers, not as individual human beings.[118]

> "Article 21- The government must ensure the rights of women in all respects,
> in conformity with Islamic criteria, and accomplish the following goals:
> 1.create a favorable environment for the growth of woman's personality and
> the restoration of her rights, both the material and intellectual;
> 2.the protection of mothers, particularly during pregnancy and childbearing,
> and the protection of children without guardians;
> 3.establishing competent courts to protect and preserve the family;
> 4.the provision of special insurance for widows, and aged women and women
> without support;
> 5.the awarding of guardianship of children to worthy mothers, in order to
> protect the interests of the children, in the absence of a legal guardian."[119]

In some Arab Islamic world countries, the family is often the first social institution that contributes to patriarchal relationships, leading to gender discrimination, control and alienation of women. Still today, personal status laws represent the most emblematic quintessence of this problem. Some Arab Personal Status Laws continue being very conservative and resilient to alteration. Often States do not even have codified Personal Status Laws and leave decisions to the judiciary, which is deeply inclined to the traditionalist nature of classical Islamic jurisprudence.[120] Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon and Qatar are amongst those States that do not have a unified Personal Status Code. In Egypt, there are some Personal Status

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[117] S. Ebadi, *A Perspective on Women's Rights in the Context of Human Rights* in F. Nouraie Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground Muslim Women in the Global Era*, The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, pp.278
[118] *ibidem*
[119] Iran Chamber Society, http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch03.php
[120] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p16 http://hdr.undp.org

Laws for Muslims that date back to the 1920s, but where there are no laws, the State has often recurred to the *Hanafi[121]* School of Law.[122] In Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the lack of a unified Personal Status Code, authorizes religious judges to rule on family matters based on Islamic jurisprudence.[123]

Family law in Muslim countries, often created to protect Islamic culture and customs, promotes patriarchy, disadvantaging women. With the exceptions of Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, and Morocco, where the legal age a woman can marry is eighteen, and twenty in Tunisia,[124] women can be married off by their parents at a very young age and often without the girl's consent. Most of the remaining Muslim-majority countries have ages set for females ranging from fifteen to seventeen.

In Jordan, the legal age for marriage was very recently raised from fifteen to eighteen. While it is fairly easy for men to file for divorce, it is much harder for women. Egypt issued a law granting women the right to divorce only in 2001. In the same period, King Mohammed VI in Morocco approved more rights for women, such as the right to divorce. This, however, initiated great protests by various conservative Islamist groups who refused these excessively liberal maneuvers.[125]

It is fundamental for Islamic countries to adopt unified Personal Status Codes in order to truly guarantee basic human rights to all of their citizens, above all women. It would be a very important first step forward, because making legal changes might then encourage social and cultural changes to also take place.

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[121] The Hanafi School of Jurisprudence: "is one of the four Schools in Sunni Islam. It was founded by Nu'man abu Hanifa (d. 767) in Kufa in modern Iraq. The Hanafi School became prominent under the Abbasid Dynaty and later under the Ottoman Empire, during which the Hanafi School of Jurisprudence became the only authoritative code of law in the public life and official administration of justice in all the vast territories of the Ottoman Empire." Retrieved from http://www.hgexperts.com

[122] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p16 http://hdr.undp.org

[123] *ivi*, p190

[124] Loon Watch, http://www.loonwatch.com/2012/05/is-child-marriage-a-muslim-problem/

[125] M. Ottaway, *Carnegie Papers, Women's Rights and Democracy in the Arab World*, Middle East Series, February 2004, N. 42

Ancient Customs that Endure

In some Muslim countries, there are archaic practices that are still carried out today, despite the fact that their nature goes against internationally affirmed basic human rights. For example, polygamy is not a widely practiced custom, but is socially accepted and legal in many countries, such as Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. [126]

As already mentioned on previous pages, it is first of all necessary and fundamental to distinguish between Islam and Customary Law. Islam is based on *Sharia*, "the body of doctrines that regulate the lives of those who profess Islam"[127], which governs all aspects of a Muslim's life. *Sharia* law is based on the Quran, the *Hadith* (sayings, actions, conduct of the Prophet), and *fatwas* [128] (the rulings of Islamic scholars).[129] *Sharia* regulates all human actions and divides them into five groups: "obligatory, recommended, permitted, disliked or forbidden."[130] Obligatory actions are rewarded when performed with good intentions. The opposite is forbidden action. Recommended action is that which should be carried out and obviously the opposite is disliked action. The most common type, the permitted action, is neither encouraged nor dejected.[131] People in the West often view *Sharia* as an archaic system imposed on populations who live in *Sharia*-controlled States.[132]Most Islamic people see *Sharia* as "something that nurtures humanity"[133], while many others including Muslims, misunderstand it: *Sharia* is frequently and erroneously associated with "death by stoning" and "amputation of limbs" and other types of prehistoric castigations.

Customary Law is "a body of unwritten norms, called customs (rules of conduct), that have arisen spontaneously and have been sanctioned by the State. A

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[126] M. Ottaway, *Carnegie Papers, Women's Rights and Democracy in the Arab World*, Middle East Series, February 2004, N. 42
[127] Retrieved from, http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Sharia
[128] "Fatwa: A legal opinion or ruling issued by an Islamic scholar." Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com/fatwa
[129] The BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/beliefs/sharia_1.shtml
[130] *ibidem*
[131] *ibidem*
[132] *ibidem*
[133] *ibidem*

legal system incorporates only those customs that function as legal norms and that the State adapts to specific conditions." [134]

In the pre-Islamic period, Customary Law was considered complementary to *Sharia*; nevertheless it was fundamental that generally accepted customs and practices did not go against the Quran and the *Sunna*.[135] Customary Law is a formal source of regulation in some Arab countries:[136]

Analyzing all of the Arab States, the United Arab Emirates is the only country which has a legal system based on Customary Law and Muslim Law. Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait and Oman have mixed legal systems based on Civil Law, Muslim Law and Customary Law. Bahrain, Qatar, Somalia and Yemen have systems based on Muslim Law, Customary Law, Common Law and Civil Law. Saudi Arabia has a monolithic legal system based only on Muslim Law. All the remaining Arab States have systems based on Muslim Law and Civil Law.[137]

All fifty-five Islamic world countries have Constitutions that are based on Islam. The majority of Muslim countries have legal systems in which Sharia and other forms of States law coexist. Nevertheless, this creates a difficult relationship between the various sources (Sharia, Constitution, Civil Law, Common Law, and Customary Law), making it hard to understand the hierarchy and role of each.[138]

Various deep routed traditions which have been generally accepted by society for a long time, have been passed on from generation to generation, and have become part of Customary Law, and thus sometimes prevail on other forms of law in certain cultures.

Child marriage is a very serious problem in the entire world, and also in some Muslim countries. According to Trust.org, a girl under the age of eighteen is married every three seconds somewhere in the world. The girl rarely gives "full and free consent" to it, going against one of the fundamental rights enshrined in the 1948

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[134]Retrieved from http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Customary+Law
[135] Retrieved from
http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=consuetudine%20nell'islam&source=web&cd=4&ved=0C
DwQFjAD&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sp.units.it%2FDocenti%2520Materiali%2FSCARCIGLIA%
2Farticolo%2520fonti%2520islamiche.doc&ei=XLlJUIzNAfKK4gSIioCwDg&usg=AFQjCNEkc8gJ
YeFdjdlHqtkh1bwA7xlj0Q
[136] Retrieved from http://www.juriglobe.ca/eng/syst-onu/rep-sys-juridique.php
[137] *ibidem*
[138] M. Oliviero, *I Paesi del Mondo Islamico* in P. Carrozza, A. Di Giovine, G. F. Ferrari (a cura di), *Diritto costituzionale comparato*, BariRoma, Laterza, 2009, p. 578

Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[139] In Yemen and Afghanistan, there is no legal minimum age for girls to wed. Many girls are obliged to get married, and some are as young as six or eight. CNN has reported the case of a twelve year old Yemeni girl dyeing of internal bleeding after intercourse with her much older groom.[140] The custom of child marriage endangers girls' right to education and jeopardizes their mental and physical health.[141] In fact, girls that are younger than fifteen are five times more likely to die as a result of pregnancy, than women over twenty.[142] As the graph below indicates, the countries with the highest rates of child marriage are those with a majority of a Muslim population. However, contrarily to what some may think, child marriage cannot be attributed only to Islamic religion. In fact, more than forty percent of child marriage also takes place in Hindu-majority Nepal and India.[143]

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[139] Trust.org, http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/womens-rights/child-marriage/infographic/
[140] CNN, http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/04/09/yemen.child.bride.death/index.html
[141] Human Rights Watch, "Yemen: Child Marriage Spurs Abuse of Girls and Women", http://www.hrw.org
[142] Trust.org, http://www.trust.org/trustlaw/womens-rights/child-marriage/infographic/
[143] The Economist, http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/02/child_brides

Child brides in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa
Selected countries, 2003-09*
% of women aged 20-24 who were first married or in union, by age

■ Under 15   ■ 15 - <18

Literacy rate†, women aged 15-24, %

Country	Literacy rate
Niger	23
Chad	37
Mali	31
Bangladesh	76
Nepal	75
Ethiopia	39
Sierra Leone	46
India	74
Uganda	86
Zambia	68
Nigeria	65
Congo	62
Liberia	80
Tanzania	76
Kenya	93
Ghana	78
Pakistan	59
Rwanda	77
Sri Lanka	99
Namibia	95
South Africa	98

Sources: UNICEF; World Bank

* Based on surveys conducted   †2008 or latest available

Graph 1- Child Marriage Data retrieved from UNICEF and World Bank

Child marriage does not occur in all Muslim countries and furthermore occurs in parts of the world where Islam is not the dominant religion. The practice thus must not be attributed to Islam, but rather to culture and retrograde traditions that have been passed on for centuries, as well as poverty and lack of education.[144]

Afghanistan is a land-locked Asian country bordered by Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. The geographical location of the country has made it a continuous battleground for invaders and conquerors for hundreds of years. This aspect has made the Afghan people quite unique in their

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[144] The Economist, http://www.economist.com/blogs/dailychart/2011/02/child_brides

customs and traditions. Afghans are known to display deep loyalty to their respective clans and tribes; they are strong believers in Allah and strictly follow the principles of Islam.[145] Almost all inhabitants are Muslims, divided between *Sunnis* (eighty-four percent) and *Shiites*.[146] Amongst all Islamic countries, it is probably the State which has maintained some of the most unacceptable, shocking and archaic pre-Islamic practices:

In Afghanistan, *baad* is an abhorrent customary practice that still takes place today. *Baad* refers to a tradition where girls or women are handed over to distressed relatives to "pay off" a crime. This punishment is generally decided by the local *jirga*[147] (Council) members, who trust that *baad* is a more "restorative" form of justice rather than revenge killings.[148] Many international organizations, such as the Human Rights Watch, are constantly trying to find ways to put an end to such an inhumane practice; however it is not easy to change an entire culture and its values overnight.

In Afghanistan, more than four hundred women, as well as girls, are jailed for having committed "moral crimes," such as the simple act of running away from domestic violence or forced marriage. Some have been condemned for *zina,* sexual intercourse outside of marriage, after actually being raped or forced into prostitution. Violence against women goes for the most part unpunished, regardless of a 2009 decree meant to restrict it.[149]

Another ancient tradition in Afghanistan that was banned by the Taliban regime, but that is now back is *bancha bazi*, literally meaning "boy for play", or

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[145] Retrieved from http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Afghanistan.html#b

[146] The CIA Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html

[147]"The basis for Jirga is the Holy Quran which commands Muslims to Shura (consultation), however this political gathering stems back from times prior to Afghanistan embracing Islam. As has been practiced in Afghanistan for centuries, Loya Jirga is held when there is an issue of special importance concerning the community's vital national and international interests. Jirga is a reliable and honorable process of decision making within the Afghan societies where after serious discussions decisions are made by involving all layers of the society. It is an unprejudiced and impartial body that takes decisions based on facts and logic. Indeed, evolution of political systems in different countries demonstrates that governments and institutions are built as a result of local gatherings and councils. Therefore, it is proclaimed that Jirga is an important political pillar of the civil system practiced and evolved in Afghan societies for many years." More information may be retrieved on http://jirga.gov.af/en

[148] Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Stop Women Being Given as Compensation", http://www.hrw.org

[149] Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Make Rights a Priority at Tokyo Conference", http://www.hrw.org

hiring out by older men, young male dancers dressed as women.[150] According to this tradition, boys who are abandoned or rejected by their families are kept in a form of sexual slavery by their "masters" making them perform in front of older men in exchange for money. According to Ghaith Abdul-Ahad's article in "The Guardian", the tradition has come back after the end of the regime, and has spread not only in small towns such as Taluqan, in northern Afghanistan, but has also reached larger cities, such as Kabul.[151]

All of these traditions and practices are undoubtedly linked to tribal and pre-Islamic period customs, but have somehow been confused with Islam.

Certain forms of negative discrimination between genders that have been carried out for a long time can be also found in the penal codes of some Arab States, such as for the crime of adultery in Morocco. While men are considered guilty only if the transgression takes place in the marital house, women instead are accountable regardless of where the act takes place.[152]

Article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code allows men, who have raped or had sex with minors, to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims. The origins of this Article lie in the fact that according to a very old Moroccan tradition, an unmarried girl who had lost her virginity had dishonored her family and was no longer marriageable, thus some conservative families believe, still today, that marriage with the rapist solves the problem. Many reforms, such as the abrogation of Article 475, need to take place to truly protect the rights of women, as well as to overcome social customs that are detrimental to girls and women.[153] Furthermore, the fact that such traditions are carried out in a prevalently Muslim country must not be confused with the idea that *Sharia* tolerates or protects such practices.

The World Health Organization defines violence against women as:

"any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of

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[150] The Guardian, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/12/dancing-boys-afghanistan
[151] *ibidem*
[152] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005,p16 http://hdr.undp.org
[153] Human Rights Watch, "Morocco: Girl's Death Highlights Flawed Laws", http://www.hrw.org

such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life".[154]

There are three serious forms of violence against women in the Arab world: honor crimes, domestic violence and female circumcision. The homicide of women, executed by a father, brother, husband or son, for the "defense" of honor is an ancient tribal tradition that is still carried out in rural areas of many Arab countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and the occupied Palestinian territory. Regardless of the accomplishments of many civil society organizations in Algeria, Jordan and Morocco, that have introduced criminal laws so as to have honor crimes regarded as criminal acts, laws in other Arab countries often still protect the murderer.[155]

Domestic violence is a dreadful phenomenon that takes place, and is condemned, all over the world. The UNDP does not have enough data in this field regarding the Arab countries to discuss the true extent of violence of this kind, however, the testimonials and the modest quantity of collected information is still horrifying. Some patriarchal families in the Arab world have been transformed into places where all sorts of violence against women take place, ranging from beating to sexual harassment on women and small girls by relatives. Sometimes, violence is even carried out in public, such as that inflicted by the *motawa*[156] (religious police) in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, women may also undergo violence in the workplace, ranging from blackmailing to sexual assaults.[157]

The elevated rate of female circumcision in some Arab countries leads to severe health complications for women. The operation can sometimes lead to infections, contracting diseases such as AIDS, and the severe pain may cause nervous breakdowns. In the worst case scenarios, the excessive bleeding during the surgery itself may lead to death. Unfortunately, it is very hard to fight against this phenomenon, as it is culturally accepted in many countries. The UNDP researches carried out in Egypt showed that low levels of education, living in rural areas, and

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[154] The WHO, http://www.who.int
[155] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p116 http://hdr.undp.org
[156] Motawa: "religious police in Saudi Arabia whose duty is to ensure strict adherence to established codes of conduct; offenders may be detained indefinitely; foreigners are not excluded." Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com
[157] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p116 http://hdr.undp.org

personal beliefs are some of the main elements that obstacle the deterrence of circumcision.[158] Finally in 1997, the Egyptian Council of State, the top Egyptian Court, banned female circumcision.[159]

Little progress and innovation have reached and influenced certain rural parts of Islamic world countries. Great parts of society remain closer to tradition.

Political Rights

Arab countries strictly restrain the political rights of all their citizens, men and women. They may at times be acknowledged on paper however they are rarely put into practice[160]. The principle of separation of powers is formally recognized in all Constitutions of Islamic World Countries, however, in reality, most of the decisive power is held by the head of State or Monarchy, and by the elite that surrounds them.[161] Parliaments are frequently powerless and strongly influenced by the Executive power. Heads of State and Governments are often elected by the citizens, or sometimes take power through a coup d'état, however the election process is strongly controlled and influence by the State itself (for example, Tunisia under Ben Ali[162]), and political pluralism is strongly kept under control[163]. There are also radical situations, such as Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that do not even recognize political parties. These are some of the reasons why presidential types of governments have installed in many Islamic countries, rather than parliamentary types of regimes.[164]

Until very recently, there were three countries that did not recognize women's rights to participate in elections and vote: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and

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[158] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p116 http://hdr.undp.org
[159] The BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/42914.stm
[160] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005, p20 http://hdr.undp.org
[161]M. Oliviero, *I Paesi del Mondo Islamico* in P. Carrozza, A. Di Giovine, G. F. Ferrari (a cura di), *Diritto costituzionale comparato*, BariRoma, Laterza, 2009, p. 578
[162] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea, Mondadori*, 2011, p 110-129
[163] M. Oliviero, *I Paesi del Mondo Islamico* in P. Carrozza, A. Di Giovine, G. F. Ferrari (a cura di), *Diritto costituzionale comparato*, BariRoma, Laterza, 2009, p. 579
[164]M. Oliviero, *I Paesi del Mondo Islamico* in P. Carrozza, A. Di Giovine, G. F. Ferrari (a cura di), *Diritto costituzionale comparato*, BariRoma, Laterza, 2009, p. 579

Kuwait. While Kuwait deliberately excluded women from the electoral process until 2005[165], in Saudi Arabia, the King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz's, declared in September 2011, that women are to be given the same opportunities for political participation as men. However, in practice, they may be restricted by the limitations imposed by the Saudi interpretation of Islamic law, such as the guardianship system under which women need authorization from a male family member to take part in public life.[166] The United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, do not hold regular elections, and both men and women have a very limited vote.[167]

Women in Lebanon won the right to vote and participate in national elections nineteen years before Swiss women, in 1952. Nonetheless, the participation of women in politics is dismal. Ever since Lebanon achieved its independence from France in 1943, a patriarchal political culture has instilled. In the 2009 Parliamentary elections, only four women were elected out of one hundred twenty eight seats. Since 1952, only seventeen women have served in the Lebanese Parliament.[168]

With the exception of the Gulf States, many Arab nations recognized political rights of women around the same time as many western developing countries[169]. Turkey, a country with a vast majority of Muslims, although not an Arab State, has recognized women's right to vote in 1930 and their right to stand for elections in 1934. Syria recognized the political right of women in 1949, Lebanon in 1952, Egypt in 1956 and Tunisia in 1957[170]. The UNDP[171] has not yet been able to collect reliable data on the extent to which women truly exercise their right to vote, and on whether their ballot is independent or if they are influenced by the men in the family. Governing is an overpowering male privilege in most Islamic world countries, and the presence of women in Parliaments and ministerial places range from zero to ten percent in very few cases[172].

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[165] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p 21 http://hdr.undp.org
[166] The BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk
[167] The Khaleej Times, http://www.khaleejtimes.com
[168] The Human Rights Watch, "A Woman's Place in Lebanon" by Nadya Khalife, http://www.hrw.org
[169] UNDP, Human Development Report 2003 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), table 27.
[170] M. Ottaway, *Carnegie Papers, Women's Rights and Democracy in the Arab World*, Middle East Series, February 2004, N. 42
[171] UNDP is an acronym for United Nations Development Program
[172] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005,p 21 http://hdr.undp.org

Arab governments have appointed women to ministerial positions ever since the beginning of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the participation of women has often been purely symbolic, and female ministers have exclusively been placed in social ministries related to women affairs. The executive body often has male-oriented ideals, thus women are not included in the decision-making processes. The first woman minister was appointed in Egypt in 1956, in Iraq in 1959, and in Algeria in 1962. Since 2002, the number of Arab countries that appoint female ministers has slowly augmented, so that women today participate in all governments except that of Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, these assignations do not mirror a general tendency towards women's empowerment because female ministers are often selected from elite groups, or appointed within the ruling party as a fake façade of progress and open-mindedness[173].

UNIFEM [174] affirms that the percentage of female representatives in the Parliament has increased from one percent in 1995, to eleven percent in 2003 in Morocco. In Jordan, the percentage grew from two in 1995, to barely six in 2003, while it increased from less than seven percent in 1995 to about twelve percent in 2003 in Tunisia. In Iraq, the percentage of women in the Parliament reached twenty five percent in the 2005 elections.[175] While most States in the Arab *Maghreb[176]* have adopted quota systems to guarantee a noteworthy representation of women in their Parliaments, the number of parliamentary seats held by women in the Arab *Mashreq[177]* is almost completely insignificant. The overall female representation in Parliaments and National Assemblies is six percent, the lowest in the world.[178] Moreover, the presence of women in Parliament does not necessarily translate to a democratic portrayal of women. [179]

As the Egyptian professor of legal philosophy Farahat Mohamed Nour stated, the Beijing Declaration[180], adopted during the fourth World Conference on Women

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[173] *ibidem*
[174] UNIFEM is an acronym for United Nations Development Fund for Women
[175] UNIFEM, http://www.unifem.org
[176] "Maghreb: North Western Africa, including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and sometimes Libya" http://www.merriam-webster.com
[177] "Mashreq: East African countries, extending from Egypt towards the boarders with Iran" http://www.merriam-webster.com
[178] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011, p54
[179] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p20 http://hdr.undp.org
[180] The Beijing Declaration may be retrieved on http://www.un.org

in 1995, along with the Platform for Action, strongly encouraged governments to revise the impact of their electoral systems on the political representation of women in the elected bodies. The Declaration was based upon the Recommendations made by the CEDAW, the Committee on the Elimination of the Discrimination against Women, which exhorted States Parties to make use of temporary special measures, such as positive action, or quota systems in the representative bodies. Moreover, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women has affirmed that all States should adopt a standard of at least a thirty percent quota of female representation in decision-making positions at the national level.[181] Many Islamic world countries are still far from this objective, but nonetheless it would be extremely important for them to conform to these international standards to guarantee more democracy and the respect of basic human rights.

Educational Rights

The access to education for both genders broadly varies among the Arab countries. In the last few years, the Gulf States have hardly worked to increase girls' enrolment in school, to narrow down the gap between genders at the diverse levels of education[182]. Great increases in literacy rates have been observed in the Gulf States and in Northern Africa, not only due to the efforts made by the countries, but also because their literacy rates were very low to begin with[183].

The utmost rate of education deficiency takes place in the less developed Arab countries, such as Djibouti and Yemen, where the literacy rate remains very

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[181] M. N. Farahat, *Al-Mar'a wal-Musawah, al-Tamyiz li-Salih al-Nisa* (Women and Equality, Positive Discrimination in Favour of Women) in *Rasa'il al-Nida' al-Jadid* (New Call Essays), no. 65, Cairo, November 2003.

[182] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p17 http://hdr.undp.org

[183] J. Saud, *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures, Volume IV: Economics, Education, Mobility and Space*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2007

low, despite the improvements in the last thirty years[184], as well as in those with the largest populations: Egypt, Morocco and Sudan.[185]

In some countries, more boys attend school than girls. In Yemen forty-four percent of girls and seventy-six percent of boys attend primary school. The male literacy rate is seventy percent, while the female literacy rate is thirty percent. Furthermore, the school life expectancy for males is eleven years, and seven for females[186]. On the contrary, in Bahrain, Qatar and United Arab Emirates, more girls than boys attend primary school, and the literacy rate is not so different between sexes. In the United Arab Emirates, female literacy rate is higher than that of males. However, the unemployment rate for female (almost twenty-two percent) is much higher than that of male (about eight percent)[187].

Literacy and School Life Expectancy Rates

COUNTRY	LITERACY MALE	LITERACY FEMALE	SCHOOL LIFE EXPECTANCY MALE	SCHOOL LIFE EXPECTANCY FEMALE
Bahrain	96.1%	91.6%	13	14
Qatar	89.1%	88.6%	11	14
UAE	76.1%	81.7%	13	14

Table 1 - Data retrieved on CIA-The World Fact Book, https://www.cia.gov/

Syria is another example of great disparity in unemployment rates. Male literacy rate is eighty-six percent, and women literacy rate is seventy-three percent. However, male unemployment rate is thirteen percent compared to the female unemployment rate of almost fifty percent. Morocco and Lebanon are amongst the few countries where the unemployment rates do not vary so much between men and women, clearly though always in favor of men[188].

Generally, the percentage of female enrolment in secondary school is lower than in primary school, in fact, less than eighty percent of girls attend high school

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[184] J. Saud, *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures, Volume IV: Economics, Education, Mobility and Space*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2007
[185] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p17 http://hdr.undp.org
[186] The World Fact Book, CIA, https://www.cia.gov/
[187] *ibidem*
[188] *ibidem*

with the exception of Bahrain, Jordan and Qatar. Female enrolment is less than twenty percent in Djibouti. The enrolment rate for women is higher than that of men in secondary school in the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Tunisia, and UAE. In tertiary education, Kuwait is outstanding because thirteen percent of men and thirty percent of women are enrolled. Kuwait is one of the few countries that have a very high literacy rate, both for men (ninety four percent) and women (ninety one percent). [189]

Economic problems are amongst the major impediments that have a negative impact on the enrolment of girls in school. Furthermore, often families perceive schooling girls to be less important than educating boys. The differences in terms of access to schooling become even greater in vocational and technical education[190].

Female registration in university education has increased. The lowest registration rates, that do not exceed ten percent, can be found in Djibouti, Sudan and Yemen, while the number of women enrolled is superior than that of men in Kuwait, Qatar and United Arab Emirates.[191] Nevertheless women are mainly found in fields such as the humanities, literature and social sciences. These unfortunately are the areas in least demand by employers. On the other hand, enrolment rates for females in fields that lead to jobs, such as engineering and science, are clearly much lower. Furthermore, women are sometimes discriminated, making it even harder for them to access certain areas: in the University of Kuwait, males are accepted in the field of engineering with a grade point average of sixty-eight, while women need an eighty-three-point-five average to be acknowledged.[192]

The 2003 UNDP Human Development Report shows that with the exception of a few countries, Islamic world women are no more education deprived than men, however, there is no detail on the quality of education that both sexes acquire, thus it is hard to make comparisons with other countries around the world. Furthermore, as in the case of the United Arab Emirates, education does not necessarily lead to similar employment opportunities for women.

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[189] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p17 http://hdr.undp.org
[190]*ibidem*
[191] UNESCO, https://www.unesco.org
[192] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p17 http://hdr.undp.org

Economic Activities and Job Opportunities for Women

Even though there is a lack of information regarding the true participation of women in economic activities, statistics show that the lowest rate of economic female activity (above the age of fifteen), is found in the Arab countries.[193] The female economic activity rate in Arab States is almost half the rate in East Asia, Pacific, Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Sub-Saharan Africa.[194]

Usually unemployment rate is always higher for women (for example in the United Arab Emirates and Syria), however in Morocco and Lebanon, the unemployment rates do not vary so much between men and women, obviously though always lower for men[195]. The conventional idea of men being the breadwinners hinders female employment. In Arab countries, experience demonstrates that in times of economic crisis, women are the first to be fired, and in times of economic growth, they are the last to be employed.[196]

Given the superior achievements of women in terms of education according to the UNDP Report[197], the tendency to discourage female employment goes completely against the ideal of economic efficiency: in all the Islamic countries, women, the gender with stronger potential for learning, thus also have higher possibilities to increase production, are less prone to find a job. Moreover, women do not enjoy the same opportunities and equal working conditions as men. It is much less likely for a woman to be promoted and to climb to the top of the decision-making ladder.[198]

Most women in Arab countries are employed in the service sector, which is lowest in productivity and wage. While figures for men and women working as remunerated workers does not show too much of a difference in most cases, non-salaried work instead has enormous discrepancy. Men usually are self employed or working for others, whereas women tend to work in the private sphere, for their families, without receiving any remuneration: in Egypt there is a twenty percent rate, while in Morocco there is a fifty two percent rate of women working in the

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[193] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p17 http://hdr.undp.org
[194] *ivi*, p85
[195] The World Fact Book, CIA, https://www.cia.gov/
[196] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p88 http://hdr.undp.org
[197] *ibidem*
[198] *ibidem*

households of relatives.[199] In Jordan, women who graduated university are paid about seventy percent of the amount earned by men for the same employment, while illiterate women's wages are less than thirty percent of those of illiterate men.[200]

Fortunately, the labor legislations in some Arab countries provide legal protection for working women. For instance, the Egyptian Constitution of 1971, in Article 11[201], secures the protection of employed women. Furthermore, many States have laws guaranteeing women the right to maternity leave, such as Article 61 of the Bahraini Labor Law[202] and, Article 25 of the Kuwait Labor Law[203], and prohibit the termination of service of employed women during maternity leave such as Article 27 of the Jordanian Labor Law.[204]

Egyptian Labor Law forbids the employment of women during the night time, with the exceptions decreed by the Minister of Manpower and Emigration, such as in the fields of hotel industry, musical and theatrical entertainment, commercial establishments opened at night, and hospitals, clinics and pharmacies. Furthermore, employing women in professions which are detrimental to their health or moral well-being, as well as physically demanding occupations, have been banned. Another ministerial decree in Egypt forbids the employment of women in bars, firms that produce alcoholic beverages, gambling businesses, mines, in the manufacturing of

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[199] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p89 http://hdr.undp.org

[200] *ivi*, p91

[201] Article 11: The State shall guarantee coordination between woman's duties towards her family and her work in the society, considering her equal to man in the political, social, cultural and economic spheres without detriment to the rules of Islamic jurisprudence (Sharia). Retrieved from http://www.cabinet.gov.eg

[202] Article 61: "A female worker shall be entitled to maternity leave on full pay for forty-five days which shall not be deducted from her annual leave provided she produces a medical certificate attested by the Ministry of Health stating the expected date of her confinement. Such Maternity leave shall include the period before and after confinement. Further, she may have an additional leave without pay for fifteen days." Retrieved from   http://www.slideshare.net/saroiitm/bahrain-labourlaw

[203] Article 24: "The pregnant woman shall be entitled to a paid maternity leave of seventy days which shall not be included within her other leaves, provided that the delivery shall take place during this period. An employer, after expiry of the maternity leave, may grant a female laborer upon her requests a leave without pay for not more than four months to take care of her infant." Retrieved from http://www.scribd.com/doc/34460390/Kuwait-Labor-Law-Guidebook-2010

[204] Article 27: "With due observance to the provisions of paragraph (b) hereof, the Employer may not terminate the service of the Employee or serve notice upon him for the termination of his service in any of the following cases: 1) The pregnant working woman as of the sixth month of her pregnancy or during the maternity leave." Retrieved from http://www.hammourilaw.com

explosives, and dancing establishments, except for women that are qualified dancers of legal age.[205]

Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen have all signed the International Labor Organization's Equal Remuneration Convention.[206] Iraq, Kuwait and Syria are among those States that clearly provide for equality in the wage of men and women in the same occupation, while Qatar and Saudi Arabia for example specify equality in salary in the civil service sector only.[207]

Despite the various guarantees for the safeguard of women in the work place, many forms of discrimination still persist. For example, a large part of the female employees are occupied in seasonal jobs, agricultural activities, and domestic work, or have a temporary contract, thus they are not legally protected by national labor laws. Furthermore, women are often prohibited to undertake important positions, such as president, prime minister, governor and many more. In Gulf States, women are not appointed as judges.[208]

Saudi Arabia has always had very strict restrictions on women's right to employment. A royal decree of 1985 prohibited women from employment in all fields apart from those of female education and nursing, and also forbade them from associating with men in the workplace.[209]A milestone was achieved in the country in January 2012, when a law allowing women to work as sales personnel in lingerie and cosmetics shops was issued. The economic planners of the country agreed that since public money is spent on the education of women, it is then fair to employ them and have them contribute to the economic output of Saudi Arabia.[210] This also leads the Ministry of Labor, to expand the list of professions that women are permitted to carry out. Furthermore, the Saudi Industrial Property Authority is developing a women-only industrial city at Hofuf to create about five thousand employments in textiles, pharmaceuticals and food-processing industries, with women-run companies and

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[205] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p186 http://hdr.undp.org
[206] The ILO Convention may be retrieved on http://www.ilo.org
[207] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p186 http://hdr.undp.org
[208]*ivi*, p187
[209] N. Hijab and C. Fawzi El-Solh, *Laws, Regulations, and Practices Impeding Women's Economic Participation in the MENA Region*, Report submitted to the World Bank, Office of the Chief Economist, Middle East and North Africa, Washington, D.C., August 2003.
[210] The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/opinion/sunday/saudi-women-break-a-barrier-the-right-to-sell-lingerie.html

production lines. [211] On one side, the positive aspect is giving more financial independence to Saudi women; however, this project also maintains gender segregation.

Another important step forward has been taken in Kuwait. In April 2012, the Court cancelled a ministerial order excluding women from entry-level jobs at the Ministry of Justice. The Court explained that the Ministry's decision to restrict employment to male candidates violated article 29[212] of the Kuwaiti Constitution, as well as international treaties that Kuwait has ratified. This is a very significant victory against legally-sanctioned discrimination in the country.[213]

More efforts to change the most conservative Arab countries are needed, but after years and years of struggles to participate in the public sphere, finally some of the professions and opportunities for women have been expanded.[214]

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[211] The Guardian, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/12/saudi-arabia-city-women-workers
[212] Article 29: "All people are equal in human dignity and in public rights and duties before the law, without distinction to race, origin, language, or religion." May be retrieved on http://www.hrw.org
[213] Human Rights Watch, "Kuwait: Court Victory for Women's Rights", http://www.hrw.org
[214] The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com

Arab Women and Communication Systems

Technology is amongst those elements that have helped overcoming some of the issues regarding gender inequality. Women have slowly left the private space, carefully entered the public spaces and have achieved a larger degree of freedom in the cyber space.[215]

Women's growing participation in educational and occupational spheres are amongst feminist activism's most significant achievements in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. This phenomenon is above all outstanding for middle-upper class Muslim women who have been restricted to the private space for a long time, because female seclusion was seen as a symbol of social prestige and economic position. [216] Private car ownership, women–only metro cars and sharing taxis facilitated women's movement outside the household. Slowly, some cafés have transformed into all-women coffee shops, and gyms have set specific women's hours, in order to protect women from harassment.[217] Stadiums in Iran are opened up to women at specific hours, and women are permitted into the stadiums to watch female-only sport events.[218] Furthermore, chaperones, mostly relatives, frequently accompany women on their outings to make sure they are not harassed, or else, women have adopted the habit to move in groups.[219] Moreover, some restaurants in the Gulf area are formally divided in men sections and women sections. Also, there are amusement parks in Saudi Arabia that are open once or twice a week, exclusively for women and minors.[220]

Women's participation in the cyberspace has grown all over the Islamic world, because it is a way to evade restrictions on socialization. Cell phones were the first technology to allow the transgression of spatial gender norms, and now emails, blogs, chat-rooms, and weblogs are all ways to exchange ideas, overcoming the obstacles of time, distance and above all, the socially imposed proper behavioral model. Women

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[215] J. Saud , *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures, Volume IV: Economics, Education, Mobility and Space*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2007, p 531
[216] *ibidem*
[217] *ivi,* p533
[218] *ibidem*
[219] *ivi,* p531
[220] *ivi,* p533

in Muslim countries in northern Africa can sometimes be spotted browsing the Internet at cyber cafés, escaping parental and community controls to forge virtual, online relationships with men, which would be impossible under the watchful eyes of family. [221] Moreover, the virtual space also allows women to circumvent the reputation-compromising hazards at work, as well as diverting the attention from their physical appearance.[222]

The Tunisian journalist, Siham Benseddrin, supported the movements of resistance against the government through *Kalima*, the online newspaper[223]. Manal al Sharif, a women's rights activist, encouraged other Saudi Arabian women to drive, by means of the videos she posted on You Tube[224], which have been seen by thousands of people all over the world. The blogger Asma' Mahfuz was able to reach out to many through Facebook and urged people to go down to Tahrir Square and fight for their rights during the Arab Spring.[225] Internet has truly been a crucial means of communication that has connected people from all over the world, creating billions of important networks to exchange ideas.

The Role of Media

Media play a substantial part in modifying stereotypes and social gender roles; nonetheless, they are a double edged sword. Media can be the ground for dialogue between Arab women who want change, but they may also be used as a weapon by those who are against it. [226]

More and more women are employed as broadcasters in satellite television, as well as in the print media, in many Arab countries. Yemen is an exception because it is undergoing a decrease in female participation in mass communication media, such as audio and print. This may be blamed on the fact that in some of the most

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[221] J. Saud, *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures, Volume IV: Economics, Education, Mobility and Space*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2007, p 539
[222] *ibidem*
[223] More information may be retrive on http://tunisiagroup.weebly.com/media-censorship.html
[224]The video may be found on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sowNSH_W2r0
[225] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011
[226] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p207 http://hdr.undp.org

conservative Islamic societies, the idea of women working in the media is still considered intolerable and appalling.[227] In November 2009, Saudi clerics requested the government to ban women from appearing on television and to forbid their images in print media. Furthermore, thirty-five Islamic clerics also wrote a letter to the Information Minister, Abdul Aziz al-Khoja, heavily criticizing the boost of music and dancing on television, as well as condemning the "obscene" images of women in popular newspapers and magazines.[228]

Clearly, the control of political and hard new media is always in the hands of men. Women, have a tendency to own businesses that produce social publications, rather than political ones. Whatever the case may be, women have no saying in the creation and approval of media policy. In Lebanon, less than twelve percent of news companies are owned by women. Moreover, there are no women on the editorial boards of any newspaper in the occupied Palestinian territory. [229] It is a shame that Arab women have no voice in the general direction of programming of media, because the female presence in policy making levels in the industry could help to portray a genuine image of women and challenge the traditional view.[230]

Nevertheless, social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are offering a ground for parity between men and women. Anyone who can access the cyber space has an equal saying, and right to participate in online discussions. Women in social networks are clearly a minority in the Arab world, thus do not reach the global standard, where usually an almost equal number of female and male users are online. Women in Muslim countries do have a handicap to start with: social, cultural, religious and traditional backgrounds often obstacle their access to Internet, but those who do have the possibility to enter the virtual world, are very active and often try to represent the voice of all women.[231]

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[227] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p207 http://hdr.undp.org
[228] More information may be retrieved on https://www.aswat.com/files/WomeninArabMedia_0.pdf
[229] *ibidem*
[230] *ibidem*
[231] More information may be retrieved on http://unpan1.un.org

Arab Women's Beirut Declaration

The 2004 Arab Women's Beirut Declaration, based on the Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women, outlined various goals for the empowerment of women which should be met within 2015. Articles 22, 23 and 25 underline the intention to promote the role of emancipated women through media:

"22. Facilitation of communication between women media figures and with other parties by the following means:

(a) Establishment of an association for Arab women media figures;

(b) Establishment of colleges for media and training centers for women, in particular in view of the information revolution;

(c) Holding workshops and seminars at ESCWA that bring together Arab women media figures, women intellectuals and civil society organizations;

(d) Preparation by ESCWA of a comprehensive directory of the names of women intellectuals, media figures and researchers, in order to improve media coverage of women's issues;

23. Focus on highlighting some of the experiences of women in the media at the base level, their struggles and the allocation of the necessary resources, broadcasting a program on women migrants and monitoring and sharing successful experiences in the media;

25. Efforts to alter the distorted image of women in the media"

The United Nations have recognized the important role the media plays in the empowerment of women and thus have decided to invest in this field through various projects.[232]

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[232]United Nations Development Program, http://arabstates.undp.org/

Poetry, Novels and Newspapers

Poetry was used to describe the conquests and losses of tribes, and was considered the central form of communication in the Arabian Peninsula before the Islamic Era (c. 750 CE to c. 1257 CE). The advent of Islam introduced other forms of communication, such as the Imams who were a crucial element in the spreading of knowledge at the Mosque. Moreover, interpersonal interactions at the market place also contributed to the diffusion of information.[233]

In the mid 1800, colonial powers introduced the printing press in the Arab world. The battle for civil rights of women started with the reform of the 1919 Ottoman Family Code, and focused on objectives such as carrying out restrictions to the dissemination of polygamy and increasing the minimum age for marriage. However, since the 1900, various Egyptian, Syrian and Lebanese women had already started writing in newspapers to promote women emancipation and equal rights between genders. [234]

In the 1860s, the medical practitioner Galila Tamarhan, was one of the first women to sign her articles in the Arab press, and strongly contributed to the medical magazine entitled *Yaasoub el-Tib*[235]. Maryana Marrash, a Syrian writer and poet of the *Nahda*[236] movement was the first woman to write in the Arab daily newspapers in the late 1800s. She condemned the condition of Arab women in her articles, and pushed women to demand education, and to express their concerns on issues they regarded as important.[237] Hind Nawfal was a Lebanese journalist who published *al-Fatah*, the first monthly journal for women in Egypt in 1892[238].

[233] G. Filoramo, *Islam*, con contributi di C. Lo Jacono, Khaled Fouad Allam, A. Ventura, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1999

[234] F. M. Corrao, Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea (Arab Revoluions. Mediterranean transition), Mondadori, 2011

[235] Yaasoub el-Tib, literally translated to "Leader in Medicine", was one of the first medical magazines in the Arab world.

[236] Nahda: "Movement of the 19th century that developed modern Arabic literature. Inspired by contacts with the West and a renewed interest in classical Arabic literature, it began in Egypt with Syrian and Lebanese writers who sought the freer environment there, and it spread to other Arab countries as a result of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the coming of independence after World War II. Its success in altering the direction of Arabic literature is related to the spread and modernization of education and the emergence of an Arabic press." Retrieved from http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com

[237] Bosworth, van Donzel, Heinrichs, Pellat, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, volume VI, Fascicules 107-108, pp598

[238] Arab Women Writers, http://www.scribd.com/doc/58319283/Arab-Women-Writers-A-Critical-Reference-Guide-1873-1999

The Iraqi poet, Nazik al-Malaika, born in 1922, is considered a pioneer of modern poetry in the Arab world.[239] Many of her poems underline the degrading and conservative traditions regarding women, which she blamed on the Arab society's isolation from innovation. The poet urged on the need to open up to other cultures and affirmed that women should not be restricted to the private space. She also stated that women should not continue being subject to laws based on tribal honor, which strongly limit their freedom of expression.[240]

In the 60s, female emancipation was set aside and subordinated to the struggles of independence from foreign powers. Since the late 50s, Nawal al-Sa'adawi, an Egyptian writer, psychiatrist and outspoken feminist, wrote novels about unequal access to health care for women[241], and problems linked to hygiene and infibulations. Her first novel, "Memoirs of a Woman Doctor", is the story of a young Egyptian woman who decides to study medicine, going against the restrictions and traditional obstacles imposed by her family.[242] In the non-fiction novel "Women and Sex", published in 1972, al-Sa'adawi reported the physical and moral damage, as well as other forms of violence, that women undergo due to the persistence of traditionalist mentality.[243] In the 80s, the Algerian poet Zaynab Laouedj wrote about the inhuman pre-Islamic customs and prejudices that die hard, and force women to live in desperate situations.[244]

In 2005, "Girls of Riyadh" (*Banat al-Riyadh*) by Rajaa Alsanea was released. The novel is written in the form of e-mails and narrates the personal lives of four Saudi girls. There was a lot of controversy when the novel was first published in Saudi Arabia, to the point where it was immediately banned by the government. Black-market copies of the novel circulated in some countries in the Middle East. The author also received death threats for "disrespecting" and "disgracing" the kingdom's women. "Girls of Riyadh" highlights many of the problems faced by Muslim women in Saudi Arabia.[245]

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[239] Retrieved from http://www.azzaman.com

[240] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011

[241] N. El-Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, Saqi Books, London, 2000

[242] N. El-Sadawi, http://www.nawalsaadawi.net/

[243] N. El-Sadawi, http://www.nawalsaadawi.net/

[244] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011

[245] Rajaa Al-Sanea, http://www.rajaa.net/

Even though the battle for the emancipation and recognition of rights of women has been carried out by poets, writers and feminist activists for over a century, there are still many territories that need to be conquered.

Female Entertainers

State officials prohibited public performances by women during the Ottoman Empire[246] (1300 to 1922). This act had strong consequences especially in Anatolia, the Balkans, and in Egypt, which lead to men performing dressed as women. During, but also after the years of censorship, the most popular artists sang privately in households, segregated by gender. At times, the female singers who were banned to sing ran away from one country to another. With this kind of cultural and social background, female singers did not have an easy access to the profession even in later years. Some performers claimed they entered the field for financial needs, while others openly stated they had always felt destined to sing. Some ran away from disapproving families, and some changed their names: Nuhad Haddad became Feiruz, and Amal al-Atrash became Asmahan.[247]

Sherifa Zuhur explains that female Muslim entertainers are simply a natural outcome of modernization and Westernization. The participation of Arab women in entertainment has both broken down the traditional view of women and their sexual appeal, but also reinforced it. Zuhur believes that women sometimes serve as a counterweight to religious messages that advocate humility and attack deviance, where "the audience listens to preachers with one ear, and to women's singing voices with the other."[248]

Arab women play musical instruments, however solo performances such as that of Munir Bashir, an Iraqi lute player, are rather recent and unusual experiences.

[246] The BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/ottomanempire_1.shtml
[247]S. Zuhur, *Singing a New Song: Bonding and Breaking with the Past*" in F. Nouraie Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era,* The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p 40
[248] *ibidem*

Moreover, women rarely play in orchestras because the performing environment and late hours are thought not to be suitable for women.[249]

In the 1990s, television in many Arab States started transmitting music and dance shows for family entertainment. The Saudi MBC2 TV runs American sitcoms, Oprah Winfrey's talk shows, and also music videos for everyone to enjoy. In the last few years, some videos have become more "open", influenced by the West, and according to conservative people, at times suggest a "sexually promiscuous culture".[250]

The Internet has played an important part in the careers of new performers. Popular singers such as Nancy Agram, Haifa Wehbeh, Diana Haddad and Ruby often post their stories and pictures, along with links to special fan-club chat lines.[251]

Many traditionalists worry and complain that some music videos normalize erotic messages. Ruby's performances have often been labeled as pornographic and some music companies have refused to register her. There are constant criticisms of contemporary singers' provocative performances in the news, as well as preaching about their negative effect on Muslim values.[252]

Women on Television

The advent of a global telecommunications revolution in the 1980s, predominantly in satellite television, brought impressive changes to the Arab world. After the great impact of CNN's international coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, quite a few Arab countries recognized the great value of satellite television. Many Arab leaders thought that satellite news was a perfect tool for spreading their influence beyond borders, and started launching their own national satellite television networks.

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[249] S. Zuhur, *Singing a New Song: Bonding and Breaking with the Past*" in F. Nouraie Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era,* The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p 38

[250] Jihad N. Fakhereddine, "Between Veils and Videos, Change and Arab Women", Daily Star, 2004, http://www.dailystar.com.lb

[251] *ibidem*

[252] *ibidem*

Amongst these was Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, the prince of Qatar, who launched Al-Jazeera in 1996. The Channel broke many taboos through its twenty-four-hour news and broadcastings of unrestrained political discussions. However, it was the two Lebanese channels, LBC and Future that first employed female broadcasters to present morning shows, aerobics, and news in 1996, a few months before Al Jazeera.[253]

Some television programs in the Arab world have enhanced the importance of dialogue, and facilitated the penetration of women into the public space, which they could not have accessed through just the use of written material, such as poems or novels, and newspapers alone. Some channels have helped support gender awareness, by promoting the principle of equality, as a substitute to discrimination between genders. The broadcast media and many satellite channels have increasingly more employed women. Female newscasters on Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya are often seen as important symbols of emancipated women.[254] Furthermore, the television acts as a bridge connecting women at home to a wider world.[255]

At the moment, there are many specialized Arab television programs and channels for women, but most of them basically only cover fashion, food, and diets. In June 2009, a new Arab women Channel "EVE" was launched on Nile Sat. Various topics regarding the role of women in politics, business, and society are discussed, and more trivial topics such as cooking are also broadcasted.[256]

Arab TV serials are fundamental in the transformation of the traditional image of women. The Arab dramatic series "Musalsalat" launched in the 1960s addressed patriarchal abuse and depicted strong female characters.[257] Nowadays, on one hand, there are Arab satellite channels that transmit religious programs which clearly help spread the Islamic culture and patriarchal models. For example, the new Egyptian satellite channel, Maria TV, launched on the first day of Ramadan in 2012,

[253] More information may be retrieved on https://www.aswat.com/files/WomeninArabMedia_0.pdf
[254] UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2005*, p15 http://hdr.undp.org
[255] J. Saud, *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures, Volume IV: Economics, Education, Mobility and Space*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2007, p 532
[256] More information may be retrieved on https://www.aswat.com/files/WomeninArabMedia_0.pdf
[257] J. Saud, *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures, Volume IV: Economics, Education, Mobility and Space*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2007, p 532

presents two broadcasters wearing a *niqab*[258], dressed in stark black, their hands gloved, who discuss the editorial content for the day.[259] Abeer Shaheer, the head presenter of the channel explained that "the main goal of the channel is to show society that there are women in *niqab* who are active, who can have a role in society and be triumphant, and be doctors, engineers or successful media personalities"[260], however this image clearly cancels out all individuality, moreover "personality" of the broadcasters. Contemporarily, there are numerous channels that portray emancipated women, such as the many female journalists on Al Jazeera.[261] The show "For Women Only" was launched on Al Jazeera in 2002 and it invited illustrious, educated women from all over the Arab world come to express their points of view regarding critical, social, political, scientific and environmental issues. However, the show was taken off the air without reasonable explanations in June 2005.[262] "Every Woman" was launched on Al Jazeera International in 2006, and it revealed the stories of women coming from diverse educational and racial backgrounds. The program confronted many subjects ranging from religion, society, education, arts, and to sex.[263]

The representation of Arab women in advertisements varies from country to country. Commercials shown in Saudi Arabian television must absolutely show veiled women. Advertisements that have Kuwait and Dubai as targets, instead, often portray a stylish, good-looking, but conservative woman. Ads in the Gulf area show women wearing a veil, dressed informally, and there are certainly no men shown in the same scene of the storyboard. Instead, in the Middle East, for example in Lebanon, the representation of women is more modern and liberal. In 2011, the National campaign entitled "Beating is…Shameful" was launched in Lebanon on TVC 7, to oppose violence against women.[264] There is a contradictory image in Egypt, where more than half the female population always wears a veil in public,

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[258] "Niqab: a face veil covering the lower part of the face (up to the eyes) worn by observant Muslim women." Retrieved from http://www.thefreedictionary.com

[259] Arab News, http://www.arabnews.com/egypt-all-veiled-tv-aims-cover-women%E2%80%99s-issues

[260] *ibidem*

[261] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005, p15 http://hdr.undp.org

[262] Al- Jazeera, http://www.allied-media.com/aljazeera/Al_jazeera_tv_programs.html

[263] More information may be retrieved on https://www.aswat.com/files/WomeninArabMedia_0.pdf

[264] YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNaDTtx4nuU&feature=player_embedded

while it is rare to see veiled women in commercials that though aim at the Egyptian market.[265]

Women in Movies

The Arab cinema also plays a significant part in increasing knowledge on women's issues and injustices due to unreasonable traditions and unjust laws. Cinema in Arab countries has sometimes challenged society through the negative reinterpretations of the role of submissive women, and many film-makers have been exiled. The Lebanese director, Heiny Srour, was the first female Arab filmmaker to have one of her works, "*Saat El tahrir Dakkat*" (1974) selected for the Cannes Film Festival. The movie was banned in most Arab countries, and she currently lives in England. The Tunisian filmmaker Najia Ben Mabrouk, has experienced censorship after producing "*La Trace*" ("The Trail") and "*Camera Arabe*", and now lives in Belgium.[266]

The Egyptian comedy, "*al-Ustahda Fatima*" ("Mrs. Fatima") by Fatin 'Abd Al-Wahhab created in 1952, portrays the story of a female lawyer confronting her fiancé, who poses resistance to her working. She trusts in her potential, and shows him all of her skills that go well beyond the traditional housewife's role. The Egyptian drama "*Du'a al-Karawan*" ("The Nightingale's Prayer") by Henry Barakat produced in 1959 depicts a woman who seeks revenge against the man who killed her sister. She undergoes the pain of rape, poverty, as well as physical and mental torture before she finds love. A research carried out by UNDP on Egyptian films between 1962 and 1972, demonstrated that eighty percent of women in the movies were portrayed as women without professions, with no specific role in society. Whilst the films produced between 1990 and 2000 show definitely a change portraying women in scenes of sex and violence, and they had titles such as "A Dangerous Woman", "The Devil is a Woman", "The Curse of a Woman", and "Torture is a Woman". Furthermore, the movies in this period did not depict female

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[265] YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNaDTtx4nuU&feature=player_embedded
[266] More information may be retrieved on http://www.al-bab.com/arab/cinema/

figures as characters that could be counted on to face and resolve problems. There was absolutely no concern for the evolution of women's roles in the Arab societies, and social, political, economical and cultural female responsibilities were evidently absent.[267]

In 2004, the film *"Bahibb al-Sima"* ("I Love Cinema") by Osama Fawzi was released in Egypt and caused public objections. The main character in the film is a Coptic (Egyptian Christian) woman who experiences sexual denial because of her husband's religious extremism and thus has an extra-marital relationship with another man. Initially, the censors refused to let the film be released, but then allowed it after cutting some scenes. In 2005, another Egyptian movie, *"Al-Bahithat 'an Al-Hurriyya"* ("Women Searching for Freedom"), directed by Inas Al-Dighaydi was released. It dealt with the problems of three women, from Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco living in Paris searching for the freedom that they had lost in their own countries. Many negative articles on the film were written, the advertisement posters were vandalized, and the director received death threats.[268]Despite the challenges faced by movie directors, the new Arab cinema is reflecting the wishes of new generations of women who promote freedom and independence.[269]

Symbolism of Cyber Space

Muslim women are increasingly taking part in the virtual space through emails, blogs, chat rooms, and social networks to exchange ideas. Nowadays, Internet is a fundamental form of communication as well as a channel for the proliferation of information, and a means for connecting people all over the globe.

According to Fereshteh Nouraie Simone[270], the cyber space is a liberating ground for young Iranian women. The virtual space is free of the Islamic restrictions that can be found in the public space. The interconnections in Internet allow women

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[267] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005, p15 http://hdr.undp.org
[268] More information may be retrieved on http://www.al-bab.com/arab/cinema/
[269] UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005, p15 http://hdr.undp.org
[270] F. Nouraie Simone, *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era,* The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p 62

to take part in endless dialogues, and share different points of view on issues such as gender politics, without the bans that are imposed in the physical space, presenting new opportunities for the empowerment of women.[271] Furthermore, the lack of a material body in the virtual space, as well as the anonymity, are characteristics of Internet that unfetter women from their suppressed identity, and allow them to create their own character, or for once, let them truly be themselves.[272]

The Lebanese blogger Maya Zankoul believes that the Internet is a tool that can help connect people that believe in the same values and share similar ideas, and allows them to collaborate to make a change. She trusts that a single woman fighting for her rights may be unheard, but many women coming together through a social network, such as Facebook or Twitter, can be a very powerful and an unstoppable force.[273]

In Asma Barlas's opinion[274], communication technologies will be able to change Muslim women's lives in significant ways, only if there is also a major transformation in the way Muslims interpret and practice Islam. Internet is deeply affecting the lives of people. For example, many female activists are using the cyber space to create partnerships, and more Muslim women are undertaking job opportunities that were once off-limits to them. However, Barlas does not believe that the virtual space will immediately help generate democratic societies that support gender equality and basic human rights. The Internet definitely has a strong political potential, however, this does not directly translate into a real "democratic global public arena" because it needs to be accompanied by many important alterations in Islamic culture.[275]

F. M. Corrao[276] explains how Muslim women use creativity as a tool to evade the rigid social rules. They express the injustices that they perceive by elaborating new codes of communication, such as *blooks* (blog-books) and by infringing the old ones. The virtual space eases the interaction amongst authors and readers, and also

[271] F. Nouraie Simone, *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era,* The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p 62

[272] M. Ryan, *Introduction, Cyberspace: Textuality, Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, Indiana University Press, Bloominton, 1999, p 20

[273] http://mayazankoul.com

[274] A. Barlas, *Globalizing Equality*, in F. Nouraie Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground Muslim Women in the Global Era,* The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p 94

[275] *ibidem*

[276] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011

enables the creation of new cultural horizons. Internet, a new virtual meeting place with the outside world, represents an alternative to the Mosque, which is still the main place for aggregation in many modern Arab cities.[277]

Internet in Different Muslim Countries

Iranian Women and the Virtual Space

Fereshteh Nouraie Simone describes the popularity of weblogs among Iranian young women as a "radical phenomenon", where the new technology has created a lot of excitement. Women write about all sorts of issues, without restrain, and feel free to express intimate feelings. The Internet is not controlled by the rules and structures imposed by the politically, culturally and socially manipulated physical space. For women born after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the cyber-universe creates a free, direct link to the outside world, unlocking a new channel of communication, self- expression and anti- conformism.[278]

F. N. Simone explains how women bloggers in Iran are mainly young professionals living in Teheran. They are mostly university students, journalists, NGO activists and social critics who use the cyber space for both personal (chat rooms, social networks and emails) and professional (website designers and graphic artists) purposes.[279]

Farsi[280] has become one of the most frequently used languages on the Internet, after English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian and Chinese.[281] Moreover, since 2000, the Internet users in Iran have increased more quickly than in any other

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[277] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011

[278] F. Nouraie Simone, *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era*, The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p 63

[279] *ibidem*

[280] "Farsi: The modern Iranian language, dating from about the ninth century A.D., that is the national language of Iran and is written in an Arabic alphabet; Persian." Retreived from http://www.thefreedictionary.com

[281] NITLE Blog Census, may be retrieved from http://www.knowledgesearch.org

Middles Eastern country. More than sixty five thousand weblogs in Farsi allow Iranian women to communicate with one another.[282]

Saudi Arabia's Rejection of Globalization

According to Mai Yamani, the Saudi Arabian monarchy has fought against the forces of globalization for the last ten years. The much closed Kingdom, where for example camera–cell phones are banned to avoid the exposure of unveiled women, has been challenged by the increasing global interdependence.[283]

Women in Saudi Arabia are often under the strict control of a guardian, a male family member, thus have very little freedom to access the virtual world.[284] However, in the more liberal Saudi Arabian households, young girls and adult women who have had the possibility to access the cyber space, truly consider it a fundamental connection to the outside world.[285]

In a society where women are frequently not allowed to work, travel or go to school without the permission of a male relative, and where socialization mainly takes place within the family, due to the severe gender segregation rules, it is understandable that Saudi women have moved into the virtual space. According to "Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture, and Dissent", a study carried out by Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society in 2009, forty-six percent of the Saudi blogging community is made up by women.[286] This is just one indication of the popularity and importance of the cyber space.

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[282] F. Nouraie Simone, *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era*, The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p 63

[283] M. Yamani, *The Challenge of Globalization in Saudi Arabia* in F. Nouraie Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground, Muslim Women in the Global Era,* The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p81

[284] The Human Rights Report, may be retrieved from http://www.state.gov

[285] *ibidem*

[286] B. Etling, J. Kelly, R. Faris, and J. Palfrey, *Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture, and Dissent,* The Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Research Publication No. 2009, 2006, p 15- 18

Egypt

Within the Arabic blogosphere, Egyptian bloggers make up the biggest group, probably due to its large population. There is the highest percentage of women bloggers than in any other Arabic blogosphere. Moreover, bloggers are very young, ranging from eighteen years of age to twenty four. Amongst these, many are politically active bloggers whom often discuss affairs of the State, and most are connected to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, or to the Secular Reformists. Some bloggers openly criticize former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, while many others discuss human rights (such as the freedom of speech), women issues (such as women's role in society, and the *hijab*) and Islam (where bloggers mainly express their personal religious thoughts, or discuss the way Islam is part of everyday life). The Muslim Brotherhood is very active online, and more than seventy percent of the group is made up of men, and their main concern is human rights.[287]

Facebook and Twitter were constantly used during the Arab Spring to encourage everyone to go down to Tahrir Square and protest against the corrupt government, and to fight for their rights. Internet was used in Egypt, but also in Tunisia, to transfer the dialogue, the protesting, and the peaceful battle from the "virtual square" to the "physical square". The great use of social networks, not only reached the directly affected population, but also lead to vast media coverage, increasing international solidarity.[288]

Lebanese Bloggers & Interview to Maya Zankoul

Lebanese bloggers write equally in English and Arabic, and use French from time to time. The areas of discussion range from political issues (such as relations between Lebanon and Palestine, or criticisms of national leaders) to more intimate and personal reflections on social matters. Religion is not a key element of

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[287] B. Etling, J. Kelly, R. Faris, and J. Palfrey, *Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture, and Dissent,* The Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Research Publication No. 2009, 2006, p 15 -18

[288] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011

conversation, while there are often debates on supporting or opposing the western culture.[289]

According to the blogger and visual artists Maya Zankoul, "women in Lebanon are freer than in other Arab countries", and for example, women may be dressed "in such a way as to reveal some parts of their body". However, women often undergo plastic surgery, over- dress (or under-dress), and wear extreme make-up just for "their quest for a husband, rather than for themselves". The biggest nightmare a woman can face in the Lebanese society is becoming a "spinster", thus women go out of their way to make sure they find a husband within a reasonable age. Maya Zankoul explains that women are theoretically free and responsible for their behavior, but are also strongly dependent on men for their future.[290]

The visual artist says that blogs written by Lebanese women are an "insight into their brains", as well as a form of emancipation because unheard voices may be heard in the cyber space. Furthermore, she explains that the virtual world in Lebanon represents exactly what it represents in the western world: "almost everyone can access the Internet at any time and nearly anywhere" (however taking into consideration that electricity in Lebanon often goes on and off, even for a prolonged time, especially during the summer), and people "spend hours on Facebook or Twitter and waste a lot of their time." Maya Zankoul also underlines the positive aspect of social networks, explaining that meeting new people on Facebook, and exchanging ideas, may lead to powerful connections. She believes that Internet can bring together people that think the same way and allows them to collaborate to carry out changes in the world.[291]

Syria

Syrian bloggers are mainly men (only thirteen percent are women), of ages ranging between twenty-five and thirty-five, which is older than the trends in other Islamic world countries. Men mainly argue about personal religious thoughts and

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[289] B. Etling, J. Kelly, R. Faris, and J. Palfrey, *Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture, and Dissent,* The Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Research Publication No. 2009, 2006, p 21
[290] More information may be retrieved from http://mayazankoul.com
[291] *ibidem*

experiences, as well as domestic issues. In Syrian blogs, western culture and values are often criticized more than in any other Arabic blogospheres. Moreover, television, movies and other mass media are rarely discussed in their blogs. The languages that are mainly used are Arabic and English.[292] Furthermore, since the outburst of the Arab Spring, and with the intensification of the violence in the country, the number of active bloggers has constantly increased.[293]

Morocco

According to Jamila Hassoune, while tourists are ecstatic and captured by snake charmers, the young population of Marrakech is allured by the magic idea of communicating with the outside world through Internet.[294] More than fifteen thousand copies of *Dalil al-Internet,* a newspaper that illustrates the use of the cyber space, are sold for each edition in Morocco. The buyers of this guidebook are mainly people who want to learn more about the Internet, people looking for employment or women searching for virtual husbands. E-weddings keep hopes up for women who still have not found their better half. Hassoune explains that a peaceful technological revolution is taking place in Morocco, where many young Moroccans dream of learning more and more languages to be able to communicate with the entire world, and access more information on the Web.[295]

Virtual Suq[296]

Ever since the advent of Internet, selling and buying all sorts of products online, ranging from food, electronics, books, medicines, airplane tickets to vacations,

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[292] Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere, http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Mapping_the_Arabic_Blogosphere_0.pdf
[293] Aljazeera, http://blogs.aljazeera.com/liveblog/topic/syria-153
[294] J. Hassoune, *La Marrakech*, in F. Mernissi (ed.), *Karawan- dal Deserto al Web*, Giunti Editore, Firenze - Milano, 2004
[295] *ibidem*
[296]" Suq: an open-air market place in Muslim countries" retrieved from http://dictionary.reference.com

has slowly become part of everyday life. Since 1995, eBay has become "The World's Online Market Place" [297] with more than two-hundred million costumers. The Arab world has launched its own Souq.com[298] which is an online auction website, just like eBay, for the Arab world, with more than nine million users. The website looks almost identical to eBay's and information is both in English and Arabic. Souq.com has also got its own promotional Facebook page, Twitter page, as well as a LinkedIn page. Souq.com is very important source for women who cannot access the public space, but can easily buy everything they need online.[299]

Fatema Mernissi describes the importance of online markets in "Karawan". She explains how Moroccan rural villagers slowly got access to electricity, much later than the urban households, subsequent to 1994. Villagers have exploited electricity, improving the quality of their lives and learned to benefit from it, also by connecting to Internet and opening a door to the outside world. The advent of electricity also led to access to clean drinking water and construction of schools. This improved the illiteracy rate which was very high for women (sixty-six percent in 1998). Moroccan artisans related to the Aït-Iktel association have recently received a UNESCO prize, for a Mediterranean area project, for selling an extraordinary amount of hand-crafted products on the Internet[300]. Moroccan artisans have made more than six-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars, selling their products on the Internet site, www.southbazar.com. This is one example of the improvements that Internet has brought to families, or rather entire villages, in Morocco.[301]

New Technologies

A Smartphone is a cell phone with advanced computing ability and connectivity. Most Smartphones usually have a high- resolution touch-screen, and

[297] eBay, http://pages.ebay.co.uk

[298] Souq. com, http://arabcrunch.com/2009/12/jabbar-company-the-ebay-of-the-arab-world-souq-com-launches-to-the-egyptian-market.html

[299] Souq. com, http://arabcrunch.com/2009/12/jabbar-company-the-ebay-of-the-arab-world-souq-com-launches-to-the-egyptian-market.html

[300] UN Public Administration Program, http://www.unpan.org

[301] F. Mernissi, *Karawan- dal Deserto al Web*, Giunti Editore, Firenze - Milano, 2004

optimal web-browsers. The Smartphones we may most commonly hear about are the iPhone, BlackBerry, and Samsung Galaxy.

An iPhone app is an application that works just like software installed on a personal computer, it is directly downloaded to the phone, and it allows the phone to perform precise tasks that the user needs. There are thousands of types of apps, which fall under various categories such as entertainment, games, search tools, maps, guides, apps for calculation, social networking, travel, weather, sports and many more.[302]

Numerous apps have been developed specifically for the Islamic world countries. Amongst these there are apps such as "iQuran", which offers the users the complete Quran in *Uthmani[303]* font along with a verse by verse translation. "iPray" is an app that reminds the user to pray five times a day during Ramadan, through alarms set at specific hours, and also tells the user where the Qibla[304] direction is. The "Islamic Calendar" app is a lunar calendar used by Muslims to determine proper dates for Islamic sacred days and festivals.[305]

Clearly there are many applications that are not strictly Islamic, which can be used by everyone, all over the world. Amongst these, the Bump application on Smartphones is changing the socialization process for some of the wealthy young women and men living in Muslim countries. The Bump application, launched in 2008 and initially created by Bump Technologies for iPhones, is opening up a whole new world of communication between Smartphones. Two strangers owning a Smartphone can exchange information, and link up to Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn by simply "bumping" their phones together. Bumpers just need to turn on the Bump application, pass by another person who has the same application turned on, bring their phones close together, and magically, without any verbal communication, the two phones have exchanged all sorts of contact information.[306]

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[302]More information may be retrieved on http://www.apple.com

[303] "Uthmani font is a type of Arabic font used in the Quran." More information may be retrieved on http://www.quran4u.com

[304] The Qibla is "the direction of the Kaaba shrine in Mecca toward which all Muslims turn in ritual prayer." May be retrieved on http://www.merriam-webster.com

[305] More information may be retrieved on http://creativemuslims.com/2010/top-10-free-iphoneitouch-apps-for-muslims/

[306]More information may be retrieved http://edrneelesh.blogspot.it

Young women in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, walking around in small groups inside the malls can sometimes be spotted secretly exchanging information by nonchalantly "bumping" their smartphones with strangers. This silent, secret, covered way of swopping contacts and data is allowing women to get in touch with the outside world, without having to go through family approval or other traditional and conservative mechanisms.[307] New technologies, such as Smartphones along with the development of tools such as apps, are definitely empowering women in Muslim countries, as they offer an alternative way to communicate with the exterior space, which has been off limits for a very long time.

The Arab Social Media Report

Social media are Internet-based tools which allow building social networks among people that share similar interests, values and ideas. Most social networks are based on the representation of the user's profile. Users may get in touch with one another and share thoughts, activities, events, hobbies and much more, and these exchanges may even end up influencing larger movements, societies, as well as governments.[308]

The Arab Social Media Report produced by the Dubai School of Government's[309] Governance and Innovation Program analyzes usage trends of online social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, across the Arab region. Users living in the 22 Arab countries, as well as Iran, Israel and Turkey were closely examined during the study.[310]

2011 has seen social networks used for various purposes in the Arab region, such as to gather people around social causes and political campaigns, to increase citizen journalism and civic participation, generate a platform for debate and

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[307]More information may be retrieved http://www.appolicious.com
[308] More information may be retrieved on http://unpan1.un.org
[309] The Dubai School of Government was established in 2005 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. It is a research and teaching institution which concentrates on public policy in the Arab world. More information may be retrieved on the site of the Dubai School of Government, http://www.dsg.ae/en/home/index.aspx?&PriMenuID=2&mnu=Pri
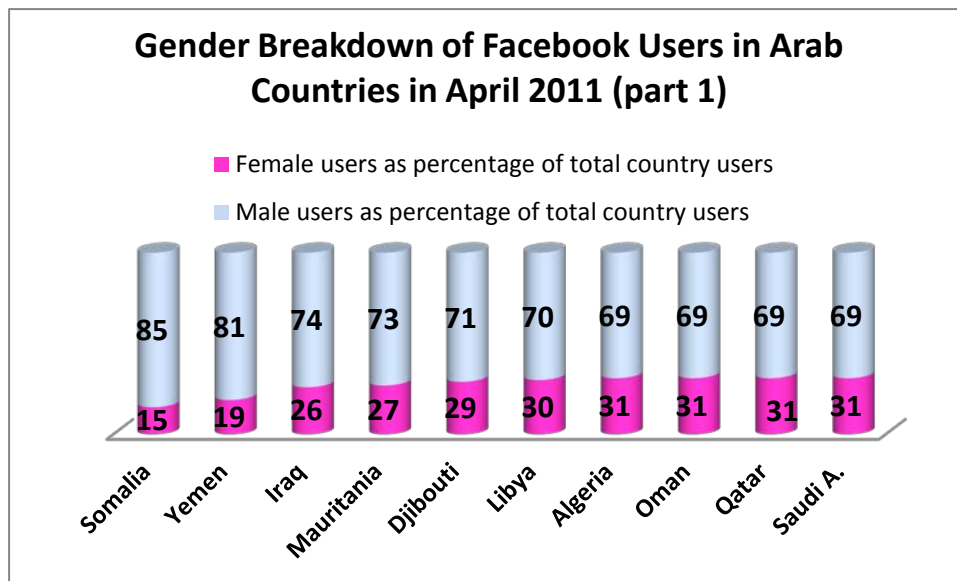[310]*ibidem*

interaction between societies, as well as to boost innovation and collaboration within governments. Social media have also been viewed as harmful, thus censored and exploited by some.[311]
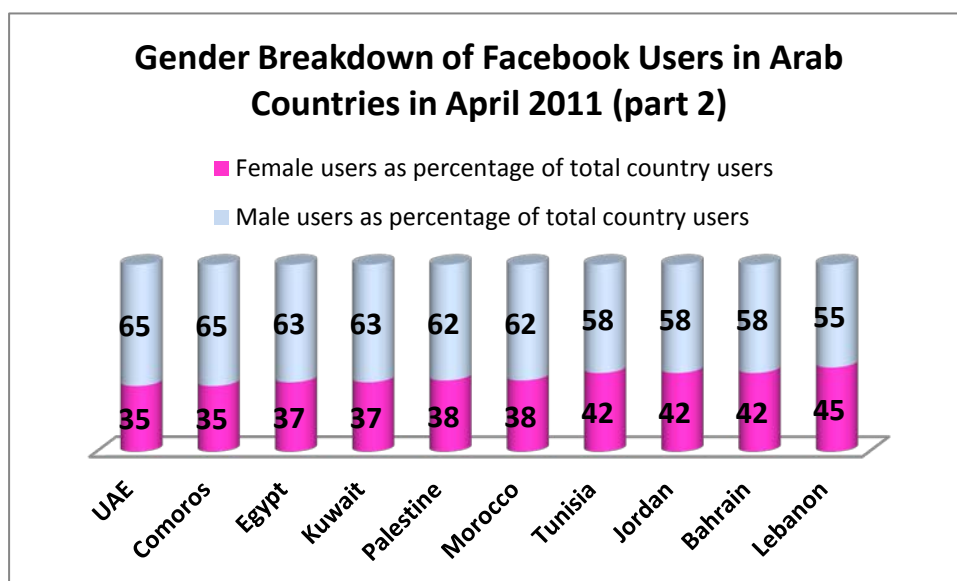
The Arab Social Media Report presents an outline of Facebook users in the Arab world since April 2010 to date. The total number of Facebook members in the Arab States stands at forty-five million, as of end of June 2012 whereas there were a little over thirty-seven million users at the beginning of the year. Furthermore, the number of Facebook users in the Arab world has just about tripled between June 2010 and June 2012. Unfortunately, the percentage of female users remains almost unchanged since 2010, not reaching more than thirty- four percent. This is considerably lower than the global trend, where women usually make up around half of the Facebook users. People between the ages of fifteen and twenty- nine continue to represent about seventy percent of users in the Arab region. In terms of percentage of population using Facebook, the United Arab Emirates remain at the top of the Arab region, followed by Kuwait. Egypt continues representing about a quarter of total Facebook users in the Arab region and the number of users has increased more than in any other Arab country, in the past year. Arabic is now the fastest growing language on Facebook in the region, but English and French are also dominant languages.[312]

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[311] More information may be retrieved on http://unpan1.un.org
[312] More information may be retrieved on http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Facebook

Gender Breakdown of Facebook Users in Arab Countries in April 2011 (part 1)

■ Female users as percentage of total country users
■ Male users as percentage of total country users

	Somalia	Yemen	Iraq	Mauritania	Djibouti	Libya	Algeria	Oman	Qatar	Saudi A.
Male	85	81	74	73	71	70	69	69	69	69
Female	15	19	26	27	29	30	31	31	31	31

Graph 2-   Data retrieved from http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan044212.pdf

Gender Breakdown of Facebook Users in Arab Countries in April 2011 (part 2)

■ Female users as percentage of total country users
■ Male users as percentage of total country users

	UAE	Comoros	Egypt	Kuwait	Palestine	Morocco	Tunisia	Jordan	Bahrain	Lebanon
Male	65	65	63	63	62	62	58	58	58	55
Female	35	35	37	37	38	38	42	42	42	45

Graph 3-   Data retrieved from http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan044212.pdf

Twitter has constantly developed since its launch in 2006, and has become a great micro-blogging tool used for various goals ranging from marketing to celebrity advertisement, to news distribution, and social interconnection. The number of active Twitter users in the Arab region at the end of June 2012 was a little over two million. The number of tweets in the Arab region in March 2012 by active users was

over one hundred- seventy million. Most tweets were generated in Turkey, followed by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt and United Arab Emirates. Moreover, Arabic is the fastest growing language in Twitter history. There is no data regarding gender participation.[313]

Muslim Women's News (@MuslimWomensNews), Manal Al Sharif (@manal_alsharif), The Uprising of Arab Women (@UprisingOfWomen), Muslim Women's Sports (@MslmWomenSports), Asma Mahfuz (@AsmaaMahfuz), Sister in Islam (@sistersinislam) and many more female activists and groups can be followed on Twitter. Manal Al Sharif's profile page is entitled "Bcuz my mother couldn't change my present, I decided 2 change my daughter's future". Anyone may decide to follow them and actively participate in conversations, without any sort of restriction. Twitter is an easy and liberated way to share information and pictures, create a dialogue, and may be considered a tool for women empowerment.

LinkedIn statistics data was available for a limited number of countries, which include Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the UAE. The total number of LinkedIn users in the Arab world is a little over four million as of end June 2012. In the same way as Facebook, the percentage of female users is much lower than that of the men, at twenty- eight percent. This percentage, once again, is considerably lower than the global trend, where women make up more than forty- three percent of LinkedIn users. Seventy percent of LinkedIn users are aged between eighteen and thirty-four.[314]

Furthermore, Fadi Salem, program director of the Dubai School of Government's Governance and Innovation program, and Racha Mourtada, research associate for the Arab Social Media Report, explain that ever since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the social media has evolved. It has shifted from entertainment purposes to political and social ones. Besides, the social media is creating new challenges and opportunities.[315]

Political activism has moved onto civic and social activism, and thus to other crucial issues that need to be faced in the Arab world such as sexual harassment of women, and child marriages. Social media also became an alternative form and

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[313] More information may be retrieved on http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/Twitter
[314] More information may be retrieved on http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/LinkedIn
[315] More information may be retrieved on http://unpan1.un.org

foundation of civil society movements. These were able to involve many people, mobilize citizens in a more organized manner, in such a way to truly reach and influence governments.[316]

Moreover, the study revealed that, even though many women were very active users of social media during the Arab Spring, the number of female Facebook and Twitter users remains constant, and much lower than that of men, due to cultural, social and educational barriers.

The empirical research results showed that Arab women are less prone to use social networks for various reasons, but above all due to the restrictions that are imposed by their culture and by the surrounding society, especially in Saudi Arabia. Other reasons that lead to a "virtual gender gap"[317] are privacy and security issues (particularly in the United Arab Emirates), the fact that women are not as ICT literate as men (specially in Egypt), and the difficulty for women to access a computer or a mobile phone, thus the cyber space. Another reason is the lack of confidence in social media, in fact some women do not believe in social networks as a valid communication arena. Furthermore, the fact that some women have lower education levels compared to men influences the virtual gender gap, as well as the fact that, according to many, there is not enough relevant content for women in the virtual space.[318]

Nevertheless, a very interesting aspect of social media is that it has an equalizing factor among men and women. While both genders offline seem to have completely different opinions about almost any issue, online men and women very often share the same values, ideals and goals, as if the social aspect of the virtual space were to unite them. On one hand, it is true that people who have access to the cyber world, very often have a certain degree of education, but it is also true that not all the Internet users come from the exact same background. Men and women behave in different ways, online and in the outside world, as they are limited by their
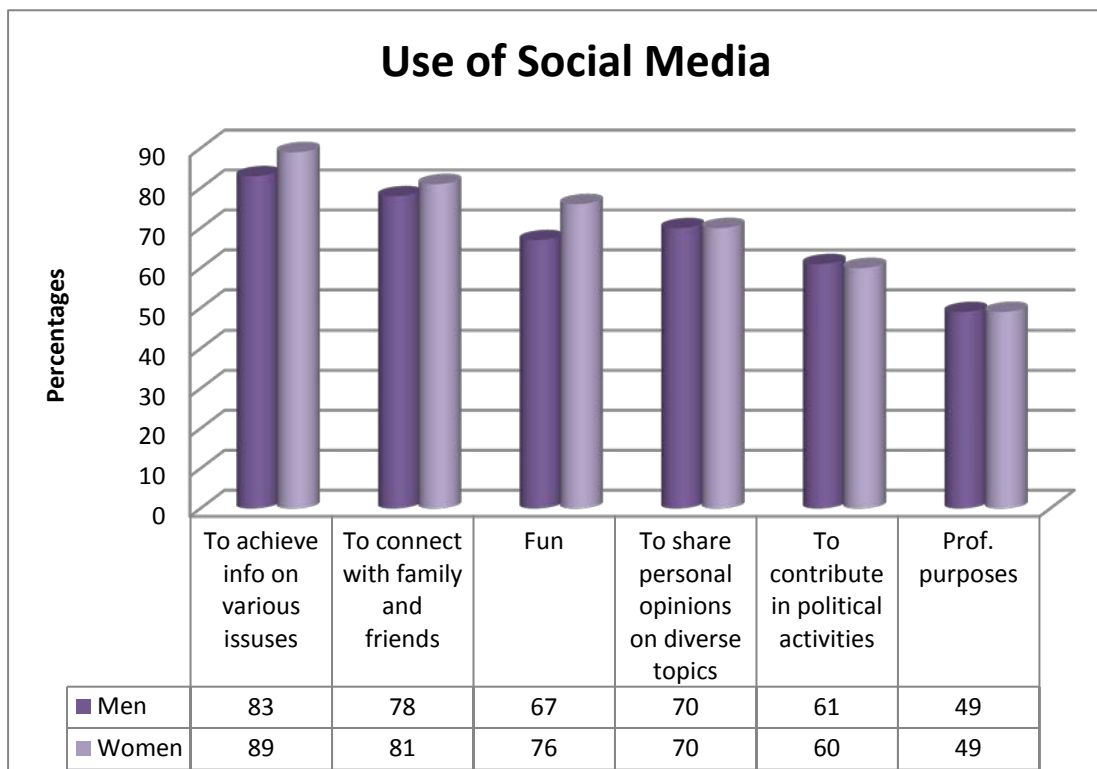
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[316] More information may be retrieved on
http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/arabic/article.cfm?articleid=2837&language_id=1
[317]More information may be retrieved on
http://www.dsg.ae/en/ASMR3/ASMR_AWSM3_EVGG3.aspx
[318] The Arab Social Media Report,
http://www.dsg.ae/en/Publication/Pdf_En/58201211601424320000.pdf

traditional culture, but in reality, this analysis demonstrates that many seem to think much more similarly than expected. [319]

   The study demonstrates that in the present day, men and women in the Arab world use social networks for analogous reasons. The primarily purpose is to access information and to stay in touch with other people. Moreover, both genders share similar concerns regarding the possibilities of negative repercussions of social media. Most men and women fear being held accountable for their views by authorities, as well as worry about negative reactions from family members, friends and the opposite gender. This is a demonstration of the fact that men and women are very alike, despite the fact that the Arab society often depicts them as very different.[320]

Use of Social Media

	To achieve info on various issues	To connect with family and friends	Fun	To share personal opinions on diverse topics	To contribute in political activities	Prof. purposes
Men	83	78	67	70	61	49
Women	89	81	76	70	60	49

Graph 4- Data retrieved from The Arab Social Media Report, http://www.dsg.ae/en/Publication/Pdf_En/58201211601424320000.pdf
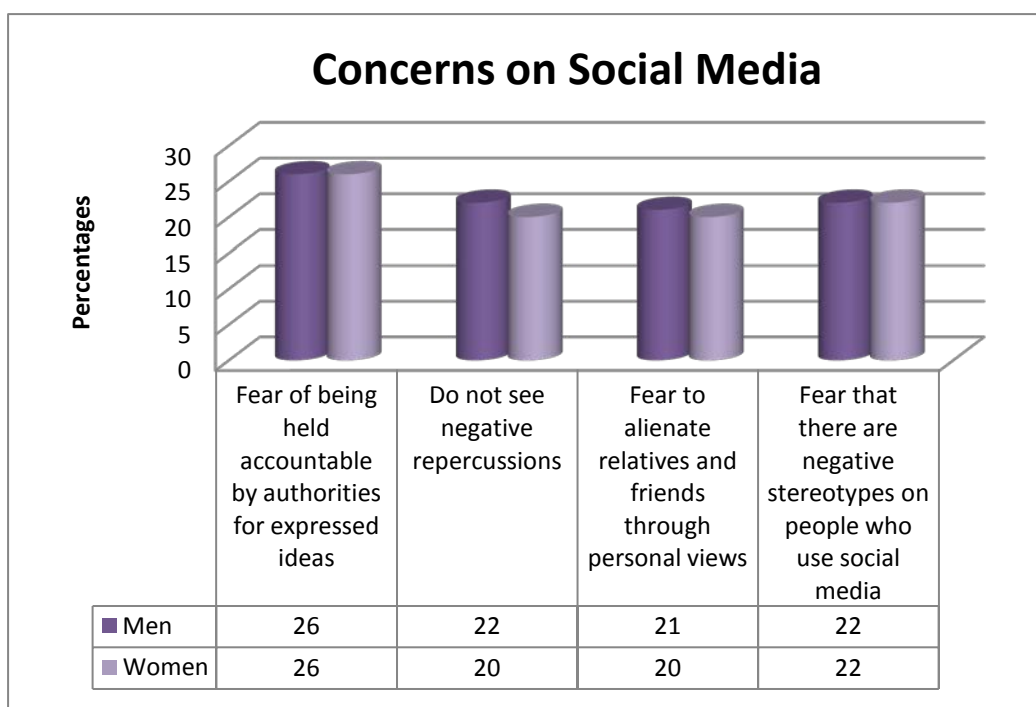
*"Fun" is equivalent to all forms of entertainment.

*"Prof. Purposes" refers to all means of professional use.

*"To contribute in political activities" stands for all types of contributions to issues related to their community.

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[319] The Arab Social Media Report,
http://www.dsg.ae/en/Publication/Pdf_En/58201211601424320000.pdf
[320] *ibidem*

Concerns on Social Media

	Fear of being held accountable by authorities for expressed ideas	Do not see negative repercussions	Fear to alienate relatives and friends through personal views	Fear that there are negative stereotypes on people who use social media
Men	26	22	21	22
Women	26	20	20	22

(Percentages on vertical axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30)

Graph 5- Data retrieved from The Arab Social Media Report, http://www.dsg.ae/en/Publicat ion/Pdf_En/58201211601424320000.pdf

The study also underlined another positive aspect of social media that is the increased toleration amongst users. The equal possibility to participate and express opinions granted to all men and women who can access the virtual space, has increased the acceptance of the ideas of others. [321]

Further positive aspects of social media, are the transparency and accountability that they promote. The possibility of filming a video with a cell phone, uploading it immediately on YouTube, and having the capacity of spreading it all over the world in just a few hours, or the prospect of taking a picture denouncing a police officer violating women's rights and posting it on Facebook, are very strong weapons in the hands of citizens. Governments and authorities must be more and more aware of the reputational damage that a social network may cause, and therefore must try to always follow international standards to avoid global criticism. On the other hand, governments are rapidly trying to develop systems to regulate the use of social media, to avoid this. In fact, at the beginning of 2011, some

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[321] The Arab Social Media Report, http://www.dsg.ae/en/Publication/Pdf_En/58201211601424320000.pdf

governments, such as the ones in Tunisia and Egypt, reacted to the spreading of social media by unplugging Internet. This extreme measure simply led to more offline activity, aggravating the situation and increasing the costs. Since then, governments have become more subtle and have increased monitoring of online activities[322]

The degree of social media contribution to the intensification of the revolutions in the Arab countries is uncertain. Nonetheless, the Arab Social Media Report provides evidence that the spreading of social networks in the region and the alteration in the usage trends has played a crucial part in the mobilization, forming of ideas, and has encouraged change to take place. A very critical and analytical community of young and active social network users is present in the Arab countries that have been examined. Governments, which had the total control over information flows in their countries for a long time, have been challenged. Many have tried to resist change by censoring information and blocking social media websites, while others have adapted in their own way by adopting new guidelines and policies. The young populations in the Arab countries, and their constantly growing infiltration in the cyber space, show that social media will continue playing an important role for the social, political and economic developments of the region.[323]

Facebook

Amongst the new channels of communication, Facebook is a very powerful social network that allows thousands of Muslim women to actively participate in the production and spreading of information. Women who used to be simple spectators, audience of the news that was originally only transmitted by newspapers, radios, and

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[322] More information may be retrieved on
http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/arabic/article.cfm?articleid=2837&language_id=1
[323] More information may be retrieved on
http://www.dsg.ae/en/Publication/Pdf_En/DSG_Arab_Social_Media_Report_No_2.pdf

television, have overturned the situation by becoming active protagonists by taking part in the creation of information.[324]

Very interesting Facebook pages such as "The Uprising Women in the Arab World"[325] transmit powerful messages regarding the empowerment of women, and create a place for dialogue. This Facebook page was created in October 2010, and already has more than seventeen thousand followers, many of whom participate in debates, post links, comment quotes, publish pictures and share their points of view on a daily basis. Pictures such as that of a yellow rubber glove with the following quote may be found:

"Les femmes du Moyen-Orient savent très bien faire la vaisselle. La révolucion aussi"- by Amnesty International

Furthermore, quotes such as:

"For most of history, Anonymous was a woman" by Virginia Woolf,

or

"Men are taught to apologize for their weaknesses, women for their strengths" by Loise Wyse

or

"Feminism has fought no wars. It has killed no opponents. It has set up no concentration camp, starved no enemies, and practiced no cruelties. Its battles have been for education, for the vote, for better working conditions, for safety on the streets, for child care, for social welfare, for rape crisis centers, women's refuges, reforms in law." "If someone says 'Oh, I'm not a feminist', (I ask) 'Why? What's your problem?'" by Dale Spencer

are published on "The uprising women in the Arab world", and commented by thousands of Facebook users. Posts in English, French and Arabic, and pictures of mostly women, and few men, all over Muslim countries supporting issues regarding women can be found on the Facebook page. Some of the pictures and quotes that one may come across on the Page are:

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[324] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011
[325] May be retrieved on https://www.facebook.com/intifadat.almar2a

A girl covered in a blanket from head to feet holds a poster that says: "A woman dressed like THIS still gets RAPED. What's your excuse now?" 28/10/2011

"Control yourself, not my clothing!" – was written on a poster during a demonstration against sexual harassment in Cairo, Egypt, 04/07/2012

"I would like you to respect me, so I could respect you" – was written on a sign, during the same protest in Cairo, Egypt, 04/07/2012

"Harassment is not manly" – a sign held by a man in Jordan, 26/07/2012

"Silence is a war crime" – a poster held by a woman during a protest in Bahrain, 2012

"Stop abusing and molesting little girls through child marriage" – a sign held by women demonstrating in Rabat, Morocco, 20/02/2012

These are just some of the pictures with messages that have been shared on "The Uprising Women in the Arab World" page, stimulating strong reactions, and encouraging women to take a stand against injustice. Furthermore, disturbing articles and pictures, such as that of child marriage in Yemen between 6 year old Tahani and her 25 year old husband Majed, create feelings of disgust, are criticized by many, and result in arguments on patriarchy, pedophilia, and horrifying archaic customs. On the other hand, there are also impressive and positive images of Muslim athletes at the 2012 London Olympics that are seen as a sign of empowerment on the Facebook page, inducing discussions on the achievements of women in the last few years. Some of the Saudi Arabian athletes' images are associated to quotes such as:

"If you want to achieve greatness, stop asking for permission."

Other strong images such as that of a woman, covered with a long, black fabric from head to feet, a cooking pan instead of her head, a baby bottle in her left hand, a vacuum cleaner in place of her right hand, a washing machine window

instead of her tummy have been posted, symbolizing the condition of women in many countries, and commented by hundreds of people. There is also a graffiti portrait of Samira Ibrahim, the heroin of the Egyptian revolution who filed a complaint against the practice of so called "virginity tests" carried out by the army[326], as well as various links to newspapers on the demonstrations carried out by Muslim women all over the globe.

Moreover, there are also Facebook groups such as "Women's Rights in the Arab World"[327] that have an open membership, and share various newspaper articles about the condition of women in the Arab world, and is open to feedback.

Facebook pages such as "The Uprising Women in the Arab World" and "Women's Rights in the Arab World", are fundamental for the empowerment of women, as they have created an easily accessible space to discuss contemporary issues regarding women. They have also established important networks amongst women who share similar values, and who fight for their rights. A woman alone may have gone unnoticed, but the "The Uprising Women in the Arab World", creates unity, and the constant debates strengthen the women who take part in the creation of the page. These Facebook pages are proof that Arab women have taken control over their lives and futures. They are not going to go down without fighting, and are not going to be submissive and silent any longer.

Ana, a Middle-eastern blogger, who participates in various conversations in "The Uprising Women in the Arab World", explains that the cyber space has been a key tool in the Arab Spring and will likewise probably be the most important means in achieving women's rights. She believes that through Internet, women can connect without creating suspicion, talk to women all over the world, and spread the written word, which, according to Ana, is more powerful than any physical weapon.[328]

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[326] Time, http://www.time.com
[327] Women's Rights in the Arab World, https://www.facebook.com/groups/259380884104873/
[328]More information may be retrieved on the blog http://thespectatorssport.wordpress.com

Censorship

Internet is a neutral field which rebels against the mainstream, controlled, and politically influenced information that is delivered by national media. The cyber space allows the production, sharing, coordination and exchange of information coming from different sources such as citizen journalism, social networks, or even agents of counter-information. This freedom to create networks and collaborate with one another has been considered dangerous by many Muslim countries that refuse to open up to the world, and who have imposed various forms of censorship.[329]

Fereshteh Ghazi, Iranian journalist and human rights activist, was arrested and imprisoned various times, due to her battle for the empowerment of women. After she was released, she immediately posted on her weblog:

> "It is in those frightening moments of the dark cell in the mysterious
> silence that one hears the inner voice of God that gives one the strength
> to go on, to realize the power of the pen, to see the pointless
> interrogations, insults, injuries, threats, beatings and all that as trivial
> and to become more determined not to be silenced. To write and write:
> in newspapers, on the weblogs, on sites, on doors, on walls and on any
> space one can find- no matter how difficult the situation."[330]

The censorship in Saudi Arabia is amongst the most restrictive in the world. The Saudi blogger, Fouad al Farhan, was jailed in 2008 for advocating political reforms.[331] Manal al Sharif was also incarcerated for filming videos of herself driving, posting them on YouTube, as well as encouraging other Saudi women to do the same[332]. The government uses routers and other technology to block the content of controversial Websites, such as pornography or gambling. Moreover, religious figures are responsible for pointing out and requesting to block inappropriate sites.[333] The Saudi Arabian Council of Ministers passed a Resolution in 2001, clearly stating that:

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[329] F. M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011
[330] Retrieved from http://fereshteh.blogfa.com
[331] The BBC, http://news.bbc.co.uk
[332] The Independent, http://www.independent.co.uk
[333] Business Week, http://www.businessweek.com

"All Internet users in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shall refrain from publishing or accessing data containing anything contravening a fundamental principle or legislation, or infringing the sanctity of Islam and its benevolent Shari'ah, or breaching public decency."[334]

In Kuwait, the use of Twitter reached its apex during the Arab Spring, as it was calculated that people wrote over three-point-seven million tweets between January and March 2011. In July 2011, armed security officers led Nasser Abul, blindfolded and shackled, into a courtroom in Kuwait City, accusing him of crimes against the State. Like many other Kuwaitis, Abul had simply tweeted his thoughts on the events taking place in Bahrain, and had criticized the ruling families of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The people of Kuwait had believed that Twitter permitted a vast freedom of expression, but soon discovered through Abul's indefinite detention that the government had been constantly and cautiously controlling the cyber space. In the following months, security forces questioned, arrested and jailed other Tweeters such as Mohammad al-Jassim, a well-known Kuwaiti blogger. Furthermore, the security officer also incarcerated Lawrence al-Rashidi, for publishing a video on YouTube in which he read a poem which was insolent towards the Emirates.[335]

The Lebanese penal code criminalizes defamation against the President, other public officials, and private individuals. The Human Rights Watch has pointed out that the laws that allow incarceration as a response to criticism of private persons or State officials are unable to coexist with Lebanon's international obligations to protect freedom of expression. Despite this, the Lebanese government pressed charges against Na`im Hanna, and detained him, for creating a group on Facebook entitled "We Don't Want a Hypocrite at the Helm of the Presidency".[336]

In July 2012, the Iraqi Parliament started a new draft regulation on information technology crimes to further limit free speech, in violation of international law. If approved, the law will foster more risks for journalists and

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[334] Al-Bab, http://www.al-bab.com, the entire Resolution may be found at the end of the thesis, in the Addenda section.
[335] Human Rights Watch, "In Kuwait Jailed for Tweeting" by Priyanka Motaparthy, http://www.hrw.org
[336] Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Drop Chargers Against Facebook Critics of President", http://www.hrw.org

nonviolent activists in the country. The pending decree contains ambiguous clauses that would allow Iraqi authorities to severely punish all manifestations they decide may jeopardize governmental, social, or religious welfare.[337]

In the same period, five men and one woman in Oman were accused of "defaming the Sultan" through Facebook and Twitter postings that supposedly criticized Oman's ruler, Sultan Qabus bin Sa`eed Al Sa`eed. The Court sentenced all of them to one year in prison and a fine of one-thousand Riyals (a little over two-thousand Euros).[338]

Tunisia's media system was state-run, under the strict control of Ben Ali, during his entire regime. The attempts of some journalists to run an independent press that was critical of the regime lead them to paying a very high price, such as phone and internet service cuts, passport confiscations, bans of leaving the country, police surveillance, intimidation, physical assaults and even incarceration. The Interior Ministry was responsible for the online censorship. "Ammar 404" rapidly became a widespread reference alluding to the default page to which users were redirected when they encountered state-censored websites. The Agence Tunisienne d'Internet (ATI) engineers regularly monitored communications and filtered out potentially jeopardizing content. Websites that allowed sharing files such as YouTube, Vimeo and Filckr were always blocked to prevent police brutality, corruption and other objectionable information to leak outside Tunisia. In August 2008, the Ben Ali regime blocked Facebook for two weeks, but the population's reaction was too strong and not worth wasting energy over, thus the regime ended up removing the blocks. After the 2009 re- election of the regime, the censorship was strengthened, and more than ten independent journalists were detained. After the outbreak of events in Sidi Bouzid, hundreds of Facebook pages were closed, and foreign journalists, such as Isabelle Mandraud from Le Monde, a specialist on Al Maghrib, were not allowed to enter the country. Moreover, activists were targeted through Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Accounts were hacked and many prominent bloggers were arrested and imprisoned.[339]

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[337] Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Cyber Crime Law Violates Free Speech", http://www.hrw.org
[338] Human Rights Watch, "Oman: Drop Cases Against online Activists", http://www.hrw.org
[339] More information may be retrieved on http://tunisiagroup.weebly.com/media-censorship.html

The 1948 United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 19 that:

> "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."[340]

Furthermore, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified by Egypt (1967), Iran (1968), Tunisia (1968), Iraq (1969), Jordan (1972), Morocco (1977), Pakistan (2008), and signed by many more countries, states in Article 19 that:

> "1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
> 2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.
> 3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
> (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others;
> (b) For the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals"[341]

The censorship carried out by many of the Islamic world countries is absolutely against the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. States are clearly not complying with their obligations, but even worse, they are violating some of the universally acknowledged basic human rights. Internet is a place where information, different from the mainstream news, can be found. "Netizens" around the world have the right to "seek,

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[340] More information may be retrieved on http://www.un.org
[341] More information may be retrieved on http://www2.ohchr.org

receive and impart" this information without encountering obstacles imposed by governments, whom are conscious of their bad conduct, and want to hide from global criticism. It is bad enough that Web Sites and Facebook pages are shut down to avoid the spread of information which may jeopardize the reputation of a State, but it is absolutely intolerable that journalists and bloggers are jailed for silence.

Media and Muslim Women Empowerment

Empowerment

The World Bank has defined empowerment as:

"the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets."[342]

Although this is a complex and complete general definition, the empowerment of women needs a more specific and particular definition. The United Nations have defined women's empowerment as a condition that includes at least five key components:

"women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally"[343].

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[342] The World Bank, http://web.worldbank.org
[343] Guidelines on Women's Empowerment, retrieved from http://www.un.org

International Plea for the Empowerment of Women in Islamic Countries

Since the 1990s, the international agenda has progressively focused on issues such as human rights, women's and minority rights, as well as further stressed the necessity for democratic changes. The entire globe strongly pressured Arab countries to respond to these challenges. After September 11th 2001, the Arab world was regarded by many as a nest for fundamentalism and terrorism, creating irrepressible hostilities, and further augmented interest towards the role of women and their rights in this part of the globe. Some Islamic world countries immediately carried out small transformations in order to escape further political condemnation of their undemocratic status, especially after all the pressures coming from Human Rights Reports as well as Reports on Women's Affairs by the United Nations and other NGOs.[344] Nevertheless, some of these changes were purely a façade.[345] Many Islamic countries have signed international conventions and treaties regarding the respect of basic civil rights, however, are not truly complying with them. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to create legislation that supports women empowerment in Arab countries, but the key aspect is putting the laws into action and enforcing them.

Regional and International Organizations' Contribution to Empowerment

The United Nations have developed, carried out, and followed up on several sustainable projects based on women empowerment in Islamic countries since the Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. Many projects were based on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

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[344] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005, p212 http://hdr.undp.org
[345] *ivi*, p51

The Center of Arab Woman for Training and Research (CAWTAR)[346] was created in 1993, in response to the demand of many Arab governments and civil society organizations and institutions. It collaborated with UNIFEM[347], ESCWA[348] and the Arab League to elaborate an Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women on which the Beijing Conference was based. The Plan was founded on nine main objectives: protection of the rights of Arab women to participate in decision-making procedures; alleviation of poverty for Arab women; assurance of equal access to education; assurance of equal access to health services; Promotion of Arab women's economic self-reliance and capacity to enter the labor market, overcoming effects of armed conflict on Arab women; elimination of violence against women; participation of women in the management of resources; the effective use of communications media to bring about changes in roles in society and achieve equality between genders[349].

The Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women was also the basis for the 2004 Arab Women's Beirut Declaration[350] which outlined very similar goals for women empowerment that should be met within 2015.

Latest Achievements of Women in Arab Countries

Many Arab States have inadequately addressed the issue of women empowerment; however, some noteworthy transformations have taken place.[351]

Jordan was the first State to establish a National Commission for Women in 1992. Whereas in 1998, the Supreme Council for Family Affairs was established in Qatar along with the Women's Committee to deal with issues regarding women. In

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[346] The official site for CAWTAR is http://www.cawtar.org/
[347] UNIFEM is an acronym for the United Nations Development Fund for Women. More information may be retrieved on http://www.unifem.org
[348] ESCWA is an acronym for Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. More information may be retrieved on http://www.escwa.un.org/
[349] The Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women may be retrieved on http://unispal.un.org
[350] Arab Women's Beirut Declaration may be retrieved on http://www.unfpa.org
[351] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005,p51 http://hdr.undp.org

the same year, the National Committee for Lebanese Women's Affairs was created. Moreover, a Commission for Women's Advancement was formed in Djibouti in 1999.[352]

After a long and arduous battle, the National People's Assembly finally issued a law that allows women to vote and be nominated for public office in general and local elections in Kuwait in 2005. Following, a woman was appointed for a ministerial post, in the Ministry of Planning, for the first time.[353]

In the same period, many changes took place in Egypt. For the first time in the history of the country, a woman was chosen as the president of a petroleum company, and more than ten women were appointed for the Consultative Council, namely the upper house of the Parliament. Furthermore, the minimum age for marriage for a girl was raised to eighteen. Moreover, in 2005, the management of the Ministry of Manpower and Immigration was given to a woman.[354]

In Lebanon, in 2005, a woman was appointed as minister for the first time, and six women won in the legislative elections. In the same year, two women were chosen to be part of the Cabinet in the United Arab Emirates. In Tunisia, a woman was appointed as provincial governor for the first time. In Qatar, a woman became secretary general of a municipal council. Always in 2005, a woman in Syria was appointed to the Baath Party's national command, while Libya ratified the agreement establishing the Arab Women's Organization.[355]

The Supreme Council for Women was established in Bahrain in 2001. Saudi Arabia abolished the need of a male "guardian" in order to acquire an identity card in 2005. Furthermore, three women won the elections to the board of directors of the National Human Rights Association. King Abdullah also approved to meet with a delegation of professional women who presented him with their demands. Bahrain instead eliminated the requirement of husbands' approval before granting a passport to women. Additionally, women were given permission to work as traffic police.[356]

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[352] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005,p51 http://hdr.undp.org
[353] *ibidem*
[354] *ibidem*
[355] *ibidem*
[356]*ibidem*

The latest achievements for Arab women have been under the entire world's attention at the 2012 London Olympic Games. Surprisingly, a great number of female athletes were chosen as flag carriers for the Arab countries. Bahrain, Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar and Somalia were all led out by women. Nine out of twenty-two Arab States were represented by women, which is more than double the number at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Given the near-parity of women to men carrying the flags and leading their country, in a region that is unquestionably male-dominated, it is clear that some changes are taking place.[357] Wojdan Shaherkani and Sarah Attar, two Saudi Arabian athletes were sent to compete, respectively in judo and track and field, for the first time. Sarah Attar finished last in the women's eight- hundred meters. Standing ovations are usually reserved for gold medalists, nevertheless the Olympic Stadium celebrated as she crossed the finish line, as she was the first woman from such a conservative country to compete, and the principle was clearly more important than the performance.[358] Qatar and Brunei also allowed their female athletes to compete at the Olympics. Tahmina Kohistani was the only Afghan female athlete present at the Games. Despite the fact that she arrived much after all other runners at the 100 meters race, she scored her personal best time, and her presence at the game itself was a triumph.[359] Moreover, Mariam Youssef won a bronze medal at the 1500 meters, for Bahrain. While Habiba Ghribi, representing Tunisia, as a middle- and long-distance runner, was the first female Arab athlete to score a silver medal in London, making these Games a landmark for Arab women.[360] Not only did Muslim athletes take part in the Olympics, it was also the first time a Muslim woman refereed a sport in the history of the Games. Amina El Sergany, from Egypt, helped officiate a beach volley match, wearing a *hijab* under her jacket and hat.[361]

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[357]The Gulf Blog, http://thegulfblog.com/2012/07/30/female-flag-carriers-the-olympics-and-the-arab-world/
[358] The Guardian, http://www.guardian.co.uk
[359] The Telegraph, http://www.telegraph.co.uk
[360] CNN, http://edition.cnn.com
[361]Muslim Women News, http://www.muslimwomennews.com/n.php?nid=6949

The Increasing Number of Arab Women Entrepreneurs

Before the spreading of Islam, women in the Arab region played an important part in business. The independent financial rights granted to women by the Islamic religion helped carrying on the presence of women in commercial dealings for some time. Unfortunately, the dominant male culture, the scarcity of jobs, laws hindering women from economic activity, such as the decrees designed for their "protection", and the weak support services (transportation and child care) were all factors that discouraged women employment for a very long time.[362] Today the growing number of female entrepreneurs in the Arab world is a clear sign of empowerment.[363] The shift towards the free market, and all the values and ideas related to this phenomenon have increased the influence of Arab women in private businesses, and in some cases, has lead to the establishment of their own organizations.[364]

The data regarding female entrepreneurs is scarce, but it indicates that numbers are constantly rising. In Bahrain, the number of women employers increased from about two-hundred in 1991 to more than eight-hundred in 2001.[365] In 2005, in Saudi Arabia, it was estimated that there are about thirty thousand women owned companies. In Tunisia, the number of businesses managed by women grew from two- thousand in 1998, to five-thousand in 2005.[366]

Organizations owned by women are mainly in the service sector. This is true in Yemen, where almost eighty percent of women- owned businesses are in this field, sixty percent in Egypt and almost forty percent in Morocco.[367] Moreover, the great part of women entrepreneurs in Morocco are university graduates.[368]

The augmentation of women in business and the boost in wealth, also lead to an increase in the number of women employed in banks and other financial

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[362] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005,p92 http://hdr.undp.org
[363] *ivi*, p110
[364] *ibidem*
[365] C. Nadereh, and R. K. Yared, *Women Entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa: Building on Solid Beginnings*, paper prepared for the Annual Joint Seminar 2003 of the Arab Fund on "Arab Women and Economic Development"
[366] S. Esim, *Gender Mainstreaming in Chambers of Commerce and Industry in Arab States: A Comparative Analysis of Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen*, 2005
[367] GEM (Gender Entrepreneurship Markets), "Regional MENA Brief 2005, International Finance Corporation", World Bank Group, www.ifc.org/menagem
[368] AFEM, www.afem.ma

institutions. The very first bank branch for women was opened in Bahrain by the Kuwaiti Finance House[369].

Empowerment of Muslim Women through Television

The Arab women Channel "EVE", launched on Nile Sat broadcasts numerous programs regarding the role of women in politics, business, and society.[370] The show "For Women Only" on Al Jazeera invited famous and cultured female guests from all over the Arab world to express their points of view regarding social, political, and cultural issues. "Every Woman" on Al Jazeera International revealed the stories of women coming from diverse backgrounds, who were confronted with many subjects ranging from religion to sex. These are just some examples of television channels and shows that were created to strengthen women in Muslim countries.

The emancipated and independent female broadcasters on Al Jazeera or Al-Arabiya, who work side by side with male colleagues, may definitely be considered an empowering sight for Muslim women, as well as role models.[371]

In 2010, when Al Jazeera's chief-editor asked female journalists to enforce a dress code that complies with Islamic "spirit and principles", the broadcasters Joumana Nammour, Lina Zahr al-Din, Jullinar Mousa, Luna al-Shibl and Nawfar Afli resigned.[372] These journalists were amongst the most popular and highly rated broadcasters, who had often chaired debates on complicated issues, or interviewed powerful men in politics and religion. For a long time, they had provided a different image from that of hyper-sexualized portraits of women in mainstream Arabic media. Despite their fame, Al Jazeera accepted their resignation.[373]

On one hand, it is very upsetting to see that a channel like Al Jazeera, which has been a pioneer in many ways, is retrogressing. On the other, the action taken by

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[369] UNDP, Human Development Report 2005,p110 http://hdr.undp.org
[370] More information may be retrieved on https://www.aswat.com/files/WomeninArabMedia_0.pdf
[371] Francesca M. Corrao, *Le Rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, 2011
[372] The Guardian, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/04/aljazeera-changed-style
[373] *ibidem*

the Al Jazeera journalists is definitely an important example of women empowerment. It shows the audience that women also have a saying, and a right to choose. By not giving into the harassments and constraints, but by resigning, the broadcasters sent out a fundamental message of strength and courage.

The Saudi E-Portal for the Empowerment of Women

Glowork.net, a Riyadh-based e-portal was recently set up for women empowerment in the Middle East by Khalid Alkhudair. The Saudi Arabian e-portal for the recruitment of female workers in the Kingdom won first place in a competition organized by the United Nations and the International Labor Organization.[374]

Since its launch in 2011, Glowork.net has helped create over two-thousand-five- hundred vacancies for women, and assisted firms in hiring workers from home and actively monitoring their work. The virtual office solution helped create opportunities for women living in rural areas, promoted the hiring of women with special needs, and above all, fits entirely with Saudi culture and tradition.[375]

Glowork.net also became a women empowerment movement by partnering with universities throughout Saudi Arabia to educate women on what is expected when entering the job market, how to prepare a CV and how to face an interview.[376]

Glowork.net is an example of how the appropriate and intelligent use of the virtual sphere can truly create opportunities and prospects for women in Muslim countries to overcome traditional and cultural obstacles.

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[374] Arab News, http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-e-portal-empowerment-women-gets-global-recognition
[375] *ibidem*
[376] *ibidem*

Empowerment of Muslim Women through Social Media

According to the Arab Social Media Report produced by the Dubai School of Government, the political and social changes that have taken place in the last two years in the Arab region have lead to the empowerment of the socially and economically more privileged parts of the population. Amongst the "netizens"[377], women have played a very important role in leading political and civic battles for regional change.[378]

Open- minded governments in the Arab region started to accept the potential of social media, such as the possibility of developing more transparent, participatory and accountable governance models. On the other hand, governments also understood that the growth of social media also brought up issues of security, privacy, freedom of expression, as well as other detrimental uses of social media on policies.[379]

According to the Dubai School of Government, social media is progressively more viewed as a fundamental tool for women's empowerment in the Arab region. The study established that social networks promote transparency and accountability. It also concluded that men and women in the Arab world use social media for very similar reasons and that both genders are very alike when it comes to the cyber sphere. [380] Moreover, it underlined that social networks have increased levels of acceptance amongst users by guaranteeing the equal possibility to all men and women to participate and express opinions in the Web. [381]

Social media allowed women to take on a new type of leadership, concentrating on using connections and networks. So far, Arab women have principally been active on the ground, rather than being cyber activists. An example of this was the awarding of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize to Tawakkul Karman, a Yemeni journalist, but above all, the first Arab woman to ever receive such a

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[377] "Netizen is a combination of 'citizen' and 'net', and stands for a person who is a frequent user of Internet" retrieved from http://www.merriam-webster.com
[378] The Arab Social Media Report,
http://www.dsg.ae/en/Publication/Pdf_En/58201211601424320000.pdf
[379] *ibidem*
[380] *ibidem*
[381] *ibidem*

prestigious prize. The presentation of the award was a true symbol of the acknowledgement of a leading female political activist.[382]

The Dubai School of Government affirms that social networks help increasing the participation of women in numerous aspects of legal, economic, political and social spheres. In fact, networks can be used to advertize women's rights, increase employment opportunities, boost political activism, and also encourage social revolution. The research has also shown the evident advantages brought by social media, such as the possibility to participate in online discussions or the possibility to contribute to the organization of political activism. However, despite the fact that the cyber space allows to overcome the physical barriers of the real world, guaranteeing a certain degree of empowerment of women in this area, the virtual participation does not directly translate to empowerment in real life, as conservative, political, cultural, and social barriers to public arenas continue existing.

It is extremely important that women in the Arab world continue penetrating the Web and that online activism increases, so that, at least on the Internet, the voices of women may be heard. Nonetheless, it is fundamental to not underestimate real life obstacles, and address them to actually promote gender equality.

Final Considerations

In conclusion, it is internationally acknowledged and proven by university researches and United Nations reports that the media support the empowerment of women to a certain extent. Even though it is clear that social media have helped strengthen women, it is also true that empowerment mainly takes place in the virtual world, and it is harder for it to become a reality in everyday life. It is unmistakable that social networks have allowed Muslim women to create important connections amongst themselves and with the outside world. It is now necessary for these linkages to transform into concrete movements, surmounting the virtual campaigns,

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[382]BBC News, http://www.bbc.co.uk

so that women's voices will truly be heard, and for social and cultural changes to seriously take place in Islamic countries.

Conclusion

Throughout the 1970s, feminism was becoming an important movement worldwide. In 1975, the first Conference on Women was held in Mexico City, and that year was declared the International Women's Year by the United Nations. Moreover, the period between 1976 and 1985 was acknowledged as the Decade for Women, during which new women issues were discussed. Many Conferences took place in the following period and various treaties and conventions were signed. The 1995 Beijing Declaration was the first document that truly focused on the topic of women empowerment, as a fundamental condition for global progress and development.

Khaled Abour El Fadl, a world leading Islamic academic, depicts this last decade as a transformative moment for the Islamic religion, based on the antagonism between moderate and puritanical Islam.[383] Especially after September 11th 2001, both the Western and Muslim world have become more aware of each other. Contrarily to what many believe, the majority (eighty-five percent or more) of people in both Western and Islamic countries agree that democracy is the best form of government, and the one they desire for their country.[384] However, it is clear that there are different positions regarding social issues. The biggest diversities between Muslim countries and Western ones involve the way women are approached. According to extreme and conservative Islamists, women's empowerment and the recognition of their rights, is a sign of cultural distortion, which leads to a Western-style corruption and a spirituality that is far from Allah.[385] Based on these arguments, some religious and tribal leaders have managed to oppose female education, and defend unjust laws, in favor of men, in the name of *Sharia[386]*.

In this kind of poisonous environment, Muslim women empowerment must come from deep within society, where conservative Islamic communities must find their own reasons for granting women a more complete role in everyday life.

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[383] A. El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, Harper Collins, New York, 2005
[384] Inglehart, RF, Basanez, Moreno, eds. *Human Beliefs and Values: A Cross-Cultural Sourcebook based on the 1999 – 2002 Values Surveys*, Siglo XXI Editores, Mexico, 2004
[385] Islam's Women, http://www.islamswomen.com
[386] "Sharia: Islamic law based on the Koran" Retrieved from http://www.merriam-webster.com

The contemporary Arab Muslim world is confronted with enormous internal and external challenges. It is facing vast "cultural dilemmas", and it is "renegotiating and re-inventing" the traditional society.[387] The limitations imposed by the Islamic world on women are becoming outdated and hard to accept. The *purdah,* [388] or curtain separating the sphere of men from that of women, is starting to open, and especially after the revolts in 2011, some courageous Arab women have even torn the curtain apart. The spotlight is now, more than ever, on the status of Muslim women who may lose or gain from the winds of change brought by the Arab Spring.

Notwithstanding the significant part played by women in history, or in the Arab Spring, the Western media continues portraying women in the region as oppressed, subservient and in need of a saving grace. It was established that this image is absolutely not the original depiction of women in Islam which in fact has an equal consideration of men and women. Furthermore, this picture does not represent all Arab and Muslim women, in other words it is essential to make a distinction between the socially and economically privileged and underprivileged women. It is globally acknowledged that the mass media systems have already contributed to the empowerment of some Islamic women but there are many who do not have the possibility to react, as they have no access to education or media, and are still kept in ignorance.

An article in the Guardian dated April 2011 said "Women may have sustained the Arab Spring, but it remains to be seen if the Arab Spring will sustain women."[389] This statement pinpoints the changes that have taken place, as well as those that may come next for women in the region. Despite the assertion, and regardless of the Arab Spring movement's support, what is certain is that a sparkle has been lit within Arab women's hearts, and it will die hard. The Arab Spring has brought challenges and opportunities. Women have carefully managed the revolts to attract the entire world's attention, and can now use it to their benefit, to change their roles in society.

The blogs, Tweets, and Facebook pages created by Arab Muslim women demonstrate that there are innumerable strong, courageous, educated, privileged,

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[387] A. S. Akbar, , *Islam*, *Globalization and Postmodernity*, Routledge, London, Albo, 1994
[388] "Purdah: seclusion of women from public observation among Muslims and some Hindus especially in India; a state of seclusion or concealment" Retrieved from http://www.merriam-webster.com/
[389] The Guardian, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/22/women-arab-spring

politically and socially aware women whom are carrying out an arduous battle, with the support of many open minded men, to have their important role acknowledged by society. On the other hand, there are many other illiterate and uninformed women whom are manipulated and brainwashed by fundamentalists. History, customs and culture cannot be revolutionized in a day, but change must start somewhere. New media unfortunately do not have the power to unhinge traditions, political systems, culture, and institutions, but play a central role in the promotion of women empowerment by providing free, unfiltered and limitless sources of information and grounds for forming networks.

Muslim women empowerment up to now has mainly taken place in the virtual world, and is far more difficult that it becomes a reality of everyday life in a short time. Social networks have allowed women to express their opinion, organize movements, and create important connections, but it is now necessary for these to transform into concrete achievements. Barlas is amongst those who believe that the cyber space will not instantly generate democratic societies. The Internet has strong social and political potential but it must be complemented with adjustments in Islamic culture.[390]

Changes must come from deep inside the society, and probably one significant step would be the re-interpretation of the Quran not in favor of men. The Prophet Muhammad said:

"Women are but the full sisters of men"[391]

Muslim women should reclaim the equality that Allah had in store for them, since the very beginning, and men's behavior towards women should be aligned with the Holy Quran. The Prophet also said:

"To acquire knowledge is compulsory on all believers, both, male and female"[392]

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[390] A. Barlas, *Globalizing Equality*, in F. Nouraie Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground Muslim Women in the Global Era,* The Feminist press at The City University of New York, 2005, p 94
[391] The Arab News, http://www.arabnews.com/node/220862
[392] The Independent, http://theindependentbd.com

The virtual space, above all the widely spread and famous social networks, and other new technologies could be used to rapidly diffuse the unbiased interpretation of the Islamic texts all over the Muslim world. However a practical solution to also reach the non-privileged community of women, that which does not have access to mass media systems such as Internet, must be found. For example, spreading an impartial interpretation of the Quran amongst the *Imams* who practice in rural towns may be a step forward.

The Media have offered countless opportunities and have helped empower many Muslim women around the globe. If Islamic countries truly start complying with international standards, find a way to overcome deep-rooted and out-dated tribal customs, and women find the way to ride the wave of change, also through the use of modern technology, the daughters of today's Muslim women activists may be able to live in a better society which their mothers have strived for.

"Because my mother couldn't change my present, I decided to change my daughter's future." - Manal Al Sharif

Addenda

Council of Ministers Resolution- February 12, 2001- Saudi Arabia

"All Internet users in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shall refrain from publishing or accessing data containing some of the following:

1. Anything contravening a fundamental principle or legislation, or infringing the sanctity of Islam and its benevolent Sharia, or breaching public decency.
2. Anything contrary to the state or its system.
3. Reports or news damaging to the Saudi Arabian armed forces, without the approval of the competent authorities.
4. Publication of official state laws, agreements or statements before they are officially made public, unless approved by the competent authorities.
5. Anything damaging to the dignity of heads of states or heads of credited diplomatic missions in the Kingdom, or harms relations with those countries.
6. Any false information ascribed to state officials or those of private or public domestic institutions and bodies, liable to cause them or their offices harm, or damage their integrity.
7. The propagation of subversive ideas or the disruption of public order or disputes among citizens.
8. Anything liable to promote or incite crime, or advocate violence against others in any shape or form.
9. Any slanderous or libelous material against individuals.
   Furthermore, certain trade directives stipulate that all companies, organizations and individuals benefiting from the service shall observe the following:
1. Not to carry out any activity through the internet, such as selling, advertising, or recruitment, except in accordance with the commercial licenses and registers in force.
2. Not to carry out any financial investment activity or offer shares for subscription, except when in possession of the necessary licenses to do so.
3. Not to promote or sell medicines or foodstuff carrying any medicinal claims, or cosmetics, except those registered and approved by the Ministry of Health.

4. Not to advertise or promote or sell substances covered by other international agreements to which the Kingdom is a party, except for those with the necessary licenses.

5. Not to advertise trade fairs or organize trade delegations visits or tourist tours or trade directories except with the necessary licenses.

All private and government departments, and individuals, setting up websites or publishing files or pages, shall observe and ensure the following:

1. Respect commercial and information convention.

2. Approval of government authorities for setting up websites or publishing files or pages for or about themselves.

3. Approval of the Ministry of Information for setting up of media-type websites which publish news on regular basis, such as newspapers, magazines and books.

4. Good taste in the design of websites and pages.

5. Effective protection of data on websites and pages.

6. All government and private bodies, and individuals shall take full responsibility for their websites and pages, and the information contained therein.

The Resolution refers to a set of regulatory and technical procedures aimed at ensuring the safety of the constituents of the national network (the internet inside the Kingdom) through effective programming and mechanical means. These include the following:

1. Service providers shall determine internet access eligibility through access accounts, user identification and effective passwords for the use of the access point or subsequent points and linking that through tracing and investigation programs that record the time spent, addresses accessed or to which or through which access was attempted, and the size and type of files copied, whenever possible or necessary.

2. The use of anti-virus programs and protection against concealing addresses or printing passwords and files.

3. Endeavour to avoid errors in applications that may provide loopholes that may be exploited for subversive activities or to obtain data not permitted for use for whatever reason.

4. Restriction of the provision of internet services to the end-user through the internet service unit at King Abdulaziz city for sciences and technology.

5. Keep a manual and electronic register with comprehensive information on end-users, their addresses, telephone numbers, purpose of use, and private internet access accounts, and provide the authorities with a copy thereof, if necessary.

6. Not to publish any printed directories containing subscribers' and end-users' names and addresses, without their agreement."[393]

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[393] Al- Bab, http://www.al-bab.com/media/docs/saudi.htm

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