Introduction

Rarely a day goes by without a piece of news about Muslims and Arabs in the mainstream media. Mostly, it is not positive. The status of Arab women particularly has long captured the interest of scholars, intellectuals, and activists from all four corners of the world. Issues of discrimination, harassment, dress codes, seclusion, lack of participation and inclusion, absence of meaningful political representation, deficiencies in education, and lack of equal access to resources are repeatedly discussed and highlighted. Those discussions often lead to the conclusion that there is either something wrong in the Arab culture, in Islam, or in both.

People who write about the region, including some Arabs, often reach the same conclusion that there is an overpowering "hatred of women" in the Arab world. Male-dominated institutions have accumulated a sum of animosity towards women, and the only path that most men take, according to such perspectives, is that they continue their domination over their female counterparts. The only way to do that is to continue to marginalize women, imprison them, treat them without courtesy or consideration, and squash any ambitions they might have.

This is not an exaggeration. In an article written in 2012, just as the Arab Spring revolutions were taking form, an Egyptian American journalist wrote a provocative piece in *Foreign Policy* under the title "Why Do They Hate Us? The real war on women is in the Middle East."[1] The word "hate" and "hatred", excluding its synonyms, appeared 16 times in the article. Blanket condemnations of Arab societies were issued such as "Arab societies hate women," "Saudi Arabia hates women," and "the hatred of women goes

deep in Egyptian society." The author described a world where abuses are conducted, husbands beat up their wives, women are denied the right to drive cars, girls are forced into child marriages, sexual harassment is endemic, and women are forced to marry their rapists.

The author was seemingly afraid of Islamism which seemed to be on the rise in the wake of the Arab Spring mobilization in 2012. Egypt had just elected a parliament dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and *Salafis*, and Tunisia's *Ennahda* party won the largest bloc in the Constituent Assembly.[2] She did not seem to have discerned the distinction between those two countries or the major forces operating within. Failing to understand the difference between *Ennahda* party in Tunisia and their progressive agenda, and the *Salafism* movement in Egypt with their ultra-conservative vision, is problematic to any Middle Eastern specialist.

The above depiction of the Arab world also invariably leads to erroneous conclusions. Let's take harassment, which was described as being endemic. Sexual harassment is indeed a problem in many regions of the Arab world. But this is hardly an "Arab" problem; harassment is a global problem. Specifically, workplace harassment—worldwide—is an impediment to female empowerment and integration in many professions, especially in those fields dominated by males. The top five worst cities for verbal harassment according to one study[3] were Mexico City, Delhi, Bogota, Lima, and Jakarta; only Jakarta is in a Muslim country. The worst cities for physical harassment were Mexico City, Bogota, Lima, Tokyo, and Delhi; none is a Muslim or Arab city. While harassment is indeed a problem in many Arab contexts, this does not make it an Arab cultural phenomenon. The Catholics of Mexico City, Bogota, and Lima do not have an innate hatred of women, nor do the Shintos of Japan, or the Hindus of India. Similarly the argument that the real problems facing women in the Arab world are based on an innate "hatred of women" is a proposition that is unwarranted. It serves no real purpose except to augment another "clash of civilizations" thesis. One more example brought forward, as evidence for the "hatred of women" in the Arab world, relates to denying women the right to drive in Saudi Arabia, which is home to less than 2% of all Muslims. This is a severe problem which has repercussions on women's integration in the public life of the Saudi society. Yet, this is still a problem that needs to be seriously tackled within Saudi Arabia, rather than being an "Arab issue."

This book about women's participation in the workplace acknowledges the significant problems found in Arab societies that still need to be resolved. Yet, missing the real culprits would only lead to prescribing the

wrong solutions. The main argument that I make in this book is that the sorry state of Arab women is the result of major problems created by a complicated web of socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. Authoritarian regimes, that have been very ineffectively governing this part of the world, have made the situation worse for Arab men and Arab women. The impact on women has indeed been more severe. But this is how dictatorships work. They create structures that marginalize historically disadvantaged communities. Some groups, in this case women, feel the brunt of those structures more than others.

This topic—understandably—has captured the interest of scholars from various disciplines, backgrounds, and ideological starting points. I acknowledge that it is not easy for a male researcher, especially in the Arab world, to write about this subject. I have learned, over the years, to ignore the perceived lack of legitimacy that I face from the presumption that I can only imagine, but never live, the struggles that women in this part of the world face. This is true; empathy has its limits and I am very cognizant of that. Yet, I feel that, as a male researcher, I actually complement, though not replace, the insights of my female colleagues. My background, as a student of Islamic studies, also helps in reaching communities that would otherwise ignore yet another book about Arab or Muslim women.

Another assumption of this book is that religion continues to play a fundamental role in Arab societies and—accordingly—it plays a role in shaping managerial and organizational behavior. Yet, I do not claim that it is the only factor, not even the primary one. I did choose to zoom in on this factor, repetitively asserting that understanding the functioning of organizations—including women's participation within those organizations—has to be explained by an array of factors—transcending religion to include other social, economic, and political factors.

This book thus addresses the special link between Islam and women's participation in the public sphere. Various discourses are described and analyzed. I also, of course, give my personal insights and opinions throughout this work. The second chapter addresses the persistent gender gap in Arab societies. Particular emphasis is put on female participation gap in the public sphere. Examples of such gaps are given in education, labor participation, income, and ascension to leadership positions. Gaps within Arab countries are also discussed and arguments against treating the Arab world as a single monolithic culture are presented. Potential explanations for these gaps are given that go beyond the oft-repeated "Arab culture" argument. The chapter also explains some of the characteristics of women's careers in

the Arab world which reflect many inter-related factors that contribute to their current status.

Through presenting various readings of key verses from the Qur'an, the third chapter describes the religious injunctions brought forward that impact women's participation in the public sphere. The few verses in the Qur'an dedicated to male–female interactions and Muslim women's dress are discussed. The various understandings of those verses are presented and the implications on female participation are described. The chapter reflects on the controversies revolving around the *hijab* verse and what this means for women's presence in the public sphere. The chapter explains how arguments that effectively seclude women are indeed based on the sacred text. Yet, it also explores how alternative explanations and interpretations of the same texts are brought forward that call for understandings that include, rather than exclude, women.

The fourth chapter depicts the main arguments put forward by opponents of veiling. Drawing from the works of several Arab feminists, activists, and academics, I describe a discourse that attributes much of the lack of female participation to the boundaries imposed on women by certain readings of the Qur'anic texts. Those restrictions, it is argued by critics, draw their legitimacy from misguided religious interpretations made by societal forces that have no intention to move in any direction that empowers women.

The fifth chapter addresses the issue of the veil within its historical context. It describes various discourses, from within Islam, that argue for, or against, female participation in the public sphere. It explains the various, sometimes divergent, understandings of the veil, and the implications thereof on Muslim women. The varieties of explanations within Islamic feminism are discussed. In addition, the chapter tackles the implications of a woman's dress on her sense of agency and autonomy. The concept of "false consciousness" is analyzed, and conflicting feminisms, within and outside Islamic discourse, are discussed.

The sixth and final chapter explains how various attempts over the last century have not been able to significantly close the gender gap. The role of education, regulatory changes, and the quota system are analyzed. Why education has not resulted in increased economic and political participation is revisited and explained. The limits of regulatory changes and the quota system are also addressed. It is argued that without proper implementation and a parallel change in attitudes and norms, regulations are not likely to be effective. The chapter also touches upon the successes and failures of

feminist action over the last century. Whether transnational feminism would help is debated including the risks of this being perceived as a form of colonial feminism. The chapter closes by asserting that the blame game engulfing Arab societies has not helped the cause of women. The need of various groups, even when coming from disparate starting points, to come together and work on a common agenda would contribute to the advancement of women all across the region.

NOTES

1. Eltahawy, M. (2012). Why do they hate us? *Foreign Policy*, 193, 1–9.
2. This has since changed with the military coup in Egypt and *Ennahda* Party softly exiting from power in Tunisia.
3. Stop Street harassment. *Statistics – The Prevalence of Street Harassment*. Reston, VA, USA. Harassment. http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/resources/statistics/statistics-academic-studies/