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4 The empowerment of women: rights and entitlements in Arab Worlds

Womens' just power

The notion of benign and just power evolved from calls to empower the powerless, give voice to those who have no say, and recognize the strength of the weak. Within this framework, women's empowerment is conditional on women's powerlessness. If taken out from this ethical foundation the concept of women's empowerment becomes problematic, since it is the condition of being powerless that justifies the justice of empowerment. Some scholars have chosen to project women's powerlessness as a cultural universal dictated by 'sexual reason' (Nussbaum 1999). The power of women's reproductive and sexual selves, they argue, has explicitly or implicitly oppressed women and empowered their oppressors. This essential oppression can take various cultural forms such as seclusion, victimization and violence, social, economic and political deprivation and dependency. It also denies access to rights and privileges freely and abundantly allowed to men. For this school of thought there is an essential gender disequilibrium rooted in sexual relationships which can be redressed through social justice.

A second trend has sought to prove, by providing empirical evidence, that women are denied rights and resources and that this deprivation is at the root of a variety of social, health, economic and security ills and ailments. This approach has sought to garner support and gain momentum through proving that women's powerlessness is a root cause of overpopulation, increasing health burdens, poverty, environmental degradation, and global insecurity. The empowerment of women thus becomes a strategic demand around which a variety of actors and stakeholders can coalesce (Kabeer 2001).

This seemingly crude distinction between a structural approach to empowerment and an increasingly effective functional approach has serious consequences for how women's empowerment is pursued, practiced, and measured. Three important observations can be derived from the duality of these frameworks.

First, both renditions of empowerment have informed one another. The gender justice writers advocating empowerment for its own sake have found the testimonies and experiences of poor and powerless women from the 'third world' immensely valuable. The plight of disenfranchised women suffering from multiple burdens placed upon them by virtue of their reproductive, productive and gender roles has helped the world visualize injustice as a poor (often dark skinned!) woman. On the other hand, the development-oriented advocates of women's empowerment as a strategic goal
have been aided by the theoretical and historical insights and conceptualization of feminist thinkers. The promotion of women’s empowerment as a development goal is based on the dual argument that social justice is a desired outcome of intrinsic worth and that it is a means to other ends (Malhotra et al 2002).

Second, each provenance of empowerment has, however, a slightly different audience. Empowerment as a strategic demand has been advanced in what would otherwise be quite conservative domains such as government, and global institutions such as the World Bank. Promoting women’s empowerment as a poverty alleviation strategy is less contentious than positing empowerment within a rights or a basic justice framework. Likewise, gender empowerment as a strategy that enhances women’s ability to decide effectively on their own well-being and that of their children is much more attractive and less fractious than calling for the right to sexual autonomy and decision-making. The continuum from rights to needs plotted by these two strands of women’s empowerment advocates has in fact some discontinuities. The schisms become evident when the degree and quality of empowerment are at issue. The fractures become dangerous when the right to empowerment is pitted against national and collective causes.

Third, observers have noted that behind the above-mentioned discontinuities lie contradictions. The landscape of women’s empowerment is subject to current global discourses that are themselves subject to politics (Sen 2005). For example, abortion as a component of a reproductive health package is under a revision that is greatly influenced by US domestic politics. Reproductive and sexual rights are promoted in so far as they advance the cause of lower fertility in over-populated countries in the South. But these rights come under attack by pro-life politicians when they invoke women’s right to choose. There is a contradiction of purposes that exposes the paradox of empowerment as proposed by the instrumentalist approach.

Similarly, many Muslim countries have accepted gender equity and women’s empowerment as strategies to gain international acceptance. They have managed to close the gender gap in terms of many health and education indicators, but have rejected the elements of this strategy that address structural inequities in the justice system and rights (UNIFEM 2004).

The different paradigms of women’s empowerment have clear implications for policies and programmes on the ground. The strategic approach has yielded great gains and has challenged some taboos by making women’s empowerment a public good that can deliver welfare and development. This operational definition of empowerment has limited utility, however, in addressing questions of basic injustices and inequities. On the other hand, the more politicized and to some extent westernized and purist meaning of empowerment as a right for women has created distances, misunderstanding and animosities, and in many parts of the world has failed to convert the sceptics and create popular support.
Development and rights-based approaches to empowerment

When considering Arab countries as the site for development initiatives, writers have often accepted the importance of patriarchy and of Islam as significant ideological forces that shape the discourses of entitlement and of development (for review specific to health and population, see Shokamy in EWIC 2003). The rights of women to health, dignity, security, and property are enshrined in the Quran and the hadith, but so are the clear distinctions between men and women, most of which are predicated on gender roles. Different renditions of rights derive from interpretations that privilege either the lens of equity or the lens of differentiations. The choice of interpretive frameworks relies almost totally on the historical context. Muslims have chosen to investigate the progressive tenets of religion when polity and society were open to change and when the Umma (the nation) was less threatened. It follows that withdrawal into a conservative and unquestioning ‘safe-mode’ of thinking happens in times of uncertainty and crisis. This is not meant as a crude apology on behalf of a religion or a people. Rather it is meant to clarify that the relationship between religious ideology and gender rights are structured by historical events. The influence and impact of Muslim religious jurisprudence and moral tenets are variable, and contingent on the conditions that are shaping individual lives and locating/concentrating power in certain hands.

This paper argues that the instrumentalist approach to women’s empowerment detailed above has created a broad near consensus around some rights, but has failed to engage with the political processes which determine how rights in general are defined and made operational in society. The timid approach to gender rights as an avenue to well-being has failed to question why these rights have been denied, and how this denial has been ideologically legitimized. Unitary and rigid interpretations of religion, culture, and tradition have been doled out as reasons why the structural meanings of empowerment are unsuited to and unpopular in Arab Muslim countries.

The contest between the basic needs approach to empowerment and the more radical rights-based approach defines current approaches to gender and empowerment. This paper will argue for analytical clarity as a path to a more politically engaged project of gender and rights. Using empirical evidence and observations mostly from Egypt, the paper presents an argument why basic needs approaches may have served the goal of gender equity by building popular consensus around goals of gender equity. However, the basic needs approach has also undermined the right to equity by making it seem like a radical one, that according to many a western project removes women from the contexts of their culture, tradition, religion and history.

Definition

Both theoretical and operational definitions of women’s empowerment are often prefaced by disclaimers or qualifiers which stress the contextual, tentative, and on the whole rather tenuous and timid essence of the definition. Women’s empowerment rests on the assumption that women as a group are constrained by structural factors which include biased legislations, values, ideologies, markets and social institutions. To overcome these constraints and to exert agency to realize goals that enhance their
own chances of survival and well-being, women are in need of positive efforts to
remove these constraints and enable them to act to achieve their goals. Mohanty
(1991) has voiced criticism to this seemingly obvious definition by pointing out that
women do not exist outside history, and that the meaning of empowerment depends
on definitions of power and powerlessness which cannot be detached from the spatial
and historical context that gives it meaning.

Kabeer (2001) has divided women’s empowerment into three interlocking domains
of resources, agency and achievements. She defines women’s empowerment as the
ability to make choices in situations and contexts that had previously denied women
this right/ability to choose. Kabeer’s definition has gained wide acceptance for its
analytical clarity and differentiation between the resources that women access, their
ability or agency to access or act upon them, and achievements which are the
outcomes of these actions. This framework has enabled researchers to inject some
methodological rigour into their research, measurement and evaluative frameworks
(Malhotra et al 2002).

In terms of operational definitions of empowerment, different studies have measured
or described different things. Women’s autonomy, agency, status, land rights, domestic
economic power, bargaining and decision-making power, and public participation are
some of the operational definitions listed by Malhotra et al in their review article on
the measurement of women’s empowerment (2002). Some have conflated empower-
ment with participation, and suggest that participatory bottom-up approaches and the
engagement of civil society are avenues to empowerment (Gaventa 2006; Chambers
1997; Malhotra et al 2002).

It would seem that there is agreement on what empowerment is, but not on what its
outcomes and implications are. It is active agency (ability to act, choose, decide,
work, move, spend, earn, vote and other acts of assertion) and the processes that
enable women to act. One broad and less than satisfying generic outcome has been
described as ‘well-being’. The idea of well-being may make sense, but it has less than
adequate analytical value.

However, there is broad agreement that women’s empowerment necessitates
systemic transformations in the structures of patriarchy. But even this assumption
has been questioned by scholars who argue for diverse meanings to empowerment
and ones which accommodate faith-based feminism such as that of Islamic feminists,
who argue that patriarchy defines clear rights for women and places obligations on
men (Barazangi 2002).

Development projects designed to empower women suffer from a fundamental
problem. They are small-scale with limited impact and scope similar to those
designed to alleviate poverty at village level. Both ignore the systemic factors that
produce poverty and which undermine women. The question is, can some women be
empowered at the micro level without addressing systemic constraints and
oppression? But how does one approach such revolutionary projects? How can
research and projects and programmes transform the structures of patriarchy which
are ingrained in policies, economies, markets, homes, psyches, sexual and social relationships?

Measurement

The need to measure the empowerment of women becomes an imperative for projects and programmes which aim to realize empowerment. Citizens are empowered by their charters, constitutions, and other enabling and binding covenants, and the evidence of how these empower citizens is often undertaken by monitoring legal, human rights, and social citizenship frameworks. Women stand apart, in that their empowerment is achieved through pro-active measures which seek to realize a measurable difference in the lives of individuals. Empowerment is thus approximated through the measurement of other indicators that imply empowerment. These indicators are derived from prevalent theories that define women’s empowerment in terms of human development and security indicators. For example, education is a proxy measure for empowerment as far as women are concerned, but is it a measure when applied to men? There is no theory to associate male education with male status. But gender theory assumes that status is enhanced by education and that higher status women are more empowered. Similarly, gender theory assumes that the younger a woman gets married, the less will be her ability to negotiate an equitable power relationship with her spouse. So delaying the age of marriage has come to be associated with ‘modern’ egalitarian relationships between spouses, which in turn assumes an empowered wife.

Kabeer’s framework (2000) has helped distinguish the resources of empowerment from its outcomes and showed that equating the means to empowerment with its outcomes is problematic (Malhotra et al 2002). Thus employment and education are enabling factors that empower women, and not proof that women are empowered.

Besides accounting for the complexities of measuring empowerment, studies have also pointed to the importance of meaning and values assigned to empowerment indicators and the inter-relationship of different variables. Simply put, indicators may have universal significance, but they rely for their meaning on the context, culture and moment in which they are used. This is a dilemma that is typical of all social sciences. There are now attempts to arrive at a consistent conceptual framework for measuring empowerment and its effects while allowing for variations in the indicators that are used to describe the components of that framework across different settings (Malhotra et al 2002).

The conceptual clarity that has emerged from the deliberations of individuals and institutions has not yet created methodological rigour or understanding. The definition favoured by this author as well as others in the field, which stresses action to make real choices when previously this right had been denied, implies that studies of women’s empowerment need to transcend the methodological confines dictated by development research and venture into fields such as history, philosophy, law, and politics. Methods from these disciplines could help researchers better understand context, the parameters that define the possible and the impossible, the dynamics of change and the meaning of empowerment as action and as potential. Such an
interdisciplinary approach can enable researchers to integrate and make operational the variety of emic perceptions and definitions of empowerment. It can also introduce a life-cycle approach that links experiences to empowerment over a life span, and offers ideas of how to ensure that the investments women make at one point in their lives are not lost at another.

The following section of this paper will look at some of the commonly recognized areas of empowerment that have received much attention in the literature. The examples of work, body, and voice will be used to illustrate the distinctions between needs and rights and the dilemma that gains for women can be realized without asserting rights.

Work

The United Nations definition of women’s economic empowerment is that women have ‘... access to and control over the means to make a living on a sustainable and long term basis, and [are] receiving the material benefits of this access and control’ (quoted in Mosedale 2005: 247). Women need access to income and to the benefits that accrue to breadwinners and their dependents. This implies not only access to jobs and markets, but also to finance, social security coverage, savings and insurance. It also means changing structural conditions that disable women from accessing these resources at the household, community and market levels, including laws and policies which favour men in labour markets.

Women’s work is still highly contested as an empowerment strategy. It is contingent on macro level conditions and on the ideological underpinnings of policies that seek to facilitate or promote women’s economic participation. Women entering the labour market can be a sign of oppression or evidence of empowerment. The meaning of work is dependant on the markets that create it and the regulatory frameworks that supervise it. Minimum wages, worker rights and social, health, and contingency benefits help to enhance the empowering potential of work. But in situations where the state has withdrawn its role as an arbitrator of social justice, the notion of economic activity and of work may carry with it some rather sinister shades of exploitation and of what is sometimes called ‘a race to the bottom’, whereby workers are willing to compete for scarce opportunities and therefore willing to give up basic rights to decent wages and benefits. In this case, women’s work and earnings may lead to heavier burdens as the main breadwinners, if men rely on women’s work while maintaining their own gendered privileges. Micro-finance and other mechanisms that give women access to cash without adequate support networks can also lead to the feminization of debt (Bisnath 2001; Mayoux 2002).

Perhaps because women’s duties and choices as caregivers and homemakers have been associated with their disempowerment, they have not been sufficiently framed in the discourse of empowerment. The ideological valorization of women’s work at home as daughters, mothers and wives is the mainstay of patriarchal ideologies and policies (whether of individuals or of the state). It is this ‘work’, it is claimed, which enables women to claim rights, dignity, recognition and influence. But home making and care giving roles are least prized by the cultures that theoretically venerate stay-
at-home women. This is evident in legal codes which do not compensate women for these gender roles, and which provide social security coverage only through markets and families and not as an integral right of citizenship, even for stay-at-home mothers and wives (UNIFEM 2004). Decades of cultural scrutiny have shown that women have not claimed the benefits of the patriarchal bargain.

Women in Egypt, as several recent empirical studies have found, privilege reproductive over productive roles. The Egypt Labor Market Panel Study notes that women exit labour markets almost automatically upon marriage (and not, as is noted in other parts of the world, due to motherhood) (ELMPS 2006). Not only is this the practice, it is also the expectation. Another survey of labourers found that the vast majority of young women workers expect to leave work once married (ICA 2005). Despite the entry of millions into the labour market as a strategy to provide basic needs and enable young women to save up for marriage, paid work outside the home is not pursued or promoted for women. Work is not only a necessity for the present and a protection in the future, it is also a right and can be an empowering experience.

Many feminists have noted how going out to work has failed to realize earlier theories that claimed that paid work would be the route to women’s liberation (Elson 1979; Engels as quoted in Elson). The issue now surely should be how to make work empowering, and not whether the right to work is a right worth having!

The area of work encompasses the right and conditions of paid work, the resources and opportunities to which the self-employed and other entrepreneurs have access, the right not to work, the ability to realize the full benefits of work including economic and social security, and the right to protection from risk, disability, and the lack of old age provision.

Body

Body issues describe physical burdens shouldered by women, including morbidities, confinements and physical constraints, physical and mental abuse or fear of either or both, and work-related pressures and hazards as well as the risks, outcomes, and responsibilities pertaining to reproduction and motherhood. Notions of ‘body’ and bodily integrity are generated through regionally specific social experiences. Thus female genital cutting/mutilation (FGC/M) is the lens through which the Sudanese and Egyptian body is perceived; sexual violence and the burden of AIDS evokes images of the South African body; abortion becomes emblematic of the Catholic woman; domestic violence speaks to us of the West and the veil of the East; and the heavy burdens of work and malnutrition characterize the female body of the Indian subcontinent. The concept that sums up the field of body for women is ‘inequity’ and ‘excess burden’. Reproduction is a biological fact, but its burden and detrimental impact on women’s well-being can be excessive. Similarly, women’s sexuality unfairly penalizes them and is controlled through criminal practices such as FGC/M, mores of modesty, segregation and confinement, and violence.

Scholars have engaged with these areas of excess and inequity more than they have shown an interest with the status of women’s health and bodies. For example, women’s
mental health, their occupational well-being, their non-reproductive morbidities and their risk due to the hazards of migration, urbanization, environmental degradation/pollution and poverty have not attracted as much attention as the more gender-specific aspects of the body and its experiences. In other words, there has been more interest in aspects of the body that are specifically female than those which are not, but which could be a deep source of disempowerment and distress for women.

Sexuality and fertility (or their control) are by far the areas of research and action with widest currency. Since the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, reproductive health has become an avenue of empowerment and a paradigm that links women’s reproduction, health, sexuality and empowerment. The focus on women’s sexuality and its socially constructed oppression is an essential action programme that incorporates the experiences and troubles of women globally. But it also leads to ignoring the non-sexual oppressions that the body endures. Of particular concern is the occupational and mental health of women, and the gendered aspects of non-reproductive morbidities. Health inequities are socially constructed, and gender is an important social determinant of health. Yet we still do not understand how gender operates outside the realm of sexuality and reproduction and the relationships that determine both gendered and non-gendered inequities.

In the Arab Muslim world for example, marriage is regarded as a religious obligation and is invested with many ethical injunctions. This can be attributed primarily to the fact that any sexual contact outside marriage is considered fornication and is subject to severe punishment.

Furthermore, Islam condemns and discourages celibacy. In this manner, marriage acquires a religious dimension: it becomes the way of preserving morals and chastity through the satisfaction of sexual desires within the limits set by God. Muslim jurists have gone so far as to elevate marriage to the level of a religious duty. A common hadith that is still often quoted, particularly among men, states: ‘The prayer of a married man is equal to seventy prayers of a single man.’ Thus, all individuals are encouraged to marry, and societal pressures, such as the importance of family reputation, discourage being single.

There can be no denial of the importance of strong family relationships, particularly relationships generated through marriage, in providing women with emotional and moral security. Most women want marriage and motherhood, and feel rewarded when they attain either or both. Indeed the strong familial ties of Arab society have their rewards in terms of social cohesion and the creation of social support mechanisms that have, unfortunately, been tested repeatedly in our modern history. The following quotation from a speech by Princess Basma Bint-Talal illustrates the normative constructions of the Arab family, society and work that may satisfy basic needs, but not strategic ones which could empower women. The quote is illustrative of what often remains unsaid and unquestioned, but is very influential in shaping attitudes (Sholkamy 2004):

*Arab society is a collective society in which family and clan relationships play a prominent role. This collective social approach has saved Arab women and their*
societies from much of the modern social strains that are common in other societies, including advanced industrialised countries. There is less hunger and starvation among the poorest Arab societies than in other regions. Drugs and prostitution is limited, rape almost non existent, single parent families and births outside marriage are also very few. Community violence exists, however at a lower level than most other societies; and polygamy, although it still exists among the less advantaged groups, is becoming more unusual. This collective social approach, however, did not greatly assist in spurring women to work outside the home. The family, in most cases, provided them with shelter, basic necessities and a relatively secure future, which meant there was little incentive to look for a job or seek other remunerative sources of employment (quoted in Sholkamy 2004).

Marriage remains a major source of security for women. In Arab societies, societal recognition and support systems appear to revolve around the roles of women as wives and mothers. In this social context, the non-married woman and her psychological and economic well-being are totally ignored. Features of the well-being of non-married women as evidenced by their level of dependency and their support networks need to be investigated. The available data is limited and suggests a high level of dependency in terms of personal educational characteristics and the ability to earn a living.

The significance of considering the well-being of non-married women is becoming more and more important because of the changing marriage patterns occurring in Arab countries, which implies that more women are spending longer spans of their lives in non-marital living arrangements, and that some women may live in permanent celibacy.

Celibacy is a word, a choice, a consequence and a condition. In each of these guises celibacy is troubling. Let us take the anecdotal but illustrative example of its linguistic translation. In Arabic celibacy means ezobliya or being single. Ezobliya can describe both men and women. But the word resonates with the freedom and independence that make bachelorhood attractive and enviable. It implies a choice that men make when they have the ability to live a few years free of the pressures and responsibility that come with marriage and the creation of a family. But celibacy is also translated (or mistranslated) into Arabic as enousssa, an altogether different concept that means spinsterhood. It implies lack of choice, almost desperation or missed opportunity, and applies almost exclusively to women.

While neither the words bachelor nor spinster say anything about sexuality, when translated into Arabic they speak volumes. An azzib (male single man) or even an azzba (a term used less often to mean single woman) may well have chosen not to marry so as to enjoy sexual license. An annis (usually female but can mean male) is assumed to be sexually inactive. The primary content of the word celibacy when translated into Arabic means one thing, but implies a lot. Despite the low numbers of celibate women in the Arab world, the phenomenon itself is an important one to study. It is also hard to justify why a demographically insignificant trend has become such a culturally urgent one with far-reaching social implications.
The ideal of marriage is highly held and has been described as a positive feature of Arab societies and one which provides a certain degree of stability and security to individual men and women (Rashad, Osman et al 2003). However marriage is not universal in all Arab countries and will be less so in the future. A cursory look at the Arab media will reveal a growing sensitivity to female celibacy with programmes on satellite channels and articles in periodicals talking about el-‘enousa in the Arab world, particularly among communities that guard mores of female modesty, such as in some Arab Gulf states. Meanwhile, social and civil life remains organized around the principles and premises of marriage. As populations change there is a need to draw attention to the possibility of a small, but significant single adult population of women who have never been married, have not attained the privileges that come with being a wife and mother, but nevertheless are full citizens with basic social, civil, and sexual rights.

Accommodating celibacy does not mean accepting sexual promiscuity, as some members of the media and of religious establishments may like to suggest. It does mean accepting single women as social individuals and revising the assumption of marriage as a universal institution that is the gate to social respectability and participation.

At age 39 years, over 10% of the female population in five Arab countries (Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco and Qatar) remain un-married (Rashad and Khadr 2002). This indicates a high prevalence of celibacy amongst women. The troubling issue here is that being celibate does not mean the same thing in these five countries. City life in Morocco affords women a fair amount of liberty and freedom that is independent of their marital status. In Kuwait and Qatar the situation is markedly different, with women’s identities remaining within the confines of family.

The sexual rights of the non-married merit some consideration. There is a resounding silence on the subject of the gender inequities in sexual rights which tolerate the choices of men, but not those of women, since the sexual rights of the non-married are not sanctioned by religion. Pre-marital sexual activities are prohibited for both men and women. Yet non-married women in various Arab countries shoulder an unfair burden of stigma and social exclusion. By forfeiting marriage, these women not only lose sexual rights, they may also, if poor or uneducated, be unable to access reproductive health services which are designed to primarily serve married women.

**Voice**

The agency of women and representation in public forums and in private decisions is a large and complex field of enquiry. Women’s representation in national, regional and local politics is one part. Another is the representation of women in cultural domains and in the media. A third dimension is women’s citizenship and legal equality. A fourth aspect is women’s mobility, freedom and right to hold and state opinions in public, to protest and to make choices. The first area is one which has received most attention and has been the site of most action. This is probably because it is the most measurable rendition of voice. Global actors such as the UN and UNIFEM, the USA through its aid and foreign policy, and the European Union most significantly through its
Gender and Development programme, have identified benchmarks that measure progress on voice. Access and presence in public offices, quotas in legislative bodies, and universal suffrage are some of the benchmarks. This focus is problematic, because it ignores context and how the apparently progressive measures to enhance women's presence in public office can be subverted by power-holders. Recently, attention has been drawn to the use of women's quotas by tribal and family forces to maintain their own hold on power in Iraq and Afghanistan, where quotas were set by legislators appointed by the occupying powers. This and other experiences have raised questions about the virtue of making women part of less than virtuous political processes. What is the point of being appointed to a parliament that is not representative of society? Moreover, Cornwall and Goetz (2005) have argued that women's participation in politics and political parties and their inclusion and prioritization of women's issues and demands is a more significant indicator of gender justice and voice than are the numbers of women in elected or, even worse, appointed bodies.

Islamicist feminists have voiced their own critique of the feminist interpretation of voice and agency, arguing that these conceptions of voice and agency are premised on notions of Islam as a religion that oppresses women through the imposition of the veil, the segregation of women, the emphasis on women's reproductive and family roles and the constraints it places on women's ability to arbitrate and lead. Islamist scholars have questioned the universality of feminist definitions of power and agency, taking the position that agency and voice are about the ability to realize goals and roles; not necessarily the roles chosen by western women. Therefore, they argue, the rights of Muslim women to acquire the kind of agency and voice which they want and which is religiously sanctioned should not be ignored or subverted. Muslim women prize their religiously sanctioned gender roles and will agitate to realize that which Islam provides and which they have been denied by secularist and despotic regimes (Barazangi 2002; Mahmoud 2005). Thus 'Islamic feminists' in Iran have sought to realize significant gains for women in terms of their personal status, including compensation for household work and child-care in case of divorce, the right of women to argue for judicial posts, and the right of women to freely express and publish, for example the journal 'Zanan', from within the structures of Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) (Mir-Hosseini 2002).

This culturally specific notion of voice and presence is indeed gaining momentum in the real and academic world, but it remains an un-tested proposition. It assumes acceptance of ascribed roles and relies heavily on the good will of the patriarchal order. The ability to realize collective goals and challenge injustices can be achieved in different ways, but in all cases the questions of citizenship and its rights remain. Citizenship is a secular principle that permits individuals equal rights regardless of gender, ethnicity and other forms of social difference. Women have every right to prize and adhere to ascribed gender roles, but some women may not share this vision and should also have the right to express this position. Moreover as Hirshman (2006) has written: "To paraphrase, as Mark Twain said, "A man who chooses not to read is just as ignorant as a man who cannot read.". In other words, women who decline to claim their individual rights to agency and voice are as silent as those who have been deprived of the right to do so.
At issue is the question of socioeconomic and political inequities in the determination of voice. Gender is a factor, but the forces of class, family and power even more so. Elite women may surface as parliamentarians or as judges, but it is poor women who still lack voice to express their collective predicaments.

Several new Arab constitutions have proposed quotas for women in parliament. Two in particular highlight the irksome problem of quotas and of handing rights from above or from across the seas, rather than claiming and forging them in the context where they will be practiced. The New Iraqi constitution drawn up by a military occupation force and its political arm has designated 25% of parliamentary seats for women. Needless to say this parliament has many problems, one of which is that the women who won seats did not really contest them. Kin and tribesmen selected these women. Many are politicians in their own rights, but the necessity of filling so many seats with so many women meant that many corners were cut. It did the cause of women's representation no good when this parliament disintegrated into factional disputes and has yielded the power of legislature over a disintegrating state.

The Sudan has also designated a 25% quota in the new constitution, drawn up to signal the end of almost 30 years of civil war. Many would agree that despite a robust and dynamic feminist and women's movement that long preceded the current regime, women had little to do with enforcing this quota. It was part of a deal blessed by greater forces. The coming elections in Sudan will be contested with the participation of women. Political parties are scrambling to gain seats and fulfill their quota obligations. As one parliamentarian who will contest the elections on behalf of the Umma Party confided, 'All the parties find this to be a contradiction!' In one recent newspaper article in a Sudanese daily, the writer suggested that only men contest the seats, and then choose the missing 25% for women. The article echoes the concerns of political parties who see few benefits (but many burdens) to giving voice and rights of representation to women.

Egypt has not adopted a quota, but has witnessed a rapid decline in the representation of women in legislative councils. The more democracy, it would seem, the fewer women in parliament (Abu el-Qumsan 2008). In this study by Abu el-Qumsan et al the party activists and senior members felt that women could not contest the elections and were therefore a liability. The voters polled by this same study had no such reservations and were more liberal in their views, stating that they would vote for a woman if she was a good candidate.

Women's voices are not always best served by protectionism. But if quotas are the tool of choice to realize the right of representation, they need a much more assertive and dynamic campaign that enables women to break into politics as equal and worthy contenders. The quotas so far have created new elites and 'professional' politicians who lack a constituency or a network that legitimizes their worth as representatives and as legislators. This, of course, does not apply to hundreds of women who have been successful in proving their ability to serve as parliamentarians, trade unionists, and civil society activists without relying on quotas. Enabling women to participate in legislative bodies and other representative bodies is only one step. The next step is to
ensure that they can assume these roles effectively, fully, and as political actors accountable to a constituency.

The voices of women are more than sounds and symbols. Symbolic gestures, lip service and tokenisms still prevail, and indeed are dominant particularly in the popular media. Female presidents and prime ministers are counted on a daily basis so are top executives and senior officials, but when we reckon the tally, we need to also think about what change this presence adds up to. A sharp line has to be drawn between the re-creation of gendered elites and the creation of a presence that voices collective concerns and is empowered to make change happen.

Globalization

Hands are reaching out across space, cyberspace and borders to create global programmes, coalitions, and movements that espouse women’s empowerment. The feminist movement has always had a global dimension and reflects imbalances of power between the global and the local. The challenges remain of aligning the messages of a global feminism to women’s struggles for empowerment situated in diverse cultural, political and religious settings. Some aspects of global movements travel well and others do not. Activists and scholars have met, participated and collaborated on many occasions in each others’ spheres of activity and interest. But the causes and concerns of women themselves have not travelled across boundaries in equal volume or speed. Women in the West have marched on behalf of many an Eastern sister, exemplifying how the West is the arbitrator of cross-border movements. The links seem always to pass through the globalized centre which is located geographically, academically and/or financially in the West.

Globalization has meant that women simultaneously and all over the world are changed or challenged by similar forces. Free trade has created more jobs for women and perhaps improved working conditions for some, but it has also created pockets of unemployment, welfare benefit cuts and pay cuts for others. It is one global force interacting differently in a variety of settings. Donor agendas, human rights and reproductive health policies and paradigms, migration and refugee regimes, are all examples of global events and conditions with which women all over the world are contending. All happen in the centre, and all impact peripheries in different ways. Do these forces divide or unite women?

The pathways that women’s empowerment has passed through are littered with opportunities, both missed and realized, that have shaped many other progressive and just movements. It is time to look at the areas of voice, body, work and the global forces that shape arenas of action and of research so as to chart a course to justice.

Development programmes targeting marginalized communities needs to be action oriented. Action research methodologies were developed to enable individuals and communities to solve their own problems and address their own needs by using simple research tools to quickly collect, analyse and act upon the results of data. This ideal has rarely been realized, if at all in Arab countries including Egypt. The divide between research and action persists, but so does the distance between policy and
local needs. Research is formal; and even when empirical it is rarely grounded in local knowledge. Meanwhile, local communities have few avenues by which they can independently express their realities, challenges or demands. The catalytic involvement of a new breed of researchers is the missing ingredient in Egypt's developmental initiatives.

Conclusion

The Muslim Arab world is large and diverse. Like any other 'region', it has been typified and categorized in terms of a totalizing Western gaze. This region's histories, trajectories of development and of change are varied. Yet there are frames of reference and common experiences that permit a paper such as this one to speak of a region. Islam is a moral and ideological framework and value that impacts the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims in the Arab world. Patriarchy is also the typical form of social organization and system that informs the laws and codes of most Arab countries. Arab identity and values still resonate as the cultural and political frame that distinguishes us from others and may even breed a sense of wariness and suspicion from the so-called 'West'!

Women's rights to equity and empowerment have been pitted as a movement that is antithetical to these three frameworks that shape ideals, if not identities, in the Arab region. This may be why gender rights were propagated as means to achieve developmental goals, rather than absolute rights that have an intrinsic worth and value. This strategic choice has reached the limits of its utility. The paper has looked at the fields of work, body and voice to argue that the strategic and appeasing approach has not yielded real or sustainable gains. It is time to go beyond the limits of a strategy that is predicated on promoting women's empowerment as a means to achieving other developmental goals, and attempt to realize liberty, equity and justice for women and men.

The rights-based approach to development should resonate with the values of humanism and liberty. It has somehow evolved into a ghetto that alienates most people. The false distinction between rights and needs persists. It is as though claiming rights is a foreign thing, but having needs met is a truly authentic and commendable goal. Thus in many Arab locations, feminism flounders while development chugs along. It is perhaps appropriate at this moment to try to change both feminist approaches to power and the lack of interest and appreciation of power relations characteristic of development work. Such a critical endeavour would enable men and women to realize gender equity and create the necessary conditions for progressive and liberating development.

References


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