



Education, political empowerment and Muslim women in the Middle East – Understanding the paradox

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Abstract

Article 3 of the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires that state parties take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to guarantee women the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men in all fields of life. The mainstream image of Islam seems to have been one that apparently portrays Islam and its stipulations on women as anathema to those of CEDAW. Curiously, the direct relationship between orthodox Islam or Muslim societies with perceived mistreatment or disempowerment of women does not materialise as clearly or forthrightly as anticipated. This paper demonstrates that recent CEDAW examinations reveal that educational attainment of Muslim women in orthodox Muslim countries in seven orthodox Muslim countries in the Middle East, namely, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Iran has vastly improved especially with respect to higher education. Yet, the facts also reveal that high education does not generally translate into greater political empowerment of the women. This paper then seeks to understand this apparent paradox with special reference to the Saudi Arabian case. It reasons that orthodox, conservative and negative perspectives and stereotypes of women in Islam are but only part of the answer. The other part would be that the educated Muslim women in orthodox Muslim countries of the Middle East as elsewhere do weigh things together in deciding which careers to pursue; that they deliberately decide in favour of the education and health profession because these are considered religiously more doable than politics and governance. The mainstream Western notions that rather simplistically equate educational with political empowerment does not happen the way it is expected for the Muslim women because of these non-secular considerations that engage them but that were not factored in and recognised in the conventional notions.

Keywords: CEDAW, educational empowerment of women, human rights, orthodox Muslim countries, political empowerment of women, stereotypes of women in Islam

Introduction

As early as 1946, the United Nations has established a body to monitor the situation of women and to promote women's rights. The work of this UN Commission on the Status of Women has been instrumental in bringing to light all the areas in which women are denied equality with men. It has also resulted in several declarations and conventions, of which the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is the central and most comprehensive document. Adopted on 18 December 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly CEDAW entered into force as an international treaty on 3 September 1981 after the twentieth country had ratified it. By the tenth anniversary of the Convention in 1989, almost one hundred nations have agreed to be bound by its provisions.

The Convention defines "discrimination against women" as any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic,

social, cultural, civil or any other field. It stipulates in its Article 2 that states parties condemn discrimination against women in all its 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 if not yet incorporated therein and to ensure, through law and other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle; (b) to adopt appropriate legislative and other measures, including sanctions where appropriate, prohibiting all discrimination against women; (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; (d) to refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation; (e) to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise; (f) to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women; and (g) to repeal all national penal provisions which constitute discrimination against women.

Going by the precept that "...the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields ", the Convention makes it explicit by means of Article 3 that states parties shall take in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women , for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men. It reiterates in Article 7 the states parties' obligation to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, to ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right: (a) to vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies; (b) to participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government; and (c) to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article1>).

It appears that CEDAW and its stipulations are anathema to Islam and its stipulations on women. At least this is how the popular image of Islam seems to have been projected to the world by the West and its adherents among the Muslims. The popular and mainstream literature and media are quite replete with negative and shocking stories of how women are mistreated in orthodox Muslim countries - from honour killings, genital mutilations, stoning of adulterous or blasphemous women, *burqas*, child marriages, attacks with acid on women and girls for attending schools or driving automobiles or going out and about without lawful companions to domestication, social segregation, and outright denial of the women's right to vote in national elections. It is not surprising, therefore - indeed, it is only to be expected- that orthodox Muslim countries would do badly with respect to their CEDAW women empowerment scores .

Curiously, the direct relationship between orthodox Islam or Muslim societies with perceived mistreatment or disempowerment of women does not materialise as clearly or forthrightly as anticipated. Recent CEDAW examinations reveal that educational attainment of Muslim women in orthodox Muslim countries in the Middle East has vastly improved especially with respect to higher education (see , for example, *Global Gender Gap Report 2010* of the WEF). This fact by itself should serve as a refutation of the stereotyped image of orthodox Islam as inimical to women being highly educated. Yet, the fact also reveals that high education does not generally translate into greater political participation (empowerment) of the women (see, for example, *Global Gender Gap Report 2010* of the WEF). This paper seeks to understand this apparent paradox with reference to seven orthodox Muslim countries in the Middle East, namely, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Iran.

Empowerment performance of Middle East Muslim women

According to the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2010* the United Arab Emirates (103) gains nine places to attain 1st position among the Arab countries. The labour force participation rate of women has increased from 41% to 43% and the wage gap narrows relative to the US\$40,000 maximum value for men. New data show that literacy rates for women are now higher than those of men, there are small gains in primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment data, and the proportion of women holding ministerial level positions has increased.

Compared with last year, Kuwait's (105) ranking does not change, and Bahrain (110) gains six places. Bahrain's improvements are mainly driven by significant improvements in the proportion of women legislators, senior officials and managers and the proportion of women holding ministerial level positions. The highest-ranking economies of the region have invested large amounts of resources in increasing women's education levels—in many, the tertiary education enrolment rates of women are higher than those of men—and these countries will now need to better integrate these women into the economy to reap the benefits of this investment.

Qatar (117) follows next in the rankings. Its strength lies in education, although gains in labour force participation and wage equality have boosted Qatar's overall ranking by eight places. Oman (122) and Saudi Arabia (129) occupy the bottom half of the region's rankings. Saudi Arabia's performance over the last five years puts it among the highest climbers of the 114 countries that have been included in the *Report* since 2006. Between 2009 and 2010, the labour force participation rate of women has climbed from 20% to 22%, the perception of the wage gap for similar work has improved, literacy rates have improved and women's enrolment in tertiary education has increased from 35% to 37%. Saudi Arabia, however, remains the lowest-ranking country in the region on political empowerment, with the lowest possible score of zero (<http://www.weforum.org/s?s=gender+gap+2010>).

Table 1. Women's educational attainment in the Middle East 2010

Country	Score	WEF Global Rank	Rank within Middle East
United Arab Emirates	0.9977	37	1
Bahrain	0.9915	60	2
Qatar	0.9887	74	3
Jordan	0.9869	81	4
Kuwait	0.9858	83	5
Oman	0.9784	90	6
Lebanon*	0.9773	91	7
Saudi Arabia	0.9739	92	8
Tunisia	0.9662	94	9
Iran, Islamic Rep.	0.9594	96	10
Algeria	0.9530	99	11
Syria	0.9363	104	12
Egypt	0.8987	110	13
Morocco	0.8607	116	14

Source: Adapted from WEF *Global Gender Gap Report 2010*

	Orthodox Muslim society
	Largely Westernised Muslim society

Table 1 summarises the overall educational attainment of Muslim women in the Middle East for the year 2010. It shows that three of the six orthodox Muslim countries of United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar occupy the highest performance positions among the 14 countries in the region examined by the WEF, with only Jordan separating them from Kuwait and Oman, and Lebanon from Saudi Arabia. Even Iran does not come out last in the region's ranking.

Table 2. Women’s political attainment in the Middle East 2010

Country	Score	WEF Global Rank	Rank within Middle East
United Arab Emirates	0.1394	60	1
Tunisia	0.1278	67	2
Morocco	0.0671	103	3
Syria	0.0603	107	4
Kuwait	0.0435	114	5
Jordan	0.0394	117	6
Bahrain	0.0376	120	7
Algeria	0.0350	123	8
Egypt	0.0311	125	9
Lebanon*	0.0283	127	10
Oman	0.0256	128	11
Iran, Islamic Rep.	0.0165	129	12
Qatar	0.0000	131	13
Saudi Arabia	0.0000	131	14

Source: Adapted from *Global Gender Gap Report 2010*

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Table 2 summarises the overall political attainment of Muslim women in the Middle East for the year 2010. It shows that in contrast to the overall educational attainment only one Muslim orthodox country, namely, United Arab Emirates, retains a top position in the region. Bahrain which is second in educational attainment drops to 7 in political attainment. Qatar drops from rank 3 in educational attainment to 13 in political attainment. Kuwait remains the same at 5 and Oman drops from 6 to 11. Similarly, Saudi Arabia drops from 8 to 14 and Iran from 10 to 12.

The paradox

The comparison of the WEF findings on educational and political attainment of the orthodox Muslim countries in the Middle East shows that generally speaking political empowerment does not go hand in hand with educational empowerment there. This is a paradox because it is conventionally believed that education should enhance enlightenment and with it liberation, including liberation in the political fields. The better educated women are the more of them are to be found participating in the political process of the country.

To be sure, the torch of enlightenment (education) has significantly, if steadily, brightened up over the past half a decade in the seven Muslim orthodox countries of the Middle East. For example, the female-to-male ratio of student enrolment in Qatar has almost doubled in favour of the females from 3.37 in 2007 to 6.05 in 2010. Similarly, in Bahrain the improvement has been from 1.84 in 2006 to 2.53 in favour of the females; in Saudi Arabia the ratio shifted appreciably in favour of the women from 0.32 in 2006 to 1.65 in 2010; and in Iran the achievement is from 1.11 in 2006 to 1.14 in 2010. Only in Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Oman has the ratio regressed from 2.72 in 2006 to 2.14 in 2010, from 3.24 in 2006 to 2.05 in 2010, and 1.22 in 2007 to 1.18 in 2010 respectively. Together, the seven orthodox countries occupy the eight top ranks of highest female enrolment in tertiary education as compared to men in the region between 2006 and 2010. Only Lebanon represents the progressive Muslim countries at rank 6 (Table 3).

Table 3. Middle East: Enrolment in tertiary education by gender and rank

Rank according to 2010 scores	Country	Enrolment in tertiary education			
1	Qatar	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	31	5	6.05
		2009	27	9	2.87
		2008	33	10	3.41
		2007	34	10	3.37
2	Bahrain	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	44	18	2.53
		2009	47	19	2.46
		2008	7	19	2.46
		2007	50	22	2.23
3	Kuwait	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	27	12	2.14
		2009	26	11	2.32
		2008	26	11	2.32
		2007	25	11	2.19
4	United Arab Emirates	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	36	17	2.05
		2009	35	15	2.32
		2008	37	13	2.81
		2007	—	—	—
5	Saudi Arabia	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	39	12	3.24
		2009	37	23	1.65
		2008	35	23	1.50
		2007	34	23	1.47
6	Lebanon*	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	7	22	0.32
		2009	37	23	1.65
		2008	35	23	1.50
		2007	34	23	1.47
7	Oman	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	57	48	1.19
		2009	32	27	1.18
		2008	28	23	1.18
		2007	26	25	1.04
8	Iran, Islamic Rep.	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	16	13	1.22
		2009	39	34	1.14
		2008	34	29	1.15
		2007	28	25	1.11
9	Jordan	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	25	23	1.09
		2009	24	21	1.11
		2008	43	39	1.11
		2007	42	38	1.10
10	Syria	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	41	37	1.11
		2009	41	37	1.10
		2008	41	37	1.10
		2007	41	37	1.10
11	Tunisia	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	77	90	0.86
		2009	76	89	0.85
		2008	76	90	0.85
		2007	74	86	0.86
12	Algeria	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	65	83	0.78
		2009	65	83	0.78
		2008	69	86	0.80
		2007	65	83	0.78
13	Egypt	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	64	81	0.79
		2009	65	84	0.66
		2008	66	84	0.79
		2007	60	80	0.76
14	Morocco	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	60	78	0.76
		2009	24	31	0.77
		2008	44	69	0.64
		2007	42	68	0.62
		Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
		2010	43	69	0.63
		2009	43	69	0.63
		2008	40	66	0.60
		2007	40	66	0.60

Source: Adapted from *Global Gender Gap Report 2010*

	Orthodox Muslim society
	Largely Westernised Muslim society

Table 4. Middle East: Ministerial positions by gender and rank

Rank according to 2010 scores	Country	Ministerial positions			
		Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
1	United Arab Emirates	2010	17	83	0.20
		2009	8	92	0.09
		2008	8	92	0.09
		2007	6	94	0.06
		2006	6	94	0.06
2	Morocco	2010	11	89	0.13
		2009	19	81	0.24
		2008	19	81	0.24
		2007	6	94	0.06
		2006	6	94	0.06
3	Bahrain	2010	11	89	0.12
		2009	4	96	0.05
		2008	4	96	0.05
		2007	9	91	0.10
		2006	9	91	0.10
4	Oman	2010	9	91	0.10
		2009	9	91	0.10
		2008	9	91	0.10
		2007	10	90	0.11
		2006	10	90	0.11
5	Egypt	2010	9	91	0.10
		2009	6	94	0.07
		2008	6	94	0.07
		2007	6	94	0.06
		2006	6	94	0.06
6	Jordan	2010	7	93	0.07
		2009	15	85	0.17
		2008	15	85	0.17
		2007	11	89	0.12
		2006	11	89	0.12
7	Syria	2010	6	94	0.07
		2009	6	94	0.07
		2008	6	94	0.07
		2007	6	94	0.07
		2006	6	94	0.07
8	Kuwait	2010	7	93	0.07
		2009	7	93	0.07
		2008	7	93	0.07
		2007	0	100	0.00
		2006	0	100	0.00
9	Lebanon*	2010	7	93	0.07
10	Algeria	2010	4	96	0.04
		2009	11	89	0.12
		2008	11	89	0.12
		2007	11	90	0.12
		2006	11	90	0.12
11	Tunisia	2010	4	96	0.04
		2009	7	93	0.08
		2008	7	93	0.08
		2007	7	93	0.08
		2006	7	93	0.08
12	Iran, Islamic Rep.	2010	3	97	0.03
		2009	3	97	0.03
		2008	3	97	0.03
		2007	7	93	0.07
		2006	7	93	0.07
13	Qatar	2010	0	100	0.00
		2009	8	92	0.08
		2008	8	92	0.08
		2007	8	92	0.08
		2006	8	92	0.08
14	Saudi Arabia	2010	0	100	0.00
		2009	0	100	0.00
		2008	0	100	0.00
		2007	0	100	0.00
		2006	0	100	0.00

Source: Adapted from *Global Gender Gap Report 2010*

Orthodox Muslim society
 Largely Westernised Muslim society

By contrast, the ranking pattern of political empowerment of the women in the same period as indicated by the number of ministerial positions held by women finds three (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran) of the seven orthodox countries in the bottom most rows with one (Kuwait) in the lower middle range and two occupying the third (Bahrain) and fourth (Oman) positions. Rather unexpectedly, the United Arab Emirates tops the list. The more progressive Muslim countries of Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, and Tunisia, occupy the 2nd, 5th, 6th, 7th, 9th, 10th, and 11th respectively (Table 4).

For the seven orthodox Muslim countries, a non-paradoxical scenario would be for all of them to score lowest in both educational and political empowerment of their womenfolk. This would serve to vindicate the generally held view in the West that women are truly degraded in orthodox Islam and Muslims countries. But as depicted in Table 5 and Figure 1, seemingly ironical scenarios predominate the scene where education conjuncts political empowerment for women in the Middle East. Religiously conservative Qatar excels in educational empowerment of its womenfolk but flounders in their political empowerment, a pattern echoed in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iran but reversed in the United Arab Emirates. Only in Bahrain is the scenario most balanced and consistent.

Table 5. Middle East: Ministerial positions by gender and rank, 2010

Countries	Enrolment in tertiary education by Female-to-male ratio and rank	Ministerial positions by Female-to-male ratio and rank
Qatar	Rank 1	Rank 13
Bahrain	Rank 2	Rank 3
Kuwait	Rank 3	Rank 8
United Arab Emirates	Rank 4	Rank 1
Saudi Arabia	Rank 5	Rank 14
Lebanon	Rank 6	Rank 9
Oman	Rank 7	Rank 4
Iran, Islamic Rep	Rank 8	Rank 12
Jordan	Rank 9	Rank 5
Syria	Rank 10	Rank 7
Tunisia	Rank 11	Rank 11
Algeria	Rank 12	Rank 10
Egypt	Rank 13	Rank 6
Morocco	Rank 14	Rank 2

Source: Adapted from *Global Gender Gap Report 2010*

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Understanding the paradox

Since the scenario of direct correlation between educational and political empowerment does not predominate in the seven orthodox Muslim countries of the Middle East there arises the need to explain or understand as to why religiously conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Iran should invest in educating a segment of their population who are purportedly not meant to engage in the very non-domestic political concerns and affairs of the countries. Since these countries are not known to be much bothered by what the world out there has to say about the way they see and do things, in particular things pertaining to their domestic affairs, impressing the external world, especially the West, could not have been the reason for enhancing the education of their womenfolk. While economic and diplomatic relations with the West matters significantly to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, these have not proven to be critically related to the way women are treated in these countries. Here, material modernisation may proceed even speedily and spectacularly regardless of the situation of the womenfolk.

The answer lies in the Islamic own perspective of education both regarding the general virtue of knowledge acquisition and its relation to gender. Firstly, education is highly valued in Islam.

“Whoever treads a path in search of learning, Allah will there by makes it easy for that person the path to paradise, “ says the Prophet (Ibn. Majah, Vol. 1, p.47).

Secondly, education for women is not prohibited in Islam. On the contrary, Islam makes learning obligatory to mankind both males and females. The Prophet’s saying that “ the search for knowledge is obligatory to every Muslim man and woman” testifies to this fundamental gender equality (At-Tirmidhi, Vol.1, p.48).

Thirdly, acquiring and disseminating knowledge are acts of worship (*ibadah*) in Islam as they represent acknowledgement of Allah as the Source of all knowledge. *Ibadah* is incumbent for every Muslim regardless of his or her gender.

Figure 1. The conjunction of educational and political empowerment of women in the Middle East, 2010

Educational empowerment RANK														
1		Qtr												
2												Bah		
3							Kuw							
4		UAE												
5	Saud A													
6						Leb								
7											Oman			
8		Iran												
9									Jord					
10								Syr						
11			Tun											
12				Alg										
13									Egy					
14													Mor	
Political empowerment RANK	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

Finally, knowledge is viewed in Islam as an instrument of mankind’s vicegerency on Earth, human capital development and worldly wellbeing (*hasanatan-fi-dunia*). Allah confers higher rankings and advantages to the learned, be they men or women, in this worldly life (The Quran, 58:11).

Because education is considered intrinsically Islamic, the state in orthodox Muslim countries of the Middle East have no objection to extending it to their womenfolk. But the society at large would still want to ensure that it is truly Islamic in the sense that it is not associated with impacts that are incongruent with Islamic values. Thus the Saudi Arabia government, for example, reported that local customs and traditions present obstacles to women’s participation in education and access to the labour market:

One of the most significant manifestations of discriminatory practices and customs was the complaint raised by many citizens to the King in the early 1960s, rejecting education for their daughters. Women’s participation in education has lagged in relative terms because citizens had disapproved of it, fearing the negative social consequences that coeducation or immodest education had had in many countries. The State, consequently, was forced, gradually, to universalize education for girls and was unable to make it acceptable to the public until responsibility for their education was given to the religious establishment. At

the outset, the education of girls was placed under the supervision of the Grand Mufti, which reassured citizens and led them to enrol their daughters. The Kingdom continued to gradually expand the education of girls until it became equal to that of boys in respect of curricula, systems and facilities. Responsibility for the education of both boys and girls was recently merged into the Ministry of Education (CEDAW.C.SAU.Q.2.Add.1.pdf).

Seeing that tribal society is affected by practices and customs and that it needs time in order to change those customs and practices, the State did not initially make education compulsory. Instead, it opened the way to those who wished to educate their daughters. Gradually and eventually, considerable success was achieved in convincing parents of the obligation of educating daughters. This enabled the government to make elementary education compulsory in 2004. Since then statistics show that at some stages of education, especially the secondary and tertiary, even more females were enrolled than males (Table 6).

Table 6. Saudi Arabia: Educational enrolment by gender 2006-2010

Literacy rate				Enrolment in primary education			
Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
2010	80	90	0.90	2010	84	85	0.99
2009	78	89	0.88	2009	84	85	0.99
2008	79	89	0.89	2008	87	87	1.00
2007	69	87	0.80	2007	79	77	1.03
2006	69	87	0.80	2006	91	62	1.47
Enrolment in secondary education				Enrolment in tertiary education			
Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
2010	76	70	1.08	2010	37	23	1.65
2009	76	70	1.08	2009	35	23	1.50
2008	72	70	1.03	2008	35	23	1.50
2007	68	63	1.08	2007	34	23	1.47
2006	70	54	1.31	2006	7	22	0.32

Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2010

While the pursuit of knowledge and educational empowerment for individuals and societies (*ummah*) is extolled in Islam, the pursuit of power and political empowerment is treated with much caution. For one, power, control and influence are viewed as liabilities in the sense that those who wield them will be accountable before God on the day of judgement. Consequences in the hereafter are definite and can be dire: righteous power holders, players and brokers go to heaven; unjust ones go to hell. Therefore political power and influence must not be coveted nor usurped.

For another, to be righteous power holders, players and brokers is not easy. Power tends to corrupt even the more steadfast believers. The political lanes are often treacherous than otherwise. To avoid them, therefore, is wise.

These sombre views and values of political power in Islam apply to men and women. To women, however, there is the added minus factor in that political life may easily interfere with the women's more primary role as home makers. The domestic roles of home making and family raising are not disdained in Islam. On the contrary, they are guarded jealously and anxiously because home and family are crucially fundamental to the making of a strong *ummah*. The future character of the Islamic society is determined at home and at the family level. Home and family are the cradles of the Islamic ongoing civilisation. Righteous home makers and righteous parents are rewarded with paradise in the hereafter.

Because both the public and domestic spheres entail heavy responsibilities, division of labour is inevitable. Islam suggests that women generally attach themselves to the domestic domain because they are generally suited to the task of home making and family raising. This does not mean that men are exempted from the responsibility of righteous parenting and family building (the role model for ideal righteous parenting narrated in the Quran is Luqman, a father, not his

wife). It just means that to require that women also oblige themselves to look after the ummah's public affairs is practically to over-burden them and is thus considered unjust and undesirable.

This should not be construed as an injunction for outright domestication and absolute confinement of women to domestic life. Women who have the necessary resources - talent, ability, knowledge, expertise etc. may come out into society to let it benefit from her involvement. This is realising good works and preventing social ills (*amar makruf nahi munkar*) a duty incumbent upon all Muslims regardless of gender. The history of early Islam witnessed women being teachers, nurses, heads of bazaars, scholars, and followed the army to battle fields.

In fact, women may also become heads of states: the Queen of Sheba was taken to task in the Quran not because she was a ruler but simply because she was a polytheist. And her style of governance by consultation and consensus was also not rebuked in the Quran as it embodied the very un-despotic principles of good governance that the Quran approves of and advocates (Quran, 42:38).

Thus by the Quran own account, women, as do men, stand to be consulted in the affairs of the society. The orthodox Muslim countries in the Middle East reflects this imperative in their political process. For example, in Saudi Arabia, women have the same political rights as men and are ensured the same right as men to participate in the decision making process. The law does not prohibit women from participating in elections, although, in practice, that participation is not completely possible. Women also have the right to participate in elections of the council of chambers of commerce and have won seats in a number of those councils (CEDAW.C.SAU.Q.2.Add.1.pdf).

Table 7. Saudi Arabia: Distribution of government officials by grade, gender and nationality, 2007

GRADE	SAUDI		NON-SAUDI		TOTAL		OVERALL TOTAL
	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN	SAUDI	NON-SAUDI	
Minister	98	0	0	0	98	0	98
Undersecretary	111	1	0	0	112	0	112
Fifteen	325	0	0	0	325	0	325
Fourteen	431	2	0	0	433	0	433
Thirteen	935	8	0	0	943	0	943
Twelve	1 777	6	0	0	1783	0	1783
Eleven	3 082	22	1	0	3104	1	3 105
Ten	8 488	93	11	0	8 581	11	8 592
Nine	10 053	226	81	0	10 279	81	10 360
Eight	15 728	551	116	9	16 279	15 728	16 404
Nine	10 053	226	81	0	10 279	81	10 360
Eight	15 728	551	116	9	16 279	125	15 728
Seven	23 224	1 177	534	41	24 401	575	23 224
Six	32 769	3 122	220	17	35 891	237	32 769
Five	27 990	3 119	224	11	31 109	235	27 990
Four	20 211	3 779	916	23	990	97	20 211
Three	7 000	586	56	4	7 586	607	7 000
Two	3 595	129	7	0	3 724	7	3 595
One	203	4	3	1	207	4	203

Source: CEDAW.C.SAU.Q.2.Add.1.pdf.

Apart from that, since 2007, at least six women had been appointed as part time advisers to the Consultative Council. Those appointments came after the Council had created a permanent supreme national committee of a consultative nature devoted strictly to women's affairs. The Council consults the committee when it considers issues that concern women. The committee reports directly to the President of the Council and its members are called "women's affairs advisers".

The Saudi government emphasizes that with respect to public services, there is nothing in the Saudi Arabia’s Civil Service Code, the list of appointments or the list of promotions that would prevent the appointment of women to leadership positions. The state claims, in fact, in some sectors women have attained high grades (Table 7), while also admitting that their number remains limited.

The Saudi state shows concern about this limited number and issued direct instructions from the leadership in the Kingdom to bring about positive changes in this regard. Changes have happened since then as depicted in the growing numbers of women assuming leadership positions and high professional grades. The women’s number continues to increase although their proportion remains considerably less than what the government has hoped for.

Despite the positive attitude of the Saudi government in enhancing the Saudi women’s political empowerment their participation in the political sphere remains negative (Table 8) in contrast with , for instance, their involvement in educational and the health fields (Table 9).

Table 8. Saudi Arabia: Political empowerment by gender 2006-2010

Women in parliament							
Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio				
2010	0	100	0.00	Women in ministerial positions			
2009	0	100	0.00	Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
2008	0	100	0.00	2010	0	100	0.00
2007	0	100	0.00	2009	0	100	0.00
2006	0	100	0.00	2008	0	100	0.00
				2007	0	100	0.00
				2006	0	100	0.00
Years with female head of state							
Year	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio				
2010	0	50	0.00				
2009	0	50	0.00				
2008	0	50	0.00				
2007	0	50	0.00				
2006	0	50	0.00				

Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2010

This brings us back to the question why do sufficiently and highly educated women in orthodox Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia not aspire to rise in politics and governance?

Part of the answer could be that patriarchal customs and traditions present obstacles to women’s participation and ascendance in politics. This should include what may be termed as the “negative group” argument within orthodox Muslim circles against the engagement of women in political leadership. This argument is at least twofold . One is that women cannot be political leaders because men are superior to women and are made leaders of women and children in the family, society and state in Islam based on the Quranic verse 4:34:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means...

Table 9. Saudi Arabia: Distribution of health and education personnel by occupation, gender and nationality, 2007

OCCUPATION	SAUDI		NON-SAUDI		TOTAL		OVERALL TOTAL
	MEN	WOMEN	MEN	WOMEN	SAUDI	NON-SAUDI	
HEALTH							
Consultant doctor	1 073	462	489	66	1535	555	2 090
Resident doctor	2 439	1 729	7 977	2 336	4 168	10 313	14 481
Pharmacist	921	533	143	48	1454	191	1 645
Specialist	3 686	1 726	274	346	5 412	620	6 032
Technician	29 720	12 068	1 752	15 374	41 788	17 126	58 914
Health assistant (a)	1 434	99	2 171	5 854	1 533	8 025	9 558
Health assistant (b)	479	83	1 031	2 714	562	3 745	4 307
Total	104 181	46 302	57 879	27 559	18 743	17 386	40 493
EDUCATION							
Professor	849	45	375	74	894	449	1343
Associate Professor	1 326	189	643	172 1	515	815	2 330
Assistant Professor	3 076	1316	2 393	662	4 392	3 055	7 447
Lecturer	1 338	1 587	1 105	210	2 925	1 315	4 240
Assistant	3 080	2 743	369	71	5 823	440	6 263
Total	9 669	5 880	4 885	1 189	15 549	6 074	21 623

Source: CEDAW.C.SAU.Q.2.Add.1.pdf.

The other, women cannot be political leaders because of the Prophet's saying that nation will never prosper which puts a woman in command of its affairs. To be sure, these arguments have been refuted by the so-called positive or progressive group (see Box 1), but they apparently still exert some significant influence at the society if not the state level in Saudi Arabia.

Orthodox, conservative and negative perspectives and stereotypes of women in Islam, nevertheless, are only part of the answer to the paradox. It is difficult to believe that Muslim women who had gone through tertiary and post-graduate education would only be but absolute and helpless captives of the larger society's negative perspectives of their political roles. It is inconceivable, too, that they would be so incapable of forming their very own private opinion of the matter and arriving at a certain decision about their careers.

Thus the more sensible answer would be that the educated Muslim women in orthodox Muslim countries of the Middle East as elsewhere do weigh things together in deciding which careers for them to pursue. The resultant Table 9 shows in doing that they have opted more for the education and health professions in comparison to politics and governance (Table 7) as they truly believe that education and health are better for them than politics and governance. Better is both in gendered and genderless senses: gendered is they as Muslim women and genderless they as Muslim believers.

As Muslim women the Saudi women would weigh in all the reproduction, parenting and family-building demands made upon them as women. In doing this the women would most likely be dissuaded from entering politics and governance as this would double their practical burden. Even the most ardent feminists would find the dual role of a career woman challenging if not overwhelming. So for the family women politics and governance are out of question.

For the unmarried and unencumbered educated women, however, the question remains.

Box 1. Refutation of the arguments against women political leadership in Islam

Refutation of argument 1:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means .. (The Quranic, 4:34)

The Qur'anic words "men are protectors of women" cannot be interpreted as "men are superior to women" because they bear financial responsibility for women and family. For women too bear the responsibilities of child-bearing and child-caring. Different kinds of functional responsibilities only mean that men and women are equal as they complement each other. It does not mean male domination over females. Nor does it justify exempting and excluding women from assuming other non-household financial responsibilities so that men may prevail over them. On the contrary, women enjoy the option of sharing these financial responsibilities with men if they are competent and in a position to manage outside responsibilities along with their home-making responsibilities. There were several women during the time of the Prophet and that of the righteous caliphs who did this.

Refutation of argument 2:

Uthman bin al-Haytham reports from 'Awf who reports from al-Hassan, who reports from Abi Bakra, who said: In the time of the Battle of the Camel, Allah benefitted me from this saying: that when the Prophet, peace and blessings be on him, heard that the Persians have made the daughter of Chosroes their Queen, he (the Prophet saw) said: that nation will never prosper which puts a woman in command of its affairs."

The above tradition (saying of the Prophet) is not authentic and hence not acceptable. Its reporter Abi Bakra was found guilty of false evidence and was punished by Caliph 'Umar. The negative group quotes the above tradition in a wrong context as the tradition is directed against despots and tyrants. The words uttered by the Prophet in the above quoted tradition referred to the daughter of the king of Persia. Since all the kings of Persia including the daughter who was made the queen, were despots, the Prophet condemned her appointment as the head of state. The despotic queen of Persia was the antithesis of the consultative Queen of Sheba as the latter is narrated in the Quran.

Source: Zeenath Kausar, 1997, 2002, 2006; Lamy al-Faruqi, 1988; M.S.Siddiqi, 1982; Muhammad A. Rauf, 1996; Nadia Hijab, 1996; Rafiullah Shehab, 1993; Kaukab Siddique, 1988; Zakaria Bashir, 1996, Jamal Nasir, 1990

Why do they not go after a political or administrative career? Here, the counter-weighting influence of their obligations as Muslim believers will have to be factored in. The consideration is that just like other Muslim believers the Muslim women must not allow themselves to be tempted by the worldly and glamorous sides of a high political or public office. They should rather shun it or stand to be damned in the hereafter if they take it and then fail to live up to the religion's stringent expectations of it. As Muslim believers the women share with their male counterparts the belief that their true self actualization is post-historical, that is, self achievement as realised in the hereafter, and not confined to this historical world. By the same token, this conviction underlines the Saudi state's general reservation to CEDAW on the basis of the norms of Islamic Law (CEDAW.C.SAU.Q.2.Add.1.pdf).

Conclusion

The paradoxical relationship between education and political empowerment of Muslim women in orthodox Muslim countries of the Middle East gives us a good reason to view conventional notions of women empowerment *ala* CEDAW with a critical eye. The mainstream Western

notions that rather simplistically equate educational with political empowerment does not happen the way it is expected for the Muslim women because of peculiar, non-secular considerations that were not factored in and recognised in the conventional notions.

To put it in another way, there are substantive limitations in the conventional treatment of women empowerment, and we would do well to heed this discovery.

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