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ARAB WOMEN ORGANIZATION

Arab-Western Youth Dialogue on Women Issues

Alexandria 13-15 June 2009



Dr. Moataz A. Fattah

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INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Arab Women Organization (AWO) carried out a project designed to enhance the active participation of youth in intercultural dialogue about women's rights in the Arab and non-Arab societies, as well as to develop and diffuse strategies for overcoming stereotypical images among youth about women in their respective societies. With funding from the Arab Women Organization and under the direct supervision of its general director, Dr. Wadoda Badran, each of its fifteen member states sent two delegates (aged from 20-24), one male and one female, to discuss and identify women-related areas of common concern, exchange experiences, highlight best practices, and explore approaches for further collaborations in relation to women issues with their thirty U.S. peers. Dr. Moataz A. Fattah, of Cairo University & Central Michigan University, with Dr. Denis Sullivan of Northeast University have facilitated this round of the dialogue with the help of six young assistants who had experience in participating in previous dialogues.*

This direct dialogue between students from Arab and American societies has had several advantages such as dismantling cultural obstacles, building intellectual bridges, and reconciling Arab and Western differences regarding women-related issues in these two parts of the world.

The facilitators build on their previous experiences to bridge the gap between misconceptions and reality in the minds of youth and evade the possible clashes or sharp misunderstandings that might cause the dialogue to fall short in comprehending and conceptualizing the diversity of women around and within Arab and American societies.

* Special thanks are due to Ms. Nora Osama for all the efforts in organizing this dialogue. Special thanks are also due to the young assistants who were the group's leaders of the participants youth: Maess Khaled Al-Tarawneh(Jordan),Eva Gamal El Din Al Afghhani(Palestine),Philip Abou Zeid (Lebanon),Rachid Boukhenfer(Morocco), Ahlam Abdel Rahim Al Salawy(Yemen)and Ms.Cynthia Rapp(North Eastern University-USA).

Approaching Arab women's rights, struggles and liberations through American visions and agendas cannot depict reality because these visions and agendas were cultivated in a different environment based on Western history, needs, experiences and values. Thus, it was an instrumental and monumental task to provide both sides with preliminary readings about other societies to historicize and contextualize the challenges and achievements of women in each society.

The organization of the dialogue has been decided upon by the two facilitators and their assistants. The facilitators agreed upon the following ground rules. The intervention of the facilitators should be kept to minimum such as correcting historical facts and ensuring accuracy of the translation between languages.

The participants were divided into seven groups discussing the main themes of dialogue, with a group leader overseeing each group. During the first session, each group of participants discussed the subtopics they wanted to discuss.

The group of Women and Legal issues discussed five topics: the legal framework of marriage, child support and custody, affirmative action and quota systems, women's access to legal information and awareness and protecting women against violence.

The social issues group discussed four topics: religion and gender, violence against women, gender and stereotypes and marriage in the West and Arab worlds.

The women in business and economy group discussed six topics: assessment of women's contribution to modern economies and business, how women-friendly is the contemporary business economy, safety of women in the workplace, challenges of women in the workplace, some women's reluctance to join the workforce, engendering poverty and unemployment and suggested programs to encourage women to be active in the business world.

The Women and Education group discussed topics pertaining to: women's access to education, segregated vs. co-education systems, women as educators, and women's right to select the field of study.

The Women and Health Issues group discussed topics related to: maternal healthcare and care of the elderly, rape and abortion, sexual health and protection, women and sex education, and common female diseases.

The women and politics group discussed the following topics: barriers against strong female leaders in politics, challenges that face women in public elections, the influence of social aspects on the political participation of women and quota system as a tactic to empower women in politics.

The group of Gender and Media discussed five topics: news bias for or against women, the impact of women's image in the media on the lives of women, media's role in creating negative stereotypes about women, female role models in the media and the effect of media on women's self-perception.

After the discussion within each group was over, the participants were asked to present the findings of their discussions to the entire group of participants.

A methodological note should be made regarding the language of the report. This report keeps the original language used by the participants with some editing and contextualization to reflect the authentic meanings and conjunctures of agreement and divergence among participants.

In the pages to come, there will be a general overview about the most important points of discussion in each of these groups.

FIRST: WOMEN AND LEGAL ISSUES

Nine participants from the United States and multiple Arab nations came together to discuss some of the main issues that the women of their countries are faced with today, paying particular attention to the legal sphere.

The first topic they decided to discuss was child support and custody. Divorce is a prevalent issue within the U.S. and the Arab worlds and there are specific child support and custody rights and laws that are enforced under each system throughout the legal process of a divorce.

The participants noted that there is a separation of church and state in the U.S. and it is governed under a secular system. In regards to custody rights and laws, the mother has the right to custody of her child but the father is not required to nurture and care for his child. On the other hand, he does have the right to gain joint custody of his child if he desires to do so. In regards to child support laws in the US, the father is required to financially provide for his child and pay child support until the legal age of eighteen. If the father goes against this law, charges can be brought against him under the criminal justice system. Some American participants stated that they opposed this law because they thought that the age of eighteen is not suitable to qualify an individual as an adult since he/she has not yet established himself/herself.

The Shari'a is enforced in most countries of the Arab world in family-related issues because it is the legal system of Islam. Guardianship is very important under the Shari'a and the mother has the right to custody of her child. The father also has the right to custody of his child and once the child is old enough, he can decide whether or not to stay with his mother or move in with his father. If the mother remarries and her husband agrees to help care for her child and in case the father approves, then the child can stay with his mother. On the other hand, if the father doesn't approve or if the mother's husband does not agree to help care for her child, the child is taken under the care of his mother's mother unless she is deceased. In that case, the child is taken under the care of his

father's mother. The rationale behind this is to prevent abuse by the stepfathers, especially for female children.

The participants argued that in the Arab World, child support laws differ from those of the U.S. Under the Shari'a, the father is required to financially provide for and support his child for as long as necessary, and in many cases for the child's entire life. Although there are various interpretations of the Shari'a, it is a norm for the father to support his child until marriage and in any other time of need. If the father refuses to pay, he can be brought to court and sued by the child's mother.

After learning about the child support laws in the Arab world and taking all of these facts under consideration, some American participants have established a position in favor of the child support laws of the Arab world over those of the U.S.

After learning about the child support laws in the Arab world and taking all of these facts under consideration, some American participants have established a position in favor of the child support laws of the Arab world over those of the U.S. There should not be an age limit that determines when a father stops providing financial support to his child, some American participants argued. One of the main issues with the U.S. child support law is that it questions the justifications used under the legislature to prove that an eighteen year old is stable enough to be considered an adult under the law. Although eighteen year old persons in the U.S. are considered adults, this does not mean that they are mentally, emotionally and financially able to support themselves.

American participants were impressed with the fact that in Arab countries, the father is required to provide financial support to his child throughout his life and not just until he reaches a certain age. In communicating with residents of various Arab nations, it is evident that the notion of a strong family bond is acknowledged and many individuals follow the law under the Shari'a. This includes every aspect of patriarchal support throughout the child's life and recognition that he has fathered a human being. It was understood that there

are going to be differences since the U.S. is governed under a secular system and most Arab countries are not, but an age distinction still needs to be established. Since the U.S. consists of numerous religions, ethnicities and cultures, the ideas and views on divorce differs and it has been proven that the fathers of more culturally oriented families tend to support their children even after they reach the legal age of eighteen.

Another issue that was discussed pertained to affirmative action and quota systems from a legal point of view. Several American participants stated that while they understand the benevolent origins of the affirmative action and quota laws, they find that the design of such systems create the opposite effect of their original intention. In other words, they think that hiring someone based in large part on their race or gender to be more racist or sexist than if they simply were not selected over another candidate. Granted, most employers

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say that they only let their affirmative action policies come into play when they are dealing with candidates of equal or comparable qualifications, but that is a nearly impossible claim to entertain. Several American

participants stated that there is no such thing as “equal” candidates, and any two applicants are going to have different educational backgrounds, work and life experience, and even their race, gender, and orientation can have an influence over their ability in a given job position. With that said, some American participants firmly argued that institutional discrimination still exists in numerous aspects of many societies, and there is irrefutable empirical evidence to support such a claim. There are still instances of race-related hiring practices, preference towards men or an attractive woman for a job they may not be the most qualified for, or discriminatory hiring based on religious beliefs and sexual orientations.

After discussing it at length with other dialogue partners, participants discussed numerous aspects of affirmative action and the comparable practices within the

Arab world. One specific example that the participants found especially comparable is the quota system adopted by some governments in the Arab countries. The most applicable example that was cited was the recently passed Egyptian law requiring a certain amount of parliamentary seats to be filled by women. Coming into this discussion, some Arab and American participants were in favor of such a quota system. They viewed the lack of opportunity for women in the Arab world as a truly unfair disadvantage based solely on gender. They resolved that requiring seats in the government for women was a good method of evening the playing field. The discussion and frequent comparison of the quota system made some of the participants view it in a more objective light.

Arab participants argued that additional representation is only advantageous if the women who assume those seats want to be in those roles and intend to do all they can as representatives of all their constituents. Giving a job or position to someone solely because they are a woman only leads to the idea that women cannot earn such positions on their own.

There has been numerous recent movements toward involving women more in government, and in many cases, they have failed to yield high interest or dramatic progress. The Arab perspective that the American participants received was in fact that the lack of result was partially discrediting and undermining the efforts for those women that are truly interested. Arab participants

argued that additional representation is only advantageous if the women who assume those seats want to be in those roles and intend to do all they can as representatives of all their constituents. Giving a job or position to someone solely because they are a woman only leads to the idea that women cannot earn such positions on their own. As one American participant pointed out that the quota system now, is much the same as affirmative action: the wrong progress in the right direction.

Conversely, the quota system is arguably a way to force progress at a quicker rate. The number of female parliamentarians has increased from only one to four in the

past 60 years in several Arab countries. Supporters argue that the required seats are an effort to place women in those roles to sidestep financial shortcomings, corruptions, and their own fears and self-doubts. American participants argued that the period when American women gained the most confidence in employment roles traditionally held by men, was during World War II. Necessity, followed by the Civil Rights Act and a second wave of affirmative action in universities, allowed for both a change in women's views of themselves in the working world, and a slow change in the national ideals about women's abilities in the workplace. There was opposition in the beginning, and progress is still crawling forward at an unsatisfactory pace to this day, but the change came in both women and society. Nobody thinks that these changes happen overnight, but they are only supportable against critics if it is the natural progression of society with government encouragement, not regulation.

Some American participants argued that the system is in place in several Arab countries to defend against hiring discrimination are exactly the kind they would like to see in America, only hopefully considerably more successful. In Egypt for example, discrimination in hiring or firing is illegal. However, a lack of strength in the courts, and perhaps a lack of concern leave all but the most serious cases overlooked or unresolved. In America, affirmative action actually creates an excess of legal protection, offering people the chance to pursue legal avenues, when what actually happened was another applicant got the job. Several American participants stated that they have enough faith in the American legal system to hope that they could take a simple approach as well, and have people defend their own rights using the protections afforded them by the law, when there is a problem. The concept of "affirmative" problem solving is the same as fixing something that is not broken, some American participants argued. Further they argued that it is absurd to think they can have an equal,

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gender-blind colorblind society that creates laws and practices based solely on color or gender. Rather than maximize diversity, some laws emphasize difference and undermine the accomplishments of every person. Opponents of quota system think that it, along with the concept of affirmative action should be abolished and replaced with a more accountable system of case-by-case legal discretion to protect people against employment discrimination.

Another topic discussed by this group was violence against women. The participants agreed on some initial points such as violence against women is a pervasive problem in most societies. Most societies suffer from rape, domestic violence, sex trafficking, violence on the street, and harassment in the workforce. The major issue in Arab societies versus American society, however, is the gap between law and enforcement as some Arab participants stated.

In the Arab world, rape carries a large degree of social stigma that affects the victim's legal rights. There are many laws on the books against rape in the Arab world. The problem, however, is still that there is a gap between the law and the enforcement of such law. Cultural stigma against the victim is a major problem as well. If the girl is not married, then she is afraid to report the rape because it means she is not a virgin, and will not be able to get married according to some Arab participants. Fornication, more so than rape, is haram according to Islam. The stigma against fornication is so strong that honor killings are still practiced, though illegal in a handful of Arab countries. These killings are extended to rape victims.

In America, rape is much more openly discussed. However, it is much more difficult to prove. Women can report a rape, and get the case taken to court without the same level of social stigma, but proving the rape beyond a shadow of a doubt is extraordinarily rare.

When it came to domestic violence, a verse in the Koran (4:34) describes the use of domestic violence; it states that hitting your wife is permitted, as long as it is a last resort for her disobedience of Allah's teachings and should not be harsh or painful. There is also a false hadith many cite as justification for domestic abuse.

Most of the basis for this problem, however, is cultural and not religious as Arab participants stated. Domestic violence is still a widespread problem, with some statistics stating at least one woman in three is beaten by her husband globally. So it is a problem in all societies. This problem is perpetuated by a woman's economic dependence on her husband. Although the statistic is one in three, there are very few laws protecting women and even less support structures in place for victims. Unfortunately, in some Arab countries, once the crime is reported and proven, it's the end of it. However, the problem is getting women to report it and proving it. The issue, again, is not necessarily the law, but the social stigma that is attached to the law.

In America, there is a much greater dialogue about domestic violence. There are many more support structures in place, and the application of the law is far greater. Some American participants cited explicit examples: in Massachusetts, for example, as soon as a domestic violence case is filed, the state pursues the case and prosecutes; it is not the choice of the victim. This takes it out of the victim's hands and ensures that the abuser is punished to the full extent of the law.

Participants came to an agreement that violence in the street is a bit different in the Arab World than it is in America with huge discrepancies between different Arab countries. In some countries, undercover police officers are usually ready to arrest the abusers. Yet, in other Arab countries, laws are frequently disregarded which creates an impression that violence against women is permissible.

The US, according to several American participants, seems to be in between. If a police officer hears a woman being harassed verbally, he will not necessarily step in unless it escalates to physical harassment. Even then, the cop would just tell the abuser to move along, as opposed to arresting him. Violence against women on the street is not necessarily a widespread issue, but should be dealt with as quickly as possible.

Participants agreed that though obviously, no one is going to jump up and say they are in favor of violence against women, the greatest problem is the

application of law. This needs to be tightened up and enforced if the issue of violence is to be resolved.

Another topic discussed by this group was women's access to information regarding their legal rights. Recognizing the unique role and experience of women in the legal sphere, the participants began their dialogue in hopes of bridging an understanding between American and Arab participants. Both sides agreed that global efforts are being made and should continue to combat the harsh realities of women's legal discrimination, women's legal underrepresentation and the lack of information about women's legal rights. As this group tried to dive into the vast sphere of women in the legal world, one issue emerged above the rest. Legal awareness is imperative for women to fully experience and fully utilize their rights. A lack of awareness is a principle issue that actively prevents women from seeking redress for the rights violations and abuse that they may face. This drew the participants to wonder what steps governments have taken to ensure that women are aware of the legal bodies intended to protect them. Both men and women globally remain unaware of these legal frameworks. Most participants took this position because they believed firmly that women have the agency to act in their own best interest and certainly will protect themselves from potential abuse, exploitation and violation by whatever means they are granted. With the knowledge of the mechanisms with which they can protect themselves from these social ills, women would more readily do so. The dialogue was a very constructive exercise. It was a unanimous conclusion that women's awareness regarding their legal protections is a very relevant issue and integral part of women's legal and social participation. It was

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also concluded unanimously that there is a necessity for a campaign to help women understand more fully the potential of the legal frameworks intended to protect them. To see an issue so universally recognized as important

by a group of people from a spectrum of nationalities and political leanings helped to confirm their stance that this should become a major priority for governments and civil societies. Particularly interesting was the experience of some participants who took part in a group called Legal Awareness at their universities. This group travels around communicating to people their rights and the laws that may affect them, so that they may live a more informed and vibrant life.

In conclusion the group has formed the following recommendations for governments to simultaneously increase the capabilities and efficiency of their justice sector and allow women to flourish in a state of wellbeing so that they may fully participate in and develop society.

- (1) Develop and pass culturally-sensitive legislations intended to protect women's rights.
- (2) Educate officials in the justice sector regarding the importance of the enforcement of women's legal protections.
- (3) Encourage organizations in civil society to educate women regarding their rights, and allow investigative campaigns by NGOs to check the efficiency of judicial proceedings regarding women's legal protections.
- (4) Launch state-sponsored media campaigns to keep the population informed about new or existing laws, especially geared towards those who have finished their compulsory education.
- (5) Build a classroom curriculum to educate young men and women about their legal protection.

SECOND: SOCIAL ISSUES

This group of participants chose four topics to be discussed in their relationship to women issues. These topics are: Religion, Violence against women, stereotypes of women, and issues pertaining to marriage and divorce in both societies.

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For the American participants, religion is a personal idea. It is not anyone else's business if one practices religion and whether one chooses to show that to the world. This was not the case for the Arab participants who agreed to the principle of individual choice, yet they emphasized the role of religion as a major component of an Arab's identity and code of ethics. The group discussed the concept of equality within religion, with a focus on Christianity and Islam. Other religions were mentioned as well, but the participants were not as familiar with them. In Islam, a woman may be a sheikh, but not an imam—the reason for this is a combination of creed and culture. In Christianity, women are not allowed to be in some top religious ranks (such as being priests or cardinals in some denominations), but may be nuns for instance. Several female American participants expressed their disagreement of the unequal position of women in both societies. They thought that if someone feels as if they are “called” to serve their religion, no one should stop them at any rank or level. There is nothing inherent about either gender to make them more fit to serve in this capacity.

Polygamy was a controversial topic discussed by the group. The US participants referred to Mormonism that allows polygamy, and various sects pursue it in different ways. Within the US polygamy is illegal and rare, but often discussed publicly. This is due to the nature of polygamy cases, and the attention they

receive from various television networks and media outlets. Participants from both sides referred to the phenomenon of young girls getting married to older men, rarely of their own volition. These girls are often denied their education, financial independence and proper healthcare. While there are some polygamists who practice happily, the publicized stories talk of underage girls who have to

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be submissive to “higher” wives, and often are married for the sole purpose of housework. Polygamy with multiple husbands is unheard of in both societies. In the Arab world on the other hand, a man

must treat each of his wives equally in finance as well as emotion according to the teachings of the Qur’an. If he cannot, he may not take another wife. Socially, it seems that the Arab world is trending toward only one wife. Moreover, when negotiating the marriage contract, a woman may include a clause stating if her husband takes another wife she will divorce him.

Another religion-related issue that was discussed was obligations, punishments and rewards between men and women. Various Arab youth were all keen to emphasize that religiously men and women are equal in all of these areas. However, the concept of “equal but not identical” was the key point of discussion.

One of the difficulties of this discussion was that the Arab culture is so enmeshed with the teachings and interpretations of Islam. In the United States, on the other hand, there is a separation of church and state. There are several prominent religions, and there are also so many different branches within them. Additionally, the participants had to continually remind themselves if a practice was a religious concept, cultural construct or the law.

It was interesting how the concept of nuns fascinated the Arab youth. The idea of hijab and modesty was something they discussed openly, but the US participants’ concept of modesty seemed to confuse the Arab youth, as it is not regimented, but

rather entirely open to interpretation. Within Christianity there is no penal code. That is, specific laws and punishments are not laid out that Christians follow. This is starkly different from Islam, and thus the source of much confusion.

Some American participants said that prior to this dialogue; they had pursued coursework focusing on the Middle East, and had researched the hijab specifically. Due to this, they were generally not surprised by most of the religious discussion. The concept of honor seems central to all things in Arab society, with the pinnacle of dishonor being a female bearing an illegitimate child. Participants expressed some disagreement regarding the level of a woman's responsibility for her moral actions, and man's accountability for his physical ones. When discussing hijab, the concern of unveiled women and the consequences arose amongst the discussion. The idea that a woman is to be blamed for her rape because she somehow enticed a man by showing "a little skin or hair" was unacceptable to most of the American participants.

Arab participants, though generally opposed polygamy, emphasized that polygamy solved social problems such as spinsterhood and the ramifications of losing a large amount of men in times of war. Arabs argued that polygamy is a conditional license rather than a right for men and shows that the essence of Islam is to look after the society's interest more than the individual's whims.

The second topic that was discussed by the social group pertained to violence against women. Both sides of participants agreed that violence against women is the most common tool in which men make women feel inferior across the globe. Many pieces make up the larger picture of violence against women. These include; child abuse, domestic violence (whether it is physical or mental) and rape as a tool of violence. Members of the social group believed that the Arab world and the Western world dealt with violence against women differently. While they indicated that neither is considered good or bad since both are flawed, they believed that there are certain aspects that are considered more effective because they lessen the amount of cases of abuse.

It was argued that child abuse had become an extremely taboo subject within the United States. It was been seen as almost eradicated from the home of any good parent. While it used to be a common punishment for a child to get spanked, it is highly frowned upon within society today. However, there are some extreme cases that still exist. These cases include situations in which children are beaten and starved. When such situations surface, it is common for the state's Child-Protective Services to get involved and remove the child from the source of abuse. The discussion revealed the difference between the norms of most Arab countries and that of the U.S. Beating children (though not necessarily called abuse) is a common form of teaching kids good manners and is being used against women in some underdeveloped areas in some Arab countries. This is predominantly due to the fact that women are dependent on their families until they are married. Thus, if a father sets a rule according to which his daughter cannot go out at night and if she breaks this rule the consequence can be a beating. This is seen as normal for society and not a grave enough offense to take action against. While physical abuse usually stems from the father, it is most common for mental abuse to stem from the

In both societies, if a woman is beaten, she has legal grounds to divorce her husband or seek a warrant to assure her that her husband cannot come physically near her. Yet, this is more practiced in the U.S. than in the Arab world.

mother. This is different in the United States. Within the United States the child abuse that exists commonly would be mental abuse. This mental abuse could come from either parent. Within some subcultures in the Arab world, the way in which a woman can escape this treatment is to get married. Yet, education is a key factor in educating parents and women about the dangers of home violence.

The discussants agreed that most marriages in the United States and in the Arab world are considered "happy" and do not consist of dangerous situations for the women. However, domestic abuse does happen. In both societies, if a woman is beaten she has grounds to divorce her husband or seek a warrant to assure her

that her husband cannot come physically near her. While many American women fear that this will not help, the majority of battered women seek governmental or non-governmental services to help their situation. In the United States there are more resources for a woman that is physically abused. Within the Arab world and the United States, mental abuse is seen as more common. Abuse is easily covered up because it is seen as a private matter. The Arab participants argued that in the Arab world, the issues of violence and private matters of women are perceived differently. If society knew about the private lives of the woman then her honor would be tarnished. The extent to which a woman can take action against her husband is lesser than that of America. The woman can run away to her family if her husband is violent towards her. The husband then goes to her father and he asks for forgiveness. Once he is forgiven the woman goes back to her husband. These tiffs within marriages are seen as normal in the Arab world and cannot be acceptable grounds for divorce.

If problems within marriages escalate, divorce can be considered. In the United States if either the woman or the man has problems within the marriage, they can legally seek a divorce. However, within an Arab state it is relatively more difficult for a woman to process a divorce. Threats for divorce are also one of the most effective tools in which a man can assert his dominance.

The Arab participants argue that keeping one's honor is the most important concern for men and women in Arab societies. This explains a lot about Arab society's view on rape. Rape is not talked about with friends and many times even family because it is seen as an extremely disgraceful act. If a woman wears revealing clothing and is raped by a man, though it is a publicly loathed crime, the consequences for a man lessens because the man and woman are equally responsible for his physical urges and she is responsible for her moral conduct (such as not wearing revealing clothing).

There are common denominators as well as some differences considering women issues in Arab countries as in the United States. Yet the participants noted the

following dissimilarities, in the U.S., society and laws blame a man for raping a woman, and a woman is rarely blamed for it. In the U.S. as well, the family is expected to stand beside the raped woman.

Despite the similarities, regarding violence against women, the discussion revealed many differences between the United States and the Arab world when it comes to society's view with regard to women. Thus it is extremely imperative to have these dialogues between the different cultures.

A third topic that was discussed was stereotypes of women within the Arab world. Participants went into this topic attempting to research the main derogatory stereotypes directed towards women, in both Arab society as well as common Western misconceptions of the lifestyle of Arab women.

Most participants entered into the dialogue with what they thought was a good understanding of women's roles and status currently within Arab society. In general, they believed that the same stereotypes held against women in the U.S. would hold true in the Arab world as well. Similar to the U.S., they found women were seen as inferior in the Arab World, but to an even greater extent. The American participants said that the Middle East oriented classes they had in the U.S. often portrayed women as almost invisible members of society, suppressed to a lower level of participation in almost every sector than men. They had been under the impression that Arabs viewed women's foremost role as the housekeeper, delegating the majority of their time to cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. Due to their past belief that women were not allowed to initiate a divorce, they questioned the validity of marriages and relationships within the Arab world, seeing women to be pawns in frequently polygamous relationships. They were aware of many Western sentiments towards the hijab, and the common belief that its wearing is somewhat forced on women in a fairly suppressive manner, aiding the men in their quest to be the solitary decision maker of the household. Attached to the idea that men are the head of the household, they also believed men to be the sole power broker in the realm of politics and economics. However, after discussions

with their peers from around the Arab World, they came to find that their misinformed views were derived from their failure to fully understand the culture in which they live.

Some participants thought that the ethnocentric Westernized views of women in the Arab world tend to skew the actuality of women's lifestyles. This is largely due to many Westerner's tendency to compare the status of Arab women to their own definition of women and women's rights. The U.S. participants found many of their previously established ideas to be wrong. Although women's historical role as the housekeeper has come to be commonly accepted almost everywhere today, especially in the Middle East, it is actually quite common for a wife to work as well as her husband. In fact, they found that stay-at-home moms are actually the exception to the rule among Arab educated women now. Women's role in politics and business has been increasing as well. Due to the quota system, implemented in some Arab states within the last ten years, it is guaranteed that women hold some parliamentary seats. Women are steadily gaining access to higher levels of education, which in turn, aids in their ability to enter into higher salaried positions in the business sector. Contrary to the American participants' previous views, women in several Arab countries are allowed to initiate a divorce from their husbands, although their right to do so must be previously established in their marriage contract or through family courts. Several of the Arab participants also challenged the idea of the man being the head of the household, maintaining that "the man is the head of the house, but the woman is the neck." Implying that while the man may think he is in total control, in reality, he is completely supported or influenced by his wife.

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great deal of time discussing the interconnectedness of Arab culture, and its

ability to influence both women and men's actions. Owing to the intimacy of Arab families and communities, it is easy for people to pass and spread judgments on those who do not adhere to cultural and religious norms. This collective, connected community works to almost ubiquitously enforce cultural/religious guidelines, such as travel restrictions, pre-marital relationships, public displays of affection, the wearing of the Hijab, child rearing practices, and household/societal roles of men and women.

Arab participants in general think that Americans are not constrained by their family's cultural and religious customs since they usually leave their parent's houses once they are 18.

After partaking in the dialogue, several American participants stated that they now see that women and men in the Arab world hold a much more equal footing than they previously thought. Although, similar to the U.S., derogatory stereotypes directed towards women do exist (such as the belief that they are weak, too emotional to take powerful roles in business and politics, and are horrible drivers) women are slowly gaining ground in all sectors as their average education level rises.

Marriage was a fourth topic that was discussed in this group. Marriage and how it relates to women's lives both in the Arab and Western realm created several points of discussion and contention. The group discussed the appropriate ages for women and men to be eligible for marriage; societal pressures and expectations to be married; virginity; pre-marital relationships (both sexual or abstinent); the selection of one's spouse; guardianship and familial involvement in the marriage process; the importance of religion; adoption of husband's family name; the expected (stereotypical) roles of husband and wife in terms of care giving and child rearing, breadwinning and decision making; independent and combined wealth; divorce and how it is instigated and conducted; post-marriage issues such as child custody, nafaka, child-support and alimony payments, and social conceptions of divorced men and women; unwed and single mothers; and polygamy.

The thoughts of the American participants before the discussion concerning the topic of marriage in Arab culture were that religion, especially Islam (since it is so prolific in the Arab world,) plays an important role in marriage and relationships. Even if something considered to be a “cultural” and not a “religious” phenomenon, it is apparent that Islam has made an impact on the Arabic culture.

Basic information was introduced about both societies. For instance, the American participants learned that in Islam, a girl is considered a woman and eligible for marriage at puberty and a boy has become a man at the same stage of development.

Theoretically, this might be considered to be around age fourteen. Yet legally, in most Arab countries there is a minimum age requirement beyond that usually (16 years of age for women and 18 for men).

In the United States both men and women must be 18 years old or older to get married, it is illegal to wed younger than that without parental permission.

Arab participants argued that marriage in the Arab world is not only between two individuals as it is usually in the United States, but is seen to be a relationship between two families. For this reason, one's family plays a large role in the selection of one's spouse.

Dating and premarital relationships are very different between our two cultures. While dating is becoming more common amongst Arab youth, it is not the same as in Western culture where it is the norm to date many people before settling down. Arab relationships are not as physical and virginity, especially a women's virginity, is a much more sacred and saved until a marital relationship is secured. However, there is a growing number of American youth today who are abstaining from sex until marriage. The U.S. participants learned that the reason why many Arabs abstain from sex before marriage is mainly religious. The US participants argued that it is important to know a person well and have

loving feelings towards them before embarking on a life together, whether that includes pre-marital sex or not is a personal preference and depends on the couple.

Arab participants argued that marriage in the Arab world is not only between two individuals as it is in the United States, but is seen to be a relationship between two families. For this reason, one's family plays a large role in the selection of one's spouse. In American culture, U.S. participants argued, the parents of the two individuals do not play any major role in the marriage (other than perhaps financing the nuptials.) In Arab culture, it is increasingly the case that, a woman has final say on whom she will marry but often her father or parents will prescreen individuals to see if they are up-to-par with what they consider is appropriate for their child and family. Ultimately, it should be the decision of only the couple involved, but of course parental approval is always assumed.

Regarding polygamy in particular, the participants agreed that Holy Scriptures are often misused or interpreted to make excuses for one's personal lifestyle. The Holy Quran states that a man must treat all his wives equally and this is not possible. In the United States, polygamy is illegal, but polygamous relationships do occur in minority religious communities. Even though it is illegal, that doesn't prevent a man from having relations with more than one woman. Participants agreed with the right of women to stipulate in their marriage contracts that they refuse that their husbands take a second wife.

Divorce is much more prevalent in the United States but it is never anticipated when going into marriage. The youth from both sides agreed that it is important for a child to have both his and her parents but an unhappy couple should never stay together for the sake of their children—indeed it only provides an unhappy, and thus unhealthy, environment for the children.

The U.S. participants learned that in the Arab world, men are obligated to financially provide for their families and that if a woman earns her own paycheck

it is supplementary and she can use it as she pleases, though often it goes towards the family finances. The Arab participants learned that there is no legal obligation for a man in the United States to support his family, it is understood that one or both of the parents will provide for their family. A man should provide for his family but so should his wife, a marriage should be a partnership, not a hierarchal institution. Ultimately, everything is subjective to each marriage relationship.

However both sides agreed that decisions in marital life must be made together and to ask for permission will not be needed. The U.S. female participants underscored that they could never be with a man that intended to control their lives in any way.

THIRD: WOMEN ROLE IN BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

This group touched upon several issues related to the role of women in business and economy. Among these issues were the safety of women in the work place, the role of women in the business world, the legislation and facilities in place to include and further the female presence in the workforce and women's ability to participate in the workforce.

Regarding the role of women in business, participants focused more pointedly on their status, including salary and positions, the impact of work on their lives, women in roles of leadership and the stereotypical roles of subordination that women are expected to fill and the ways in which they overcome this obstacle.

The first question was related to why there are less Arab women than men in the workforce and what this means for the future.

The American participants argued that they had been encouraged throughout their lives to be independent since a young age and their parents had always supported them no matter what they decided. One of the U.S. female participants stated that she had looked into getting a job in zoology, the military, working for a government agency like the CIA and a career in foreign correspondence with a focus on war correspondence. All are difficult jobs that are traditionally and mostly filled by men. Yet, her family supported her choices and trusted her judgment. Most Arab participants echoed similar experiences but acknowledged that not all Arab women have this kind of freedom. Both groups, found it hard to understand what it would be like living in a culture that is unequivocally uncomfortable and unused to the idea of women heading out into the world to make decisions on their own. However, it was acknowledged that Arab society would resist women's career choices if the job is one normally held by men and would keep them away from their traditional role in the home.

Before beginning the discussion the U.S. participants had a stereotypical image in their minds of how the lives of business women were in Arab countries. It was

that they did not really have business women. From what little they knew, they thought that the culture as a whole was very family oriented and so the women for the most part remained in the home.

Yet as the discussions ensued, U.S. participants found that in most Arab countries the situation is not much different from the U.S. AS in the U.S., there is no law that prohibits a woman from holding any position (except, in

Islam does not prohibit women from working but in fact does the opposite, encouraging them to contribute to society. Yet, some Muslims misinterpret Islam to limit women's chances to have professional careers.

the United States, a few military positions) or discriminates against them for seeking out a job and working. Islam does not prohibit women from working but in fact does the opposite, encouraging them to contribute to society. Yet, some Muslims misinterpret Islam to limit women's chances to have professional careers.

It is the culture and mentality of the people that keeps most women in the home, raising the children and caring for the family. It has been argued that in some Arab societies, gender roles play a major part in the lives of the average family and tradition is much deeper and more revered.

The participants agreed that there was nothing wrong with a woman wishing to stay home and raise her children. Several participants gave examples of their own mothers who stayed at home with their children. On the other hand other women work forty plus hours a week, pick their children up from daycare and then split the house chores with their husbands. Both systems work and both allow each person to contribute to the overall well being of the family. They also concurred that a woman may want to both work and care for her family but believes that she can only do one well.

It is the deep rooted tradition and lack of encouragement that girls receive that is hard for most participants to wrap their heads around. Tradition and family are very important. Yet they should not impair a woman's right to be independent.

Looking into the future, the youth, Arabs and Americans, seem to have different ideas and feelings about their traditions and culture. Some believe that education is the key to empower women and allow them to work. It is an untapped potential. Others think that a working mother is increasingly becoming a must to relieve some of the pressure of financial trouble and household chores.

Another topic discussed pertained to “what are the current economic conditions faced by women and what impact does their involvement have on society?”

Again it was clear that the American participants were under the impression that most women do not work and are primarily responsible for taking care of their family. This impression was coupled with assuming that women in the Middle East are entirely dependent upon their husband as a source of family income. They also did not know that many opportunities were present for them to join the workforce. However, the American participants were clear that their perceptions of the state of women in the economy were not representative of their personal opinions regarding women’s rights. All of them argued that women should share equal rights as men and they should not face obstacles because of their gender. After an intensive discussion about which role is better for society, most of the participants agreed upon the fact that women play an integral role in society and that in order to maximize the ability of an economy all citizens must be given the right to be involved. It only makes sense that the more people that are involved the more talented people there will be to choose from.

The American participants were surprised to learn that many of their assumptions of Arab women’s involvement in the economy were false.

The American participants were surprised to learn that many of their assumptions of Arab women’s involvement in the economy were false. Women are present in the

workplace and have the ability to bring financial stability to their family. New ideas of equality came into light within politics and society with new heads of states taking office in most Arab countries in the past twenty years. Increasing women’s access to education helped produce a platform for change. Prior to this,

women thought that they had a duty to stay at home and take care of their family. Women now have the confidence and ability to partake in business and have a shared responsibility towards their family. Men have gradually been able to accept women's involvement in business as well as a woman's right to work. A sense of sharing responsibility exists among men and women when financially supporting their family.

The U.S. participants in particular have stated that this dialogue opened their eyes to the similarities shared between the Arab societies and the United States. They did not expect to hear that women have the rights that they had attained in Arab societies. They expected to hear that, within the Arab world, traditional ideas are promoted and women are discouraged from being involved in the business world. This decreases women's reliance on men and increases feelings of self respect. Another thing that they realized is that certain issues exist that both sides, Arabs and Americans, agree on. There are other issues for which great differences in opinion exist. Women's involvement in the economy provides added talent to many fields which benefits individuals and society. In both the U.S. and Arab states women contribute to anything from business and commerce

Women, in both the United States and the Middle East, share the same attitude, that work is a source of empowerment and makes women more independent.

to engineering or medicine. Their involvement should be promoted and continued actions should be taken to increase women's rights and equality.

Both sides of the dialogue appreciated the opportunity to learn from each other. The Arab participants in particular, strongly believed that Arab women today are in a much better situation than they were twenty years ago. Some Arab participants referred to colonization as one of the reasons Arab countries shifted their attention toward the important issue of gender equality and to go back to Islamic sources to reinterpret them in favor of more equality between men and women. Arabs have emphasized the great roles played by prominent Muslim women such as Khadiga – Prophet Mohamed's first wife. She worked as a business woman and helped her husband in his mission to preach Islam.

The American participants appreciated the historical information about Islam and Muslims that they received from their Arab colleagues.

Another topic that this group discussed was related to the reluctance of women to join the workforce, or specific sectors thereof.

Participants agreed that women should have the freedom to choose their occupations, free of discrimination or prejudice. However, they also recognized that, in general, men seem better suited for some occupations than women, such as construction work that involves intense labor and requires physical strength. Due to the fact that men are normally better equipped to handle such tasks, it stands to reason that men would more commonly occupy such a field.

However, a similar explanation cannot clarify the reason for discrepancies in other fields, such as engineering and mathematics. Given the fact that family is the foundation of customary Arab society, in this traditional structure, the female is encouraged to prioritize her domestic role, while the male is expected to provide financial and emotional support to his wife and children. Though it is also acceptable and increasingly common for women to assume a portion of the financial burden, this structure is only suitable if the male assumes a sufficient portion of the domestic duties. Otherwise, the children may suffer from a lack of parental guidance, and the mother may find herself incapable of meeting expectations in the workplace and at home.

Arab participants referred to the traditionalist thinking that maintained that it was detrimental to society in general if a woman decided

Arab participants referred to several rights for women in some Arab countries that the U.S. participants found were not granted Americans

to assume a role as both domestic caregiver and financial provider. These traditionalists also believed that such a position could negatively affect the woman's health because of the stress produced by additional responsibility.

Another topic that crossed the minds of the participants was: what difference did/ can women make while being in the workforce?

Another important issue that was discussed was the importance of equality in the business field specifically with regard to salaries and positions of employment. Participants also discovered that this particular issue is not pressing just in the Arab world, but also in the United States.

With this being an issue in the Arab world the only way to face it is by raising awareness, and by that they meant separating and distinguishing between religion and tradition, because religion has nothing to do with restricting women from working and actually encourages women to shoulder their societal responsibilities. Yet it is the misconceptions and mix-ups between religion and tradition that give these traditions legitimacy and sustainability.

Arab participants referred to several rights for women in some Arab countries that the U.S. participants found that American women were not granted. Some of their rights included maternity leave, and the right of women who have young children to work part-time for up to six years and receive two-thirds of their full-time pay. Also, if the woman is to have a second child within the first three years of her first birth, she can extend these benefits for up to nine years in some Arab countries.

The American participants argued that while this is a respectful way to help women balance their professional and family lives, the burden ultimately falls on the taxpayer, who would essentially pay more money so that women can spend more time with their families, for a certain amount of time.

Both sides of participants agreed that the assimilation of women into the economic mainstream resulted both from enhanced educational levels and from tailoring the workplace to the needs of women, who have had to balance family and professional responsibilities.

Another issue that was raised by the participants of this group was: To what extent does women's participation in the economy and business impact the whole society?

Interestingly, both groups of participants agreed that the assimilation of women into the economic mainstream resulted both from enhanced educational levels and from tailoring the workplace to the needs of women, who have had to balance family and professional responsibilities. Actually some social rights such as maternity leave, the creation of daycares and of organizations which bring women together for a common cause are some of the driving forces that have helped to achieve this. Yet still a large number of women do suffer from unemployment though it is decreasing in a number of Arab countries. Discussion of unemployment raised the issue of its impact on women and how do rate of their unemployment compare with those of other components of the society. Are women being unemployed just because they are women?

Group members believed that, this is not the case since the reasons of unemployment affect all members in both societies; further more nowadays more and more women are aware of their rights and their need to get a job to be financially independent to prove themselves in the workplace.

As a conclusion, the participants noticed that the discrimination against women is not related to religion or tradition in Arab countries. Discrimination exists in all societies whether liberal or conservative and whether Arab or Western. Equality is a major goal to be achieved and education is a key factor in empowering women in conjunction with the supportive role of the state.

FOURTH: WOMEN AND EDUCATION

The education group devoted its attention to discuss the challenges facing women in the education sphere. Discussions addressed a number of topics. The first was women's access to education and how this was related to choosing between gender-separate education and the pros and cons of all girl schools vs. co-ed schools. The second topic was women as educators and the differing education girls receive at school vs. at home. The third topic was fields of study and why women choose certain fields over others.

The first topic discussed by this group was access to education. One question tackled extensively was: should national governments play a larger role in encouraging women to obtain a university level education?

Participants agreed that education is a key aspect to change and the advancement of a country. It is true that in the Arab world adult literacy has doubled in recent years, however, more than half of the women continue to be illiterate. It is important to note that not only has the aspect of adult literacy improved in the Arab world, but education as a whole has significantly improved. Unfortunately, these significant improvements do not put the Arab education system where it should be when compared to education systems of similar countries in other regions. A major drawback for the Arab world is the access to education for women. Female enrollment rates are lower than male enrollment rates, especially with regard to higher education. Women in the Arab world tend not to continue their education after high school for various reasons such as her family not wanting her to obtain a higher education or her and her family simply deciding that she should become a housewife. More importantly, financial reasons seem to be the largest reason for women choosing not to continue their education. This is why the participants believe that national governments should play a larger role in encouraging women to obtain a university level education.

The Arab world's increase in education spending in the 1980's definitely helped with their recent significant improvements in education, however, the rate of spending slowed down in the 1990's. This decrease in spending hindered and continues to hinder the educational opportunities for women as this money should be used, by the various national governments of the Arab world, towards scholarships, fellowships, and tuition loans for women who cannot afford a university level education. These methods of assisting participants in obtaining higher education may lead to a form of affirmative action, which may be required in order to provide access to education for women. Governments could contribute to encouraging women to obtain a university level education in more ways than education spending. For example, it is vital to the education systems in the Arab world to increase government involvement in helping women obtain an education because it is capable of utilizing its power over local communities and businesses. Financial problems for education can be resolved by creating a partnership with the local community.

However some participants were opponents to a larger involvement of governments in expanding their role in women obtaining a higher education because scholarships, fellowships, and tuition loans geared towards women will send unqualified female participants to universities while having to reject applications from more qualified male participants. However, these steps toward improving the access of education for women would not only improve education in the Arab world by increasing enrollment and literacy rates, but also improve poverty within Arab countries. These women who become educated at the university level will receive greater opportunities for employment.

Another topic discussed by this group had to do with single-sex vs. co-education. Many Arab and few American supporters for all-girl education stems from their positions as proud graduates of this type of schools. All-girls education empowers women and provides a comfortable setting for them to develop physically and intellectually. There is also a strong correlation, often highlighted, between leadership and graduates of all girls' schools.

American participants, who referred to all-girl education as they know it in the United States, referred primarily to private schools for participants whose parents can afford this choice for their daughters or public charter schools with rigorous curriculums. They also highlighted that single-sex education in the United States is an option, not a mandate. One potential backlash they thought of if co-education is mandated in a region where it hasn't been, could occur in the form of pulling daughters out of school entirely.

In the U.S. girl's schools are almost always private, with the exception of some public charter schools. Many women who are leaders in government, law, business, and sciences are graduates of an all-girls education at some point in their life; this suggests strongly that products of a single-sex education are not incapable of leading men and women, even if it does not establish an advantage. Furthermore, supporters of same-sex education conceded to their opponents' point of view that some individuals are naturally more inclined to be leaders, but they do still feel that additional leadership opportunities made accessible to girls at all-female institutions proves to girls their capacity to lead and gives them the experience to get ahead when entering a coed environment.

All participants agreed on one negative facet of all-girls education, after having experienced both co-educational schools and all girls' schools. They thought that adequate socialization is often hindered by single-sex education, especially in some other Arab countries where girls have very little exposure to their male counterparts.

All participants agreed on one negative facet of all-girls education, after having experienced both co-educational schools and all girls' schools. They thought that adequate socialization is often hindered by single-sex education, especially in some other Arab countries where girls have very little exposure to their male counterparts. Inadequate exposure and separation can often lead to unhealthy attitudes of idolization of the opposite sex and unrealistic expectations of them.

This discussion brought to mind the phenomena and importance of gendered space, which is very often lacking in the United States. Furthermore, after a discussion with Arab colleagues who believed that the quality of education offered at an all girls French High school was very high and would be a suitable option for their hypothetical future daughters due to the fact that in most Arab cities she would know boys “no matter what”, the American participants found that the lack of gender separate space exists in parts of the Middle East as well. American participants’ experience in an all-girls school was that the learning environment particularly encouraged questioning attitudes, openness, support and encouragement. Girls were free in this space from the pressures they face in the presence of their male counterparts, and they could learn to appreciate themselves and other women around them. It was a very affirming experience and one of exploration, not in a sexual sense as some think, but rather in a quest to gain an emotional, philosophical, and cultural appreciation of what it is to be a woman.

While coeducation seems to be the progressive trend in many Middle Eastern countries, at least where private schools are concerned for the moment, the experience of several American participants is that same-sex schools in the United States are a privilege, although unpopular among large segments of the population.

Another question raised by this group was: Should scholarships be geared towards women?

This question was primarily raised by American participants mainly because in most Arab countries, university education is free since it is subsidized from governments. However, there was a clear bias among female participants toward the idea that more scholarships should be geared towards women while taking merit into consideration and the woman should have the same qualifications that are expected. The logic behind this idea was that it was important to provide women with the resources needed to succeed, especially in certain male-dominated fields. Fields such as engineering and some sciences are predominately

male fields. Though some women are in these fields, they are male dominated and offering women more scholarships will provide them with assistance and encourage them to enter these fields.

From another perspective, some participants in this group thought that scholarships should be given solely based on merit and that scholarships should not be geared towards women. They thought that if one is qualified he/she should get the scholarship regardless of gender.

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regardless of gender. They also thought that women are women and men are men and in gearing scholarships towards women one is creating a distinction that might have negative unintended consequences. Rather people should be considered human rather than classified as males or females. Also in doing this leads to reverse discrimination against males by giving priority to women.

The proponents of gearing more scholarships toward women agreed that people should be treated as humans and that people should not always be classified in terms of gender. Even though they thought that scholarships should be given out based on merit, but they wanted some scholarships to be geared towards women. In an ideal world people would be classified equally as humans, but we do not live in a world like that and it is human nature to stereotype and discriminate against people based on gender, race or religion. Thus, women should be provided with the necessary resources and support to excel in whatever field or atmosphere they desire.

Another topic that was discussed by this group was women as educators. More specifically, they looked at the idea of women as educators in the home and in the school setting. The participants argued that for the first years of a child's life, the mother and father are the main educators. In most cases, the mother,

because she is the main caregiver, takes a more prominent role in her children's education; therefore, the education of the mother directly impacts the education of her children. The participants agreed that it is important for children to receive a positive education from their family before they start their official education at school. Parents are responsible for teaching their children life skills, such as how to interact appropriately with others by teaching manners and conflict resolution. After the child enters school, the parents are responsible for reinforcing the education in the home. Parents are responsible for helping their children with homework. If the mother, who is often the one who is in charge of watching the children after school, is not educated, she will not be able to offer proper aid with homework. As a child gets older, the mother is also responsible for providing life lessons. More specifically, the group looked at the aspect of sex education. Most Arab students argued that in the Arab world, sex education is virtually nonexistent, so the education falls to the family or peer groups.

Some of the Arab participants maintained that there is an overwhelming majority of female primary educators, whereas male teachers at the primary education level are virtually nonexistent. In their opinion, the reason for this is that women tend to be more nurturing and patient, two key characteristics people need to deal with young children. Primary education teachers act almost as a child's second mother for eight hours a day. One of the American participants

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agreed and mentioned that for the first seven years of her education, every one of her teachers was female, which is why the idea of a male primary education teacher is so foreign to her. Some American participants stated that the fact

that so many women are primary education teachers also impacts a child's impression of the teaching profession. Young children's minds are extremely impressionable. If during the first five years of their schooling, children are taught

only by women, then the children think that teaching is a female profession. Interestingly, men and women educators receive the same education training, so theoretically children would receive the same quality of education from a male or female teacher. A bad teacher is a bad teacher regardless of the fact that he is a male or she is a female. However, if more men were in the field of primary education, young boys may be more inspired to become teachers and may experience a deeper connection to their teacher and therefore a greater thirst for knowledge. As you move into the university level of education however, there tends to be more male educators. A large factor in this may be the fact that women who want to have families and raise their children may not find it realistic to spend more years in furthering their education.

Another question that was subject to discussion among the education group was “what causes women to choose certain fields of study or concentrations in education?” Through group discussion, participants came up with several important factors that seem to have a major effect on what women choose to study and consequently, what fields they tend to work in. Marriage and job stability were two pivotal factors discussed that certainly need to be taken into account. Others chose to discuss how the skills and the education that women gain as children and during the early stages of youth up until high school impact the choice they make when it comes to fields of study.

Most participants believed that gender roles and the tasks that parents assign to girls and boys as well as how gender roles are portrayed in elementary schools are the two factors that most greatly impact girls during childhood and as a result might encourage girls to choose certain fields. Parents have a tremendous effect on the development of a child. From what some participants experienced and learned, it is much more common for a girl to be asked by the parents to do the

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housework than to do the work that a father or man might do. For example, a son is more likely to help his father repair things around the house or help with farm work than be asked to help in the kitchen or do laundry by his mother. It is equally unlikely for a girl to be asked to repair something with her father if there is a son who could help him instead. The fact that women are asked to do dishes instead of chopping wood or fixing things around the house gear them towards different fields of study and having certain interests at an early age. These repeated activities also allow boys and girls to develop different sets of skills that further enforce where they will go later in life.

Both in the US and most Arab societies, elementary school workbooks tend to show stereotypical activities that boys or girls do. For example, a reading book with illustrations might show a man going to work and a woman doing the cleaning. These examples that are continually reinforced in education cause children to have certain expectations about the roles of men and women. Some participants did not think that these roles should be illustrated and if they must be, there should be examples of both genders doing household tasks and working in offices for example. When it comes to professions, men and women are also shown doing stereotypical tasks. A man will be shown working as a doctor whereas a woman will be shown working as his nurse. It is the mentioned examples that seem to have a great impact on what girls will study later in life.

As for the discussions, participants, Arabs and Americans alike found that the discussions mostly reinforced what they already thought based on their own cultural experiences. They came to many consensuses and noted the differences between fields of study chosen by women in the United States and the Arab world. Americans noticed that in the United States, women in politics and the business realm tend to go higher in their respected fields due to education. Also similar the U.S., there are fewer Arab women in fields like engineering and the hard sciences than men.

In conclusion participants were in agreement that women should have equal rights in providing and gaining education both in schools and at homes since education is the corner stone of building awareness in the family and the society as a whole. Education curricula should be gender neutral otherwise they socialize students on certain gender roles that might undermine their potential to make individualized merit-based choices for their careers.

FIFTH: WOMEN AND HEALTH

The health group discussed a number of subtopics: maternal care; rape and abortion; sexual health, early marriages; sex education and genital mutilation; and common women diseases.

The first topic explored by this group was maternal care and the care of the elderly within the Arab world compared to the United States.

Participants agreed that maternal care is much more advanced and accessible in the United States and some rich Arab countries than others. The participants defined the maternal care as the process of surveillance and treating the mother and child. Different tests and examinations are supposed to be conducted throughout the duration of the pregnancy at multiple times during each trimester of pregnancy. Insurance covers a majority of the costs associated with these medical visits. The discussants agreed that in most Arab societies and for many Americans who are not covered by medical insurance they do not get enough prenatal practices and the biomedical procedures associated with prenatal care compared to the more advantaged. Furthermore, the participants agreed that there is an increasing tendency among governments to offer more information to women about prenatal care via medical literature such as brochures and there is more of an emphasis on educating women. Just as in the United States, most

Arab participants within group referred to the collectivist ideals, traditions, religious beliefs and a strong tie to family that there are often extended families that live in one household without the need to resort to the assisted living homes.

Arabs rely on insurance from the public sector to cover the cost of medical expenses. Some issues that stem from health insurance are the quality of the services provided and raising awareness about these options that are available for people who

might be financially disadvantaged. In the U.S. some people can receive health insurance from the companies or institutions that they work for. The issue with

this however is that some companies purposely keep their workers from working full-time (which is typically how people can become eligible for insurance provided through the company). This is more common with occupations that many immigrants or financially disadvantaged people occupy such as janitorial duties. Several commentators argued for universal healthcare and the American participants in particular argued that the system in the United States had several elements of corruption and was systematically becoming more incoherent. Some argued that Medicare was losing its capacity to sustain all of its customers and it showed when it comes to paying for prescription medication, co-pays for medical visits or hospital stays. Within some Arab countries, healthcare is offered to all but because of lack of education (and shortage of resources in others); many people are not aware of this option and turn to expensive private providers. There was an agreement that people who could not financially afford health insurance; should have equal access to it.

On this note, some participants were excited to include elderly healthcare within this subtopic of health related issues because it is often a topic that is neglected in public discourse (at least in the United States). Insurance is a controversial issue when it comes to the elderly. Some health insurance plans would cover generic prescriptions but others will not. The elderly are increasingly paying out of pocket for their medical costs as their plans start to cover less.

Another interesting issue discussed was the family unit or structure and how that relates to the placement of elderly in assisted living homes in some Arab societies and the United States. Arab participants within, the group referred to the collectivist ideals, traditions, religious beliefs and a strong tie to family and that there are often extended families that live in one household without the need to resort to the assisted living homes. The idea of sending an elderly person to live someplace else in the Arab world is virtually uncommon in comparison to the United States. Some participants argued that many families that chose to send their elderly relatives to homes often do it because of financial reasons. Another reason is that they themselves are not physically capable of providing

sufficient healthcare for another individual. Some participants thought that the latter however also relates to cultural beliefs and values.

Another topic discussed by the group was rape and abortion. The participants thought that this was an important topic because, it affects women everywhere. It is tied to politics, social issues, legal issues, and media. In their opinion, it is one of the biggest issues women face on a day to day basis.

American participants disagreed on their final attitude toward abortion. Some of them thought that abortion was wrong but no government should have the right to dictate the law on abortion. Some of the American participants argued that it is the woman's right to choose to keep her baby or not. So even though several American participants did not believe in abortion, they thought that no woman should be denied the right to their body. There are so many situational issues that lead to rape and abortion. If a woman is raped, she should be able to talk with someone or get an abortion if it is her will. This was the biggest difference the American and Arab participants noticed while discussing this issue. Americans noted that in the U.S. women are given so many options in terms of rape crisis centers or abortion clinics. They

can speak with counselors who can influence their decision and give them facts and sound advice on what to do. Arabs emphasized that this is not typically the case in the Middle East. There is a relative lack of support for raped women in most Arab societies

Abortion because of rape is an issue that has been subject to debate among the participants though they agreed that since most Arabs are religious, Muslims, Christians or Jews, they have a negative attitude toward abortion in general. The same goes to most American religious persons.

and women often go without telling anyone that they were raped or had an abortion. This is a psychological issue that can lead to various health problems if left alone. Abortion because of rape is an issue that has been subject to debate among the participants though they agreed that since most Arabs are religious, Muslims, Christians or Jews, they have a negative attitude toward abortion in

general. The same goes to most American religious persons. Yet, there was a point of consensus regarding the need for women to be given more options to learn more about these issues and hopefully avoid the dangers of illegal abortions.

Some participants found reliable statistics about abortion in different regions in the world. In 2005, forty percent of pregnancies among American women ended up in an abortion. In 2005 as well, 1.21 million abortions were performed in the USA. American participants noted that abortion is legal in many states in the USA.

In the Arab countries, the UN estimates that one in every ten pregnancies will be terminated through abortion; that estimation should take in consideration that abortion is illegal in most Arab countries except for cases in which harm to mother is imminent.

The low number of abortion in Arabs countries can also be explained by the fact that Arabs live in a very conservative and religious society that firmly condemns it, so terminating an unwanted pregnancy is almost out of the question.

Difference between the Arab world and the USA resides also in the fact that in the USA abortion is strictly a personal decision, while in Arab countries the omnipresence of families strongly influences the decision, and makes abortion a solution of last resort in extreme cases: as the fact to avoid dishonoring the family from a rape.

Arab participants were surprised to see that although the USA is a very liberal society in general, when women find abortion as the easy way out and turn to abortion they are judged and despised by society.

Most participants agreed on most of the technicalities of rape and abortion but some differences were based on societal reactions on the stigma of rape. Some American participants found it hard getting their opinion across without seeming judgmental but in the end the need to acknowledge cultural differences was pivotal.

Another topic that was discussed by this group related to sexual health and protection. The participants chose to discuss sex with minors, sex education and genital mutilation. These topics were of particular interest to the group because of their controversial nature and the cultural discussions they raise. Over the course of one day these issues were discussed

In Arab countries, there seems to be diversity between societies regarding accepting when a girl is ready for marriage with some Arab participants quoting examples of girls married early in their teenage years. Yet, there is a clear tendency among various Arab states to outlaw this practice and to raise the minimum age required for marriage to 16 and 18 years old.

in depth one-on-one and in a group of ten participants. The participants noted that sex with minors varies greatly between the Arab world and the United States. In the U.S. different states have restrictions with regard to sex with minors--i.e. In New York when people reach the age of seventeen they are legally able to consent to sexual activities with adults. In Arab countries, there seems to be diversity between societies regarding accepting when a girl is ready for marriage with some Arab participants quoting examples of girls married early in their teenage years. Yet, there is a clear tendency among various Arab states to outlaw this practice and to raise the minimum age required for marriage to 16 and 18 years old. The participants discussed other sexual activity between minors and adults like rape which is punishable by law. They also discussed how it is common for high school participants to date partners a couple years older and engage in sex. While individuals might be legally too young to grant consent, these relations are generally accepted in American society and not accepted at all in Arab societies. While parents might disapprove in the U.S., legal action is rare because relations are generally mutual.

In Arab states women frequently marry at an early age. While some laws forbid girls to marry before reaching puberty or adulthood, which might be defined at a certain age, Arab participants said especially in rural regions, these laws are sometimes ignored. As sex is considered a duty of marriage, women at any age

are expected to submit to it. Yet again, laws are passed to bring these traditions to some sort of discipline.

Therefore, besides exceptional cases of abuse, sex with minors is permitted within the context of marriage if there are no laws in some Arab countries. This could have physical consequences--such as becoming pregnant before female organs are fully developed, discomfort or other abuse. Psychological consequences would also ensue. Young girls might face confusion, feelings of abandonment from family and other burdens associated with roles they are too young to fill. That is why it has been an issue on the legal and political agenda of several Arab countries to put certain minimum age requirements on marriage for both males and females.

The participants discussed a case of an eight-year old girl in Yemen who sued for divorce and won. While this was an extreme case, they believe it is very unusual for girls to be married at eight. Participants also wondered if other cases exist which are not publicized.

Throughout this discussion the Arab participants stressed Islam does not support early marriages. Possible causes might be relieving girls' family of economic burdens and social acceptance and values tied to marriage.

The next topic was sex education that encompassed what is and should be taught in the West and in the Arab world, cultural differences and challenges. Participants discussed the continued controversy of teaching comprehensive versus abstinence only education in the United States. Some Arab participants

A debate erupted when an Arab participant asked if American society were more religious would there be fewer incidences of STDs. Americans explained that while strict adherence to religion might reduce sexually transmitted diseases, it is not a practical solution in the U.S.

were surprised to learn the issue remains controversial.

Arabs were very curious about disadvantages of teaching sex education from an early age in the U.S. Americans agreed that while critics say sex education

increases curiosity and possibly sexual activity; there is no systematic empirical proof about this assertion. With the prevalence of sex in the media, it is essential children learn how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and pregnancy.

A debate erupted when an Arab participant asked if American society were more religious would there be fewer incidences of STDs. Americans explained that while strict adherence to religion might reduce sexually transmitted diseases; it is not a practical solution in the U.S. Many different religions exist and many Americans are agnostic, atheist or simply do not adhere to their religions. Religion is not the common denominator (as it is in the Arab world) and cannot be forced down people's throats or used as a solution to societal problems in the US. Sexual habits are deeply rooted in today's American culture and cannot be eradicated--people will continue to have choice with regard to their sexuality. Educating people about their options is a more practical solution, most American participants argued and a few Arab participants concurred.

While religion can be disconnected from sex education in the United States, Arab participants stressed its essential influence on sexual practices in their countries. For example, extramarital sex is illegal under Shari'a law--reinforced in Arab states and respected by all Arab societies. Due to this, sex education, as known in the United States, is not practical in the Arab world without taking into consideration the cultural and traditional framework, Arab participants thought. As engaging in sex outside of marriage is illegal, debates such as "abstinence only" verse comprehensive information, are not relevant in the Arab world.

An Arab participant suggested sexual health--such as STDs and pregnancy prevention must be taught to girls before they marry to protect and empower them. She said because the subject is currently taboo. As prostitution and other forms of sex outside the marriage do occur, this knowledge would help to empower women to protect themselves.

Genital mutilation was the hardest issue for the group to discuss. While across the board, participants discussed their disgust with the practice; its frequency was hotly debated. Attempts to talk about the health aspects of the practice were difficult as participants continued arguing over statistics. Though no American participants brought up religion, Arab participants were quick to say the practice was tradition not supported by Islam. They asserted that the practice came from Sub-Saharan Africa and was passed upward from Sudan to Egypt. Discussion regarding genital mutilation not hashed out to its end because of continued arguing and its sensitive nature.

Talking about these sensitive issues revealed the differences in culture and society as well as similarities. For example, while all participants believed women should be empowered with knowledge to protect against STDs and unwanted pregnancies, the methods for providing that information must be different between regions. Overall, participants were more eager to listen and learn from each other than argue. Questions were generally directed at gaining more knowledge, not proving an opponent wrong.

Another topic discussed by this group was, common women diseases. Participants argued that many diseases are not exclusive to any geographical area or a nation's character. They also pointed out that the world does not only share diseases but the world also shares the knowledge of dealing and treatment; but differences rise in how societies act towards these diseases.

As a case study, participants discussed how women face breast cancer in both Arab and western societies. The dialogue started by referring to the personal experiences of how women, according to their marital status, would face the disease and the role of society.

A single woman in the Arab world would typically consider her breast cancer a personal issue since she would be afraid of minimizing her chances to get married especially when her health situation would force her to accept surgical

intervention resulting in the deformation of her breast. On the other hand a single western woman would probably welcome the support of society and start her enrolment in many campaigns. In analyzing the situation, the dialogue took the participants to reach the explanation that Western women are more independent than Arab women.

The second issue discussed in this repeat related to men's reaction towards dealing with a sick wife; where men in both societies will face two options. Their choice is related to each man's personality and relationship with his wife. In case of the first option both Arab and western men will have the chance to stand by their wife to provide emotional and financial support. However Arab and western men's choice regarding the second option will differ. In parts of the Arab world men will have the choice to get into a second marriage, which mostly will result in social isolation. On the other hand, a Western man will face the choice to cheat on his wife which also will result in the same reaction by society.

Arab participants argued that the Arab World recently started awareness campaigns for breast cancer targeting women; but such diseases need awareness campaigns targeting the whole society.

Arab societies, on the other hand, stress a more community-based approach where responsibility to the family is paramount and community relationships profoundly influence the behavior of the individual.

An interesting observation raised by one of the Arab participants was that although the group had a dialogue in many important health issues; he was interested in addressing plastic surgery. In this context, the discussion targeted the reason behind the weak acceptance of the Arab world of cosmetic surgery. The plastic surgery discussion along with other discussions led him to some conclusions or perspectives on the difference between both cultures. Whereas the Arab world justified many issues by referring to the societal benefits, the American side justified their decisions by referring to individualism and freedom of choices by individuals.

American participants argued that American culture is based heavily upon the idea of individualism. One of the female participants argued that “as a female that has grown up in the United States I was always told that my education and a successful career came first and that once I was established on my own financially, I would be ready for marriage and a family of my own.” Arab societies, on the other hand, stress a more community-based approach where responsibility to the family is paramount and community relationships profoundly influence the behavior of the individual. These fundamental differences profoundly influence the way in which Arab and American societies react to various issues that affect women.

Some topics characterized these structural differences more than others. An example in this context relates to the differing views held by American and Arab participants regarding breast cancer, how women deal with it, and how men react to a woman who has been diagnosed with it. In the United States, if a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, it becomes a community issue and family, friends, neighbors, and other individuals offer support often through cancer walks or other fundraisers that support cancer research or funds for treatment. In the Arab world, women are often ashamed or embarrassed about the issue and keep it to themselves or only within a small group of people. The degree of secrecy differs between married women and single women. Married women often share the issue with their husbands or parents but generally do not share their struggle with individuals who are outside of their immediate family and they often keep this information from their children. Single women, on the other hand, are likely to go to greater lengths to keep their diagnosis a secret because it could affect their prospects for marriage as some Arab participants argued.

Within this context some American female participants were surprised by the fact that Arab women might feel ashamed about discussing their experiences. For a society that stresses community support as a main pillar on which individuals rely, it seems very strange that when the woman is in a time of need, she no longer feels comfortable falling back on her support system. At the same time, in a country like the United States where individualism and self-reliance are

The Arab participants agreed that plastic surgery was permitted to correct disfiguration or birth defects but should not be used solely for cosmetic purposes.

not directly affected by the disease often take part in activities to build awareness because the existence of the disease itself is enough for people to want to be involved in finding a cure.

Another example highlighting the structural difference between Arab and American participants related to cosmetic procedures that are often undergone to correct any changes to the body that result from treatment. The Arab participants agreed that plastic surgery was permitted to correct disfiguration or birth defects but should not be used solely for cosmetic purposes. They agreed that resources and money should be spent to help the community rather than the individual. Most American participants thought it is up to the individual to decide whether he/she wants plastic surgery or not and it is not an issue for others to decide if it is purely for cosmetic purposes. It was clear that the different upbringings and societal values of the participants affected their views. The Arab participants believed it was bad that individuals try to alter their appearance to attract the opposite sex while American participants found that acceptable in general and that many people take part in these procedures for their own self-confidence. They disagreed on this matter but they understood that the views of individualism and community responsibility are behind their opinions and they showed a great level of understanding and respect for the differing opinions.

In general and in conclusion, participants agreed that women spend a good span of their lives being reproductive machines giving birth to children, working in their jobs taking care of their families, and raising children. Thus, they are the ones who end up exhausted. So special health care programs must be introduced concerning all women, working women and pregnant women, ALL over the world.

ingrained from an early age, the community gets very involved in bringing awareness to the issue as well as raising money for various treatments. Individuals who are

SIXTH: WOMEN AND POLITICS

In a discussion that involved participants from the U.S., Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine and Jordan, the issue of how to create stronger female leaders was examined. One of the most impressive elements about this particular dialogue was how fluid their conversation and ideas became despite the cultural gap and language barrier. When they started off working together, their main goal was to look at politics from a potential female citizen's perspective. To do that, the group decided to address some of the psychological barriers that restrain women in both societies from greater political participation and how to transcend these barriers. They examined the stereotypes and misconceptions about women in politics. This discussion was very interesting to both sides primarily because it enabled them to realize the commonalities that run in all societies. The participants highlighted the following points:

The participants agreed that the idea of a self-made female politician is still something that is rare in many areas of the world.

- 1- In the U.S., there are fewer women in powerful elected positions such as the Senate or the Presidency than men. Many that are in prestigious positions in politics are appointed such as cabinet positions or the Supreme Court, yet that has been shifting slowly. Many women are involved in lower levels of government and have proved innovative and resilient leaders, but a glass ceiling still exists.
- 2- In the Arab world many states have very few female leaders as well, and many that do exist often have some type of family connection. These types of female politicians lack the legitimacy needed, and often do not break down the negative misconceptions that perpetuate both cultures.
- 3- The participants agreed that the idea of a self-made female politician is still something that is rare in many areas of the world, but do exist in others such

as Palestine. Even in the United States many female politicians do come from political families with existing connections.

- 4- In the Arab world many states have very little mechanisms to create home grown female leaders yet others have a constitutional forced quota system to ensure a certain percentage of female representatives in the legislature.
- 5- There is no doubt that there are huge differences in the level of female political participation between Arab states and the United States, however in many countries there is a positive movement towards greater political participation.
- 6- There are many barriers that female politicians face around the world that prevent the popular support and the election of women. Misconceptions that women politicians face from their constituents include negative stereotypes about women, misconceptions about the role of women and family, and finally misconceptions about religion. Fascinatingly these were barriers that all the participants agreed easily about, finding many different examples of this in their shared societies. This is another point of agreement that transcended peculiarities.
- 7- Where does stereotype end and culture begin? In this group there was some debate/disagreement on the topic regarding the concept of stereotypes versus traditions or culture. For instance, one participant contended that the idea that women are weak, emotional and passive leaders is a negative stereotype that exists in all cultures. Others believed that this was more due to the traditions and culture in both the United States and in the Arab world. The used concepts represented points of contention. For instance a stereotype, a U.S. female participant thought, is something that is not true and a mere label. On the other hand, saying something that is derived from culture and tradition denotes that there is some legitimacy to the argument due to historical evidence and background. Furthermore, to this she argued that historically women have often been given inequitable treatment and not allowed to show the strong leadership capabilities that they had.

Overall this group was in great agreement on the need to increase female political participation in politics and to create strong female leadership in government. They agreed that there were a great number of misconceptions and barriers that women around the world faced in the political sphere. They realized that there needs to be more positive solutions to the problem, which includes creating more awareness about the issue so that there will be a social movement creating more involvement from the government to change laws, to involve the media to change the misconceptions, and for a greater youth movement for change as well.

Another topic discussed by the politics group was how to make strong female leaders. The group examined first the status quo of female leadership in various countries. They ended up with the following conclusions:

- Although women make up one half of the electorate, the proportion of female candidates for public office and, consequently, the number of women elected is quite low. The traditional practice in many political parties and government structures of favoring male leadership continue to impede women's participation in public affairs.
- Government institutions and private enterprise in general do not take full advantage of women's aptitude for high-level management and policy-making; the invaluable contributions they could make to development and democracy are underutilized.
- Overt and covert discrimination mechanisms against women persist in social and political institutions. They can be seen in the ways opportunities are announced and individuals are selected and promoted.
- Women's unequal level of participation in economic life and obstacles derived from their education prevent them from taking their rightful place in society.

Overt and covert discrimination mechanisms against women persist in social and political institutions. They can be seen in the ways opportunities are announced and individuals are selected and promoted.

- It is necessary to strengthen, and to establish means of cooperation among women's organizations, state mass media agencies, and neighborhood and community radio and television networks to conduct ongoing pro-equality campaigns, raise awareness, and devise multifaceted strategies aimed at different sectors.
- It is necessary to promote and guarantee access and equitable participation for women and men in all public and private power structures as an intrinsic aspect of their rights as citizens and as a means of ensuring their participation in developing equal conditions.
- The action steps proposed in this group are aimed essentially at achieving a transformation in the political culture of society and in the cultural patterns that shape family life. The fundamental aim is to use the educational system and the media to promote the principles of gender equity and equal opportunity, and to make women in all walks of life aware of their potential for leadership.
- Women's organizations should, negotiate cooperation agreements with the public and private media (radio, press, and television) to enlist their cooperation in promoting society's awareness of the principles that underlie equal opportunity and gender equity, and in portraying attitudes of respect and tolerance among men and women, through public awareness campaigns about the importance of women's participation in building democracy in Arab countries, and stressing the need to establish shared family responsibilities to facilitate such participation.

A Third topic discussed by this group was related to women in elections and top administrative and political offices. The participants agreed that the gap between rhetoric of gender equality and reality of discrimination exists in both countries. Only seventeen percent of the current U.S. Congress is composed of women while women make up more than half of the population in the United States. Also, women in prominent positions, such as at the head of departments or ministries as well as leaders in parliament provide women with a role model

to show how they can get involved in politics by both voting and running for office and that a vote for a woman is not a lost vote.

They also discussed issues such as Islam and women's participation in politics. Arab participants explained how Islamic law does not prohibit women from running for office but that it was a cultural perception of women that holds them back from being elected. They also discussed the misperception that exists within the United States about Islam limiting the participation of women in politics.

During the discussions, important figures from American politics arose as cases for discussion, such as Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, and the issues surrounding her former candidacy for president in the 2008 elections. Other subjects were raised and paired off such as education, perceptions of women's role in society, the role of women in high office and their implications for other women, the utility and application of a quota system to ensure women's participation and presence in politics and social barriers to women's participation in politics.

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After some discussion, participants came to look at the deep causes around the vast under-representation of women in parliamentary politics, the way

that women and men view each other in the political sphere, the attitude of government towards women's participation in politics, the role that education plays in socializing attitudes towards women in authority positions and several examples of women participating in politics in the Arab world and the U.S. They contrasted the way that female leaders were treated in politics, taking the example of Congresswomen in the U.S., and the first female mayor in Egypt, as well as Louisa Hanoune, the first female to run for president in an Arab state, in Algeria. This helped them to flesh out an approach to tackle the issue. They decided to divide the topic into three questions: 1. why are women underrepresented in parliaments? 2. How does government support for women in politics affect their role? 3. What role does education play in women's role in elections?

These questions were applied to both the American and Arab experiences. In the participants' view, society is often less progressive in its attitude towards women's rights than government is. This necessitates that government take measures to promote civic awareness among female citizens. However, when U.S. participants learned that civic education was not as available in several Arab countries as it is in the U.S., they took a different opinion, that in some cases there are broader priorities than just promoting women's participation and awareness: if a society suffers from high illiteracy and apathy rates, it makes more sense to educate the entire population before focusing on particular sub-groups.

A point of departure between the Arab and U.S. participants was in their attitudes towards whom to hold most immediately accountable for women's lack of political representation. Most Arab participants believed that women themselves were largely to blame for not pulling themselves away from dependence on men in the patriarchal system (they believed that women could break away from social and family constraints if they were truly willing to). Most U.S. participants believed that society and especially men have a responsibility to encourage their daughters and wives to achieve their goals and to participate more fully in society, politics included. The U.S. participants agreed that it is possible for a woman (or anyone else) to break from social constraints only if there is a network of support for them to do so, no individual is stronger than the society that surrounds him or her. Though the Arab and U.S. participants' views did not alter after their deliberations, they agreed that objectively there is truth in both views.

The last topic that was discussed by the political group was gender quota.

As the discussions demonstrated, quota is a very controversial subject. In fact, some considered it to be an antidemocratic way to make women participate in politics because it gives them privileges that could be harmful to male candidates; others saw it as the only method that allows women to practice their rights since we are living in a society dominated by men.

Supporters, mainly female participants from both the U.S. and Arab countries, argued that they are not represented strongly enough; therefore, naturally they supported the implementation of gender quota in all elected positions. The discussion shifted towards the instrumentality of quota systems. Some critics of the quota system, Arabs and Americans, believed that it undermines the guiding principles of democratic thought which state that people should choose their representatives freely and without artificial boundaries. And even if one overlooks this caveat, if a certain percentage of representatives are mandated to be women then this creates tension over where these women come from and disenfranchises the people. Others thought that women, especially in the Arab world, will need institutional crafting that would allow them to get the opportunity to participate in politics, at least for some time.

Some critics of the quota system, Arabs and Americans, believed that it undermines the guiding principles of democratic thought which state that people should choose their representatives freely and without artificial boundaries.

Concerning the implementation of quota, the supporters argued that the quota might take two broad forms: the candidate quota and the seat quota.

The former means that a law mandates that a specified percentage of political party candidates are be females. The pros and cons regarding this system vary. Some argued that it doesn't guarantee the access of women to parliament because people might not vote for them so the main purpose behind its implementation is no longer insured. On the other hand, this kind of quota is considered more democratic than the other one because it allows people to freely choose their representatives.

The second type of quota system has two mechanisms: to allocate a member of already existing parliamentary seats to women or, to increase the number of parliamentary seats and allocate the new seats to women.

In the Arab world, for instance, one of the participants argued that, it is preferred to have the second form because the parliament is the institution that is supposed to vote for the quota bill to become a law. Since the parliament consists mainly of men, this law will fail at gaining the members' vote, because they will lose their seats to women. So, by adding new seats we would fulfill the ultimate benefit of both sides.

Finally, it is argued that, the quota is a temporary solution for the under-representation of the women until the patriarchal mentalities give way to more respect for women public role.

The issue of gender quota was not supported in general by the American side. Their position on this topic was conflicted because they do believe that they need more women in positions of power but were not convinced that quotas would be a positive addition to government. According to them the main obstacle ahead of women's public role is the social constructs that societies have long held and institutional changes have failed to change these beliefs. The U.S. participants thought the most important issue was changing people's opinions, educating and training women in politics and creating a political culture that accepts and promotes the participation of women. In the United States, Congress has currently a small percentage of women (only 15%). Most U.S. participants believed that quotas of any sort are highly undemocratic in nature. Apparently they were highly influenced by the American view of democracy and the importance of giving equal choice and opportunity to everyone. By mandating quotas in elections, we would be limiting the opportunities of other groups and limiting the choices that voters are given. Quotas raise many questions because they tamper with a system that promotes giving all decision making power to the population and respecting the results of elections. For an American, these principles are held very dear and the suggestion of altering them is not easily accepted.

The American side showed more sympathy to the idea of encouraging parties to nominate women. If encouraged, parties would begin to seek out and train highly

skilled women who could really be competitive in elections. There is also the option of adding seats to a government body for women only. This might deter women from progress towards regular seats but might be a good option for the United States where regional representation makes quotas hard to implement. In every case, participants agreed that quotas are not ideal and should not be permanent but be a temporary means to promote the election of women.

Though many participants were not advocates for quotas, they thought they may be appropriate for some countries, given that the population supports them.

In conclusion, both groups of participants agreed that women are under-represented and that a certain aspect of culture, such as traditional gender roles, limits the role of women in politics more than law itself. There was a general belief that women should have the same opportunity to participate in politics as men.

Instead of focusing on differences, there was a lot of discussion on controversial issues in which both the United States as well as the Arab world are facing difficulties. This led participants to see each other in terms of the issues that brought them together rather than those that divide them and fracture their cultural understanding.

SEVENTH: WOMEN AND MEDIA

The media group discussed several subtopics including the impact of women's image in media on the lives of women. After a lengthy discussion, the participants agreed that the media has both a positive and negative effect on women's lives throughout the world. The way in which the media portrays women has a very influential role in the daily lives of women all around the world.

Arab participants argued that in the Arab world, women are taking several initiatives to secure equal rights in multiple facets of their daily lives; while in America the process started a long time ago and it seems to be paying off.

The female Arab participants were very adamant about how women in the media were representing a fake image of what women should look like. The dialogue went into detailed discussion about how the media represented women from the participants' personal experiences. Participants found that it was important to differentiate between the positive and negative impacts the media has on the lives of women.

Participants agreed that the positive effects of the media on women are based really on the educating aspect which the media has on the population. First and foremost, providing women in countries where it is rare for women to be successful in the workplace, with role models of successful women around the world, is a major positive contribution to "right-sizing" the image of women among the viewers or readers.

The major example which the group discussed was Hilary Clinton and her role in attempting to break through the male barrier in United States politics. Yet, the success of women is not only exclusive to the Western side of

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the globe; several examples of Arab women were given as models of how an Arab woman can be successful in workplaces. Arab participants highlighted the positive role played by Arab prominent women who speak for the rights of women and the positive contribution they make in the lives of other women. Another major positive impact of women's images in the media is the ability to educate the public. At the beginning of their discussion, participants were mainly focusing on the Arab world but later they began to discuss how all these notions pertain to the United States.

Discussion of the negative impact of media on women's lives and images highlighted several problems pertaining to media in the United States. A clear negative impact for media in the U.S., and increasingly in the Arab media, is the misuse of women as icons of physical beauty and tools for marketing. This misuse of women portrays women as shallow human beings. The image of women on television was a topic which the participants were really adamant about having changed. Yet, after they discussed what the reasons behind having models and women in advertising and marketing, it was agreed upon that it was really a subject that would be difficult to change. Especially because it is a very successful form of advertising for a number of products and companies, taking women out of the media as a form of advertising for products was not a realistic goal, several American participants argued. A more important problem that was brought up was the problem of women being represented as objects, with a major example being Hugh Hefner, the owner of Playboy. His fame and fortune is completely derived from his "objectification" of women. American and Arab participants

Most participants in the media group stated that the dialogue really did not change many views that they had before, although it provided them with a different perspective on how women felt about the media in both societies.

thought that these negative aspects really hurt the lives of women by providing a false, unhealthy image.

Most participants in the media group stated that the dialogue

really did not change many views that they had before, although it provided them with a different perspective on how women felt about the media in both societies.

Within the context of their discussion, the media group addressed female stereotyping. They analyzed the dynamics of physical and cultural stereotypes. They approached the first topic with the understanding of the often used saying “sex sells,” and that media is a commercial entity. Thus Profit will; motivate the content of the media production. In terms of advertising, images of women as slender, perfectly formed objects are pervasive around the world. Participants discussed this “objectification” of the female image. Which they thought is by no means is a new trend. Women have been used as a seductive advertising tool at least since the spread of mass media and this continues to be used for the simple reason that it works. Participants referred to the negative impulsions of this situation which include the great deal of pressure it puts on young women to be attractive. These pressures have had many negative effects on women and their relationships. Participants pointed out to examples like arguing eating disorders and a rise in plastic surgery.

This expanded the discussion further to include more than media. The media cannot be blamed solely for stuffing provocative advertising down the throat of consumers. Consumer culture continues to respond to this marketing strategy. This raises the question of whether media reflects or creates this trend in consumer culture.

In terms of physical stereotypes the participants discussed the many similarities found in Western and non-Western media outlets. While the specifics of individual advertisements and media productions vary, most feminine stereotypes seem to be near universal. This represents an almost unattainable norm for women throughout the world and puts pressure on young girls to focus on cosmetic issues that should not be of concern to them.

Much of the discussion focused on the cultural stereotypes that are pervasive in the media. These stereotypes range from professional to familial. Again,

participants found that many of these stereotypes were identical throughout global media – though to different degrees.

They expanded on this further to discuss women's role in the workplace. Often, media portrays women as secretaries, nurses or maids – all low level positions that require little decision-making ability. It is presumed therefore that women are unable to hold positions of greater importance – either for lack of education or intelligence. Obviously there are many women holding positions of influence on every level throughout the world. There has been a trend, in the Arab world and in the U.S. at least, to start showing more empowered women in media and doing so presents a more accurate representation of real life.

One thing some American participants did not expect was their discussion of how women's image in media affects men. They talked about how there are also stereotypes for men in society,

these too bridge from physical to cultural. In the cultural role, men are expected to provide for their families. They discussed the importance of this role division in Arab society. Arab participants stated that men are projected as a failure if they are not employed

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and cannot provide for their family. Particularly in the media, men will not be cast as normal unless they are successful in business. While this is generally true in American media as well, there is a level of tolerance for men who are not bread winners, some American participants argued.

Participants were not surprised about how many similarities there were in American and Arab perspectives on female stereotypes in media. They believed that around the world people have accepted many of these stereotypes as the norm, and in fact in much of the world they are the norm (with regard to social stereotypes only.) The problem is that the media does not provide sufficient

diversity in its image of women. There are not enough models of successful and powerful professional women. In the discussion they came up with many of the same points without difficulty or hesitation. This proved both that these stereotypes exist and that we as consumers are aware of them.

Another type of discussion erupted regarding empowerment of women and female role models in the media. The participants argued that the role of women in the media may be analyzed from a myriad of perspectives and is a topic that may have varied interpretations depending on the audience. Some participants argued that media is a crucial aspect in advancing women's rights and an important means of promoting self-confidence and self-esteem to women and young girls.

They all agreed that although the media frequently objectifies women and portrays them in stereotypical lights, especially in the sphere of advertisement, the media also has the unique capability to empower women. They decided that a major obstacle in women's issues is the fact that their struggle is often hidden or deemed inappropriate to talk about publicly. Domestic violence and conflicts within the family, among other injustices women face, are viewed as private matters. Media—a network umbrella of social communications—facilitates the spread of ideas and information which makes mass awareness and empowerment possible. Female role models in particular are able to raise awareness of these issues and are capable of inspiring other women to confront these obstacles.

The participants used a suitable example of a role model company that is demonstrated through Dove's recent campaign to promote their products with women of all shapes, sizes, and colors. In contrary to the famous "sex sells" term that is often used as justification for the objectification and degradation of women in the media, Dove's initiative is a way that industries and companies can take a public stance against the degradation of women and can promote the empowerment of women.

Most participants stated that this dialogue has allowed them to open their minds to different views and perspectives on empowerment of women in the media.

The majority of the group agreed on many aspects of the topic, they were all able to relate their topics and make significant connections with each subtopic. An important issue that was brought up within the group is the fact that large populations of women are expected to uphold domestic expectations and remain in the home, limiting their possibility of an education. This point made several participants realize that a limited access to education leaves these women to turn to media as their only means of knowledge. Limited channels of education exacerbate the media's effects and increase the need for female empowerment.

Several American youth stated that participating in a dialogue with Arab participants made them realize that despite the different perspectives of women in the media that one may have based on their background and life experiences; there still exists a global issue of the portrayal of women and its effects on society. Thus empowerment of women through media and channeled through role models, is imperative to female progress in society.

Another dimension addressed in the dialogue was how the media affects women. It was stated that the media plays a crucial role in understanding the fundamental values of a culture and expressing the social norms to viewers outside the general audience. Within recent years, women's issues have become a social platform for media coverage in the United States and many Arab countries. Women's role in the secular community has changed drastically in the last forty years: beginning as domestic caretakers and slowly progressing into successful businesswomen.

The media has had a great deal of influence within this transformation. The portrayal of successful and educated women in the daily news and on popular TV-shows has given women a positive representation of what is socially and politically possible. Important female role models such as, Oprah, Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton are just a few examples of women in the United States who have excelled in their field, argued several American participants. Arab participants gave similar examples as well.

Motivational talk shows have also become increasingly popular within recent years, helping women breakthrough traditional norms. This type of support,

which is driven by the media, helps to motivate young women of the United States and Arab countries.

The media also acts as a uniting tool among women by providing an outlet for public knowledge. Without the news and other forms of education, women would be powerless. The media helps to provide equal rights and equal opportunities for women, which would otherwise be overseen.

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would otherwise be overseen. Through the media, women see ways to better themselves, their families and their country, and thus, help to strengthen the societal perception of women and their role in the community.

Women also feel the negative impacts of the media. In Arab societies and in the United States, women who have acquired professional careers are now facing social challenges inflicted by the media. Because traditional norms demand the importance of raising a family, the media has begun to depict women as the “super power”, or dual-provider—working as a nurturing caregiver and career-driven professional.

Interestingly, Arab and American participants found that the political structure of any culture leaves little room for educated women to take on the demands of a working mother. Women struggle to hold an intermediary position between the biological and social demands of their culture. This sense of perfection, both physically and intellectually, has put a great deal of pressure on American women in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, these demands are not equally represented between genders, as men have solely been given the role of the provider.

These issues are also seen in most Arab countries, but on a smaller scale, Arab participants argued. For example, the Arab media encourages women to get more involved in the workforce, but to not forget their traditional role. Within time, Arab women will also struggle with these hard decisions.

Another issue discussed by the media group is related to how often and to what extent women's issues are presented in the news and how more women in editorial or production positions would affect the number and depth of these stories. The group's discussion of the prevalence of stories related to issues about women in news and talk show media platforms and the noticeable trend upward in this area over time took them to discuss who sets the agenda for media outlets. The debate focused on whether the rise of women-oriented programming was simply a response to increased advertisers' awareness of the market potential of a large, and for the most part largely ignored, segment of the population or if more women were being given creative control over content and influencing the scope and target of the shows. Are there now more programs directed at women because it was found that women liked television and thus could be induced to extend their viewing times, and subsequently their exposure to advertisements, by introducing new shows that would appeal to them or was there a social explanation? Have producers and networks come to understand that there are social questions related to gender and the role and position of women that news and talk shows are uniquely capable of addressing and can this explain the rise of women oriented programming?

It was almost consensual among the group that the main impetus for the development of these shows is market forces. More women eager to watch television has led to more programs directed at a female audience. However, some participants took the position that there are two other realities 1) that even if inspired by economics these shows and news reports provide a valuable service to both women in particular and the society as a whole and 2) that these programs would be better served by having a strong female influence.

It was believed that information and varieties of perspectives should be open, free flowing and available to everyone. Shows that focus on the issues facing women, be they domestic violence, traditional roles versus career choices, religious roles, sex education and health, may be controversial in some cultures

but the end result is a better informed public and individuals better capable of making decisions with regard to their own lives.

Equally important is the editorial perspective of these stories and the depth given to topics of debate. To have a comprehensive view of topics about, and important to, women, there needs to be a female contribution in the creation process. Female news reporters may ask questions that men would not think of. Women producers may introduce topics of debate and perspectives that their male counterparts may not have thought of. For instance, a show currently running on one of the local NBC channels features four women discussing issues deemed by the producers important to women. American participants believed a show like this would only be successful in the long run if women have at least equal creative control of the content. It is not enough to have women on screen, there needs to be women writers and producers providing their experience and perspective to the whole process of putting the show on air. The reason is that women and men, while equally able to write good stories and programs, often have different perceptions based on different upbringings and experiences with the world, society and culture. Women add a valuable voice to an industry historically run by men.

Participants agreed upon a short list of suggestions:

- 1- Producing high quality cartoon movies which show and teach children about women empowerment, because this will help us to get a well educated generation in order to support women in many ways.
- 2- Changing the old image of women that they are the only ones responsible for household chores (eg. Washing cloths, cooking, taking care of children, etc). There is a need to show professional women at work.
- 3- Women should be encouraged to take part in whole media circles and professions including writing, directing and anchoring shows that are not solely directed at female issues.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By creating an opportunity of exchange between young American and Arab participants, the Arab Western Youth Dialogue on Women's Issues has been a forum of intellectual stimulation to bridge the gap and enlighten both groups' knowledge of current issues involving women within the two areas of the globe. The participants discussed the most sensitive and controversial issues in both societies such as rape and abortion among others. Upon examining the evaluations and feedback of the participants, there is consensus that this dialogue promoted cultural understanding and mutual respect among the participants.

During the discussions they agreed that women throughout the Arab world and the United States face common challenges, though at different degrees and in different forms. One of these challenges is the weak political participation of women compared to men. In general women do not tend to participate in political elections, and also have an insignificant percentage of representatives in a parliament/government. Women in both societies as well are subject to different sorts of stereotypes. It is arguable what the causes of these situations are, but the participants' main conclusion is that religion should not be the explanation to use or factor to blame. The participants agreed that the main common obstacle in front of women's equal rights is that there is not enough cultural, social and legal awareness among women and men towards women's rights. Religions as well as traditions are the easiest and the most inaccurate explanations people came up with, participants argued. The dialogue was a very constructive exercise. It was a unanimous conclusion that women's awareness regarding their legal protections is a very relevant issue and integral part of women's legal and social participation. It was also concluded unanimously that there is a necessity for campaigns to help women understand more fully the potential of the legal frameworks intended to protect them.

The participants had their differences as well. There were points of clear cultural discrepancies regarding issues such as sending the elderly to assisted houses; the right to abortion and sex education; and genital mutilation.

Talking about these sensitive issues revealed the differences in culture and society as well as similarities. For example, while all participants believed women should be empowered with knowledge to protect against STDs and unwanted pregnancies, the methods for providing that information must be different between regions.

It was clear that the different upbringings and societal values of the participants affected their views. The Arab participants believed it was bad that individuals try to alter their appearance to attract the opposite sex while American participants found that acceptable in general and others argued that many people take part in these procedures for their own self-confidence

The participants discussed how in the Arab World, child support laws differ from those of the U.S. In the Arab world, the father is required to financially provide for and support his child for as long as necessary, and in many cases for the entirety of the child's life. Although there are various interpretations of the Shari'a, it is a norm for the father to support his child until marriage and in any other time of need.

After learning about the child support laws in the Arab world and taking all of these facts into consideration, some American participants have established a position in favor of the child support laws of the Arab world over those of the U.S.

Regarding the quota system to empower women in the Arab world, some American participants were not sure of the impact of this system. They likened it to affirmative action: the wrong progress in the right direction.

Overall, participants were more eager to listen and learn from each other than judging and criticizing each other. Questions were generally directed at gaining more knowledge, not proving an opponent wrong.

An Arab participant said: "I found this discussion very interesting and a great experience for us all. It was an opportunity for all of us to exchange thoughts and clarify many cultural and religious misconceptions."

Another Arab participant stated that “I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in the Arab/Western youth dialogue on women’s issues. This experience has not only allowed me to hear different perspectives on women in the media but has made me realize the similar opinions we share despite our vastly different backgrounds and cultures.”

Another Arab participant commented: “I want to conclude that before I went into this discussion I was really doubtful that I would reach any kind of understanding with my fellow American colleagues, but after really getting in the discussion I realized that there is a lot of mutual and common understanding regarding all kinds of issues that we have discussed.”

Another Arab participant said: “I have found this dialogue very enriching and beneficial. I have grown as a person by learning that we might do things differently according to our religion, tradition and customs but after all we are human beings and such dialogues increase our tolerance and acceptance of each other.”

American participants’ general evaluation of the dialogue was very positive, as an American participant put it, “the experience I obtained from this dialogue was a clear example of the need for understanding others before judging them. It was a crucial point towards the understanding of the importance of dialogues. Dialogues similar to this one play a crucial role in global politics. It is unfortunate that most of this information is not accessible for participants outside the region and lack of political dialogue can lead to a clash of civilizations.”

Another American participant stated that “in conclusion I would like to note that the AWO Dialogue was a life changing experience and if every year participants from all over the world can sit down and have healthy debates, it will make the world at least a bit knowledgeable about the Arab world which includes more than twenty countries and has more than a hundred ethnic groups.”

Another U.S. participant said: “I enjoyed the dialogue, and feel that it helped enrich my opinions. I am better able to understand another cultural point of

view. I believe both sides were able to learn many different aspects of the foreign culture, as well as being able to see that the cultures are incredibly diverse.”

Participants agreed as well that this dialogue was an important vehicle for ignorance elimination and culture demystification. As one participant stated “as hard as it is to not generalize or play advocate for your country, the dialogue helped me formulate my thoughts more coherently and understand other points of view. It is intellectually stimulating to engage in dialogue with educated individuals from the U.S. within this short time period, I have learned and accepted different opinions on varying subjects as well as shared opinions on these same issues.” Another quote goes as follows: “Encouraging healthy dialogue and even debate is a necessity for educational advancement and implementation. I am really thankful for this opportunity.”

According to one of the participants “I learned more than I thought I would learn; it was an amazing opportunity hearing the various opinions group members had.”

The participants came up with a list of possible suggestions and recommendations for governments to simultaneously increase the capabilities and efficiency of their efforts to allow women to flourish in a state of wellbeing so that they may fully participate in and develop society.

- (1)Develop and pass sound legislations intended to protect women’s rights.
- (2)Educate officials in the justice sector regarding the importance of the enforcement of women’s legal protections.
- (3)Encourage organizations in civil society to educate women regarding their rights, and allow investigative campaigns by NGOs to check the efficiency of judicial proceedings regarding women’s legal protections.
- (4)Launch state-sponsored media campaigns to keep the population informed about new or existing laws, especially geared towards those who have finished their compulsory education.

- (5) Build a classroom curriculum to educate young men and women about their legal protections.
- (6) In conclusion, both groups of participants agreed that women are under-represented and that a certain aspect of culture, such as traditional gender roles, limits the role of women in politics more than law itself. There was a general belief that women should have the same opportunity to participate in politics as men.

For sure this dialogue was an excellent opportunity for participants to discuss controversial issues in which both the United States as well as the Arab world are facing difficulties. This led participants to see each other in terms of the issues that brought them together rather than those that divide them and fracture their cultural understanding.

PHOTOS FROM THE DIALOGUE







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