

Women in the Middle East and North Africa – Agents of Change

Published by Routledge (London) in 2011

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Key Findings and Recommendations

- The book examines the position of women in the contemporary MENA region.
- Although culturally diverse, this region shares many commonalities with relation to women that are strong, deep, and pervasive:
 - a space-based patriarchy,
 - a culturally strong sense of religion,
 - a smooth co-existence of tradition and modernity,
 - a transitional stage in development,
 - multilingualism/multiculturalism.
- The book addresses 5 major aspects of women's agency: political agency; civil society activism; legal reform; cultural and social agencies; religious and symbolic agencies.

Political Agency, Activism & Economy

- Although the overall political context in the MENA region is not favourable to women's empowerment, women managed to secure seats in the parliament and local municipalities, fight for and evaluate the quota system, and maintain integrity.
- In the last decade, women have been appointed as cabinet ministers, diplomats, and judges.
- Women introduced values in politics: less corruption, accountability, respect of people in spite of social challenges and stereotypes.
- Instrumental in the mobilizing and lobbying phases of political change
- They are dexterous in policy-making
- Women's activism in the region has been instrumental in the pressure for democracy: the issue of women's rights is gaining prominence in policy debates
- This activism has also resulted in the region's progress at the economic level: women's increasing role in informal economy has saved many households.
- By linking social and economic development to women's rights, women's activism presents women's demands as "society's demands". In so doing, women have managed to attract the attention not only of human rights organizations but also of decision-makers in the region.

Legal Reform

- Demands for legal reforms have constituted the backbone of feminist movements in the MENA region. Such movements have secured the support of democratic men and enlightened religious scholars.
- Women in the region have always been aware of the following fact: Judges' decisions are driven more by laws than constitutional rights. That means that through legislation, women can decide the real reach of constitutional reforms.
- Women are conscious that their judicial status in the family is linked to demands for democracy and full citizenship.
- Women's fight for legal rights moves national debates from the realm of ideology to the realm to action-taking. Morocco is a good example.

Cultural, Religious and Symbolic Agencies

- Important to note that Women did not only lead the first ascetic movement in Egypt as part of the early Christian search for Grace, they also celebrated Isis and constituted part of deity in Carthage. Women were also among the first to acknowledge Islam as a reaction to tribalism and poverty Which deprived them from owning property.
- Women fought seclusion and polygamy throughout centuries. When the MENA region was colonized, a combination of nationalism and self-empowerment allowed women to indulge in individual achievements and collective action and, thus, forge for themselves new identities and a new self-consciousness that turned them into members of organized resistance. These roles contributed to the transformation of mentalities.
- Women are strong at the symbolic level: women-related symbols have been used against the colonizes and against terror: Hand of Fatima.

Recommendations

- At the level of research: gender research in and on the region needs to take into account the 8 core components of the region: history, geography, Islam, orality, multilingualism, social organization, economy, and political systems (Sadiqi, 2003).
- Coalitions between feminist groups in MENA countries
- Training on gender equality at all levels, including judges, psychiatrists, and policymakers, among others. This could be accomplished by creating pilot centers where experts would advise the authorities who promulgate and implement the laws on how best to enforce specific provisions.
- In addition to the laws that currently exist, additional punitive laws that specifically address domestic violence must be enacted.
- The government should establish a partnership with NGOs to provide aid for female victims of trafficking and violence. Legal counseling, social assistance, and relocation centers should be available in all cities and cater to rural areas as well.
- Proper implementation of the family law requires the use of Berber and Arabic dialects (the mother tongues that the majority of women speak) in campaigns intended to explain the new provisions.