

Western Ideals of Gender Equality: Contemporary Middle Eastern Women

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This essay will illustrate that Western ideals are highly relevant to an understanding of the roles played by women in contemporary Middle East (ME) societies and will highlight the need for cultural sensitivity as well as universal commitment when using such 'Western' notions of gender equality. The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) will be used to frame this debate. Edward Said's (2003) *Orientalism* will highlight the colonial legacies that are still present in post-colonial thinking and the complexities of achieving universal equality through this theoretical framework. Egypt, the Palestinian population, monarchical states such as Saudi Arabia, the theocracy of Iran and the secular yet Jewish state of Israel will be considered with their specificities that aid their patriarchal construction of gender roles. Patriarchy in Arab tribalism, religion, politics, economics and culture/society will also contribute to this critic on the relevance of 'Western' notions and ideals of gender equality (Western feminism) for women's roles in the ME. Examination of equality between citizens in Middle Eastern societies as against the notion of universal equality will also be examined, aiming to argue how universality can be in conflict with cultural relativity. Due to word limits of this essay, discussion will only briefly consider the impact of economic constraints on women's roles in the ME, however it is vital for this to be acknowledged as important.

'Discrimination against women' is:

'Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms on the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field' (CEDAW 1979).

This is essential to analysing equality to counter women's human rights' violations whilst supporting universal equality and the development of women's social status where geographical, geopolitical position nor culture should be seen as variables to women's equality (CEDAW 1979). Nevertheless roles played by women in contemporary Middle Eastern states vary between states, specific peoples and communities. At times these women become homogenised as 'Middle Eastern Women' opposing the loaded term of 'Western feminism' and 'the West' (Hamid 2006, Tohidi 2003, Ottaway 2004, Lazreg 2009). This reductionism stems from a colonial legacy of the '*Orientalism*' where the Orient and the Occident were imagined and constructed as opposing forces of domination and oppression; masculine and feminine; man and woman. The binaries continue with West/East, Christian/Muslim and Religion/Secularism. Said (2003) posits: 'Orientalism is...a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans against all 'those' non-Europeans...the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures' (p.7). So the colonial European/Western *Occident* is the dominant force for modernity within the *Orient*, an hegemonic force for change and also an oppressor of ME peoples.

Malkia Mehdi (1993) agreeing, refers to the colonially eroticised 'Oriental' woman: 'Such an ethnocentric pictorial erotic discourse conjures up the picture of a negative Eastern femininity...systematically devalued...set in contrast to a more positive and refined view of Western femaleness' (p.24). Therefore the CEDAW risks being interpreted as a

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form of neo-colonialism from the West/Occident, synonymous with a modern, political, democratic 'crusade' to save non-western women (Tohidi 2003). So the 'East' can use this binary to its advantage, rejecting universal conventions in the name of oppression and cultural relativity. Consequently many Western feminists may avoid discussion of gender in the ME because of these misconceptions of Euro-centrism (Tohidi 2003, Ottaway 2004). However Western media also manipulates these discourses on equality, picturing Islamic women as only veiled and incarcerated in their homes. Thus women risk becoming 'the symbolic battleground on which the epic struggle between Islam and secularism, East and West [is] fought' (Hamid 2006, p.88). This manipulation was obvious in the French law of 2011 banning the public wearing of the full-face veil in a country with an Islamic population of approximately 5 million, great ties to the ME and whose constitution validates equality, democracy and secularism (Laurence and Vaisse 2006). Therefore Western notions of gender equality are relevant to the ME in order for the West to be held accountable since the colonial period. However feminists, both Western and 'Middle Eastern' face great difficulties when working to improve women's lives in certain Middle Eastern societies because of stereotyping and 'othering' constructed out of colonialism and Orientalism. Therefore these constructions must not inhibit progress, and it is through their deconstruction that progress towards equality may be achieved. Hamid (2006) agrees: 'if we take this line of reasoning...each person will only be able to speak for him or herself. The end result is a debilitating...reverse Orientalism' (p.88). Thus any form of discrimination should be eradicated and the model of Western gender ideals have relevance for women in Middle Eastern societies as they enable a measure of equality whilst idealistically hold an ultimate aspiration whether relative or universal.

Cultural relativism holds the potential to inhibit progress towards equality if every time a human right's law pertaining to women is constrained by a cultural specificity. A Western voice on universal rights can encourage women's voices from within Middle Eastern societies to speak a little louder. The Occidental and the Oriental constructs, whilst in opposition, exist only because of one-another. Meyda Yegenoglu (1999) wrote of desire creating the colonial dominator and dominated: 'colonial identification as a process in which both the 'Western subject' and the 'Oriental other' are mutually implicated...thus neither exists as a fully constituted entity' (p.58). Thus the dominant occident is controlled by the desire for the oriental woman and neither can function autonomously. 'She' becomes 'his' desire and therefore 'him'. Yegenoglu's (1999) discussion refers to desire as able to construct not just the self but also the other and so binary survival is 'mutually implicated'. This is found in constructs of nationalism where anti-colonial Palestine's national identity sought 'to dissociate national identity from any colonial domination', instead in 1948 it was constructed against and through the masculine Zionist 'rape' of the Palestinian land, establishing the Israeli state (Hamid 1995, p.470). Ergo the Palestinian masculine population becomes the protector of the motherland whilst Palestinian women become 'secondary and supportive in the narrative of nationalism': the mother, reproducing the masculine Palestinian nation (Massad 1995, p.472). Thus the construct is one of male soldiers upholding the security of the Palestinian nation (female) and fighting to regain the homeland (woman). This gender construction facilitates conflict, re-enforcing Palestinian nationalism as anti-colonial and anti-Zionist; a national struggle constructed through gender of a Palestinian state and Orientalism. Therefore autonomous binary identity constructions are simplistic and static. Cultural Relativity and the fear of Euro-centrism should not hinder the advancement of women's rights, ending discriminatory practises women face in the ME. Therefore through reconstructing 'the self' there is possibility of reconstructing the 'other'. The relevance of Western notions of women's equality becomes very important for women's roles in the ME as a universal model and equality is attainable where Middle Eastern states are held more accountable for the subjugation of women's roles in society.

The CEDAW (2003) states: 'State parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all political and public life'. Israel, a supposedly secular yet Jewish state holds deeply rooted, traditional patriarchal structures that promote power, state security and nationalism (Hertzog 2005). Tamar Hermann and Gila Kurtz (1995) maintain: 'During the formative years of the state, many carried with them deeply-rooted patriarchal traditions and looked disapprovingly on women entering the political arena' (p.452). The political institutions and parties of Israel are therefore patriarchal supported by Carole Pateman's (1997) definition of patriarchy as 'a subjugation of women [and] ... a form of political right that all men exercise by virtue of being men' (pp.19-20). Women's parties were kept out of the Knesset until the 1990's when they gained a more public voice. However they are still predominantly dismissed as marginal to security and political interests. Nevertheless Golda Meir became Israel's fourth prime minister in March 1969 to 1974. She was constructed as the 'matriarch' of the Jewish people, the personification of Zionism. Since 1948 Israel's conscripted army, the Israel Defense Force (IDF), has included

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women and remains a prominent force in the country. Pateman (1997) questions the difficult definitions of 'patriarchy' and whether 'rule by fathers' is an inherent part of all human society or whether cultural, family and social variables should be included in Western feminism's analysis of patriarchy. This suggests that male-dominated structures are not peculiar to specific religions such as Islam rather they are constructed from kinship ties, tribes and communities that relegate women's roles. Nevertheless it highlights the continual importance of cultural relativity within debates about equality (Haghighat-Sordellini 2010). These examples offer complex constructions where national incentives also influence attitudes about the usefulness of women in public life. Therefore a definitive universal or 'western' measure of women's subjugation within a particular society or cultural group, promoting equal rights becomes very relevant as it questions the patriarchal, military and political implications of a women's subjugation in the ME. It also suggests that the relevance of Western equality in countering such discrimination in society is paramount as nationalist rhetoric could be reversed, supporting peace instead of conflict.

Institutional democracy provides the foundation for women to break through patriarchies. However the concept of democracy emanates from Western 'civilisation' and could itself carry neo-colonial elements of domination. There also remain cultural norms and values that inhibit and obstruct women's equality in the ME. A top-down institutional, 'democratic' emancipation also needs a bottom-up approach when deconstructing the roles of women in Middle Eastern societies. Marina Ottaway (2004) discusses the nature of democracy and women's rights in Islamic Arab states and sees the necessity of democratic institutions as 'accountable to the citizens [to curb]...power through a system of checks and balances' (p.11). Women's equality becomes a marker of the development of democracy within a country: 'pressuring Arab governments to recognise the rights of women...undertaking projects to improve their lives addresses the most fundamental obstacles to democracy: the unchecked power of strong executives' (Ottaway 2004, p.11). So 'equality' becomes an index of a country's ethical, institutional and economic development (Hermann and Kurtz 1995, Hatem 1994, Ramazani 1993). A top-down approach can formally change woman's roles when institutions and legislation offers a new political framework but the extent to which this institutional democracy trickles down to the population is variable due to a state's political/religious structures, the economics of a country and the demography of a particular state. Therefore having universal norms enables frameworks outside state structures to influence change, underpinning the importance of such 'Western' notions of gender equality to the roles played by women in the ME. However these universal conventions must not be abused by states to wage-war on the people they are aiming to free such as American rhetoric for intervention in Afghanistan in 2001.

In Arab and Islamic culture, family and kinship ties are fundamental units of socio-economic activity and the most formative and influential unit of identity where every family member, especially women, are responsible for upholding the family 'honour' (Karmi 1993, Barakat in Fernea 1985). *The Guardian* (20/03/2012) describes that 87% of women still report physical, psychological, sexual abuse or forced marriages, women are still controlled by family patriarchy and patriarchal mechanisms of state legislation in Afghanistan: '...An Afghan woman...was imprisoned after she was raped by a relative... the case received international attention [and even after] the Afghan president offered her a pardon she...[married] the man who raped her to avoid social problems outside of wedlock' (The Guardian 20/03/2012, p.19). So women are maintained to the private sphere where family and patriarchal states structures control most aspects of their lives (Karmi, 1993, Ramazani 1993, Hatem 1994, Barakat 1985). The CEDAW states: 'cultural patterns which define the public realm as man's world and the domestic sphere as women's domain are strongly targeted...[affirming] the equal responsibilities of both sexes' (CEDAW 2003). This seeks to eliminate the spatial differentiation of women and men as a woman's lack of autonomy impedes her access to equality. Thus in Islamic states women's inequality because of the cultural and religious norms must be addressed by legislation but also efforts to change public perceptions. The relevance of Western notions of equality become crucial to women in the ME, motivated to step from their confinement. However there is a lack of cultural transparency and women are socially and economically constrained by the patriarchy, unable to use these conventions to their advantage should they so wish.

In many Islamic and Arab countries a women's position results from Islam's influence on the law and social policy (Alvi 2005, p.143). Modernity, progress, secularism and liberal democracy are equated with Western neo-colonialism, risking provocation of fundamentalist Islamic values even when modernisation can offer many useful ways forward (Alvi 2005, Haghighat-Sordellini 2010). Nesta Ramazani (1993) and Mervat Hatem (1994) argue that feminists and Western liberal democracies have seen secularism as the most appropriate means of women's

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advancement in the ME. However many Islamist parties cling to notions of the family as the basic unit of socio-economic activity to gain political support, rejecting the secular state for not incorporating religious specificities, '[trying] to replicate pre-Islamic social structures and apply them to the modern era' (Alvi 2005, p.145, Haghighat-Sordellini 2010). This is further compounded by economic situations of specific countries where such parties use social welfare through the mosque as well as 'democratised' institutions to gain support, reconfirming the woman's place in patriarchal societies. As Haghighat-Sordellini (2010) states: 'Islam [becomes] another vehicle used to perpetuate male control...in times of actual or perceived political [or economic] failure, Islam becomes fundamentalist in nature to...destroy any force bringing social change upon the population' (p.39). Political activity becomes bound up with Islam and *sharia law*, obstructing the democratic process, curtailing the advancement of women's rights, rejecting secularism and stopping any political protest or disagreement to maintain authority, prevent change and curtail external influence. Since the 'Arab Springs' in 2010-2011, in Egypt and Tunisia the Muslim Brotherhood and Ennahda Islamist party have used women as spokespeople, a symbolic gesture falsely illustrating 'democratic' change. It falsely illustrates Islamism as non-discriminatory, showing it can play a part in politics even in secular states. But this public voice when examined indicates very superficial reform. Here the CEDAW provides both a framework for analysing gender discrimination in the ME, a universal ideal from which to work for gender equality whilst also maintaining a framework to speak out against such extreme and fundamentalist Islamic views.

Nevertheless sharia law (law based on Islam) does influence social policy in more conservative Islamic shi'ite states where cultural practices of veiling, female genital mutilation (FGM) and stoning become normalised (Tohidi 2003). This patriarchy limits women's freedom of choice and self-determination and many women are unable to pursue education and employment outside their homes. In Afghanistan poverty and rural/urban disparities reinforce patriarchal societal norms whilst *sharia* prevents women entering the workforce whilst casting men as the sole contributors to the household (Papps 1993). In theocracies such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, Islam and sharia law play a dominant role in politics (Alvi 2005). However Nazi Ramazani (1993) suggests the theocratic state of Iran has been 'introducing progressive reforms affecting women [in] areas traditionally most resistant to change' (p.409). In Iran many women are able to be educated and hold powerful positions both in government and in other areas of work. Statistics suggest that in 1986/7 admissions for women into dentistry and audiology were equal to that of men and from 2005 to 2010 51% of women were in 'third-level' education (Ramazani 1993, UN Data accessed: 10/05/2012). This shows that education is accessible in Iran for women however admission to university is dependent on passing exams concerning Islamic theology, reaffirming the importance of religion in this patriarchy (Ramazani 1993). In contrast divorce and marriage laws have been reformed to the extent that prenuptial agreements can be made and women can gain a share of property upon divorce (Ramazani 1993). Iran may be seen as a great reformist theocratic state but there are great juxtapositions, as women are made to veil, invisible in public. In Saudi Arabia the power of Wahabism has created debate over whether gender segregation should be reformed. In 2011/2012 women have been given voting rights but are still not permitted to drive. There is also great debate about whether women should be allowed to take part in the Olympic games in London 2012 as it is seen to contravene Islamic dogma.

Although amending laws and allowing women more choice in many cultural aspects of their life, the underlying currents of Islamic patriarchy obstructs equality. Veiling can be a women's choice or an imposed 'choice' by immediate family and community. She is protected from the male gaze whilst incarcerated. Nowhere in the Quran does it stipulate women should veil nor does it specify 'modesty', this is a cultural interpretation of the specific *sura* relating to 'modesty' that can be manipulated for purposes of religion, honour and cultural identity (Tohidi 2005, Lazreg 2004). There is emphasis on the bride's honour and virginity in marriage and many see the obliteration of the beauty, hair and face of a woman as her protection. These interpretations of veiling seem vehemently reductionist with their emphasis on the sexualised Arab man and the promiscuous Arab woman. Women here are oppressed, objectified and reduced to their bodies. Taken a step further in Egypt and Yemen many women suffer the psychologically and physically trauma of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), another cultural practice that has become confused with religious dogma. In Egypt (2005) it was estimated that the prevalence of FGM for women aged 15-49 years was 95.8% (World Health Organisation). Such practices deny women sexual pleasure and FGM carries great health risks (World Health Organisation). It is here that Western ideals of gender equality and universal application become imperative. They offer alternatives and options to women socially constrained and obliterated to the private sphere where they are physically and psychologically vulnerable. It speaks out against horrendous acts of violence where women in Middle Eastern societies are unable.

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In conclusion Western notions of gender equality are relevant to the roles of women in the Middle East but these Western ideals in Middle Eastern societies require necessary sensitivity and absolute universal commitment. Cultural relativity cannot obstruct the advancement of women's equality in the ME and women universally. If women's rights are used as propaganda for state intervention as seen in Afghanistan in 2001 then these conventions become misinterpreted as neo-colonial, continuing the ongoing struggle for women's emancipation and empowerment. The support for fundamentalist Islamic parties of the ME suggests that the gender equality enshrined in the CEDAW, still has many governments and societies constructing these ideals as incompatible with the Islamic state and culture. Reform in these patriarchies must emerge from within, below and above, implicating the legislatures, the governments, the populace and the individual. Discrimination is a universal issue not just an issue for the Occident and the Orient, therefore the binary must be broken for equality with everyone working to change and support women's equality, empowerment and emancipation. Universal declarations produce legitimate models and means for women to step beyond the confines of their patriarchal societies. Vital in those choices is access to education and economic stability as means to change a women's place in her society but such change is dependent on political institutions becoming more willing for such change to take place. Power structures within states must allow the populace to engage in Middle Eastern state politics but even since the 'Arab Spring', implementation of true universal equality in Middle Eastern societies still has a long road to travel.

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