

**THE SOCIETAL CONTEXT OF
THE STATE OF WOMEN**



CULTURE

Introduction

This chapter considers social patterns that contribute to shaping the position of women in Arab societies today. It focuses on the impact of two central sources of influence: cultural and especially religious heritage and Arab intellectual production.

Culture plays a pervasive role in composing the social context of women's position in the Arab world, and religious interpretations provide a field for conflict over the position of women in public perception and general behavioural patterns. Religious heritage, above all, is a key determinant of the cultural norms underpinning the position of women in the Arab world.

Arab intellectual production, as it arose during the Arab Renaissance, also contributed to creating the prevailing social consciousness in relation to women in Arab societies.

The examination of cultural structures that follows also includes how popular culture, the arts and the media, themselves drawing on religious heritage and intellectual production, have altered consciousness and behaviour relating to women.

THE TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS HERITAGE PROMOTES AND REINFORCES THE EXISTING GENDER HIERARCHY

TEXT AND INTERPRETATION

This section considers how human beings and society are perceived from an Islamic religious point of reference and how these perceptions bear on the image of women and gender relations. However, some caveats first:

it is important to recall that, in Islamic history, religious culture is not built on sacred texts of indisputable authority but, rather, on differing interpretations of the content, substance, forms and views of multiple writings and sayings in the collective memory of society. It is also based on customs and traditions that have been consolidated to preserve a specific order for the family and society. Furthermore, religious culture reflects the different schools of thought that have emerged at various stages of history (Arkoun, in French, 1984, 12; Jid'an, in Arabic, 1985, 442).

If the message of Islam comprises a number of major rules concerning the order of the universe and of society, it follows that there is more than one facet to these general rules since the recipient's interpretations are subject to the historical evolution of society and to developments in methods of reading and understanding the texts.

Because knowledge systems and interpretations do evolve and change, the meaning given to a specific text may not be entirely in keeping with the spirit of its substance: it can be transformed, in the intellectual process of extracting significance, into another aspect of theoretical practice. It thus becomes an interpretation, i.e., an effort to understand that should not be put on the same level as that of the text itself. Also, because interpretation is, in fact, a process of thought that takes place in history and within a given society using the means of knowledge at hand, it becomes part of the system of ideas within society. It is thus subject to the same transformations and corruptions as the symbolic systems of history.

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Interpretation... is subject to the same transformations and corruptions as the symbolic systems of history.

Fahmi Howeidi: Equality Is at the Heart of Islam

There are three considerations the scholar must bear in mind if he wants to preserve his impartiality and objectivity in the course of an examination of the position of women from the Islamic perspective.

First, the question of women in Islam cannot be approached independently of the fundamental principles and tenets of the Islamic message, which confers an inviolable sanctity upon all creatures and holds that every creature must receive a measure of respect. All of God's creatures, as the Qur'an states, "form part of communities like you" (Al-An'am, 38). This embraces all beasts and birds, on land, in the sea or in the air, all of which worship God Almighty. Among all these creatures, mankind is God's chosen creature and His agent for developing the earth. Every human being, male or female, enjoys this special status, as the Qur'an establishes the right of every human being to dignity, regardless of gender, ethnic origin or religious affiliation.

Second, traditional practices have defeated scriptural teachings, in the Arab experience in particular. The early Islamic period – the period of the first four caliphs, to be precise – gave rise to a major transformation in the status of women. It liberated them from the oppression of the pre-Islamic era, during which they were held in such contempt that it was perfectly acceptable to bury female children to spare oneself the shame of their existence. However, the subsequent period brought numerous reversals in this, as well as in many other areas of life, and the gains which women had won under the first four caliphs gradually eroded until, speaking figuratively, the idea of "female burial" resurfaced, albeit symbolically rather than materially. Societies in the period of decline resuscitated the traditions emanating from the shame attached to the existence of women and to anything that betokened that existence, whether in social and public life or in prayer assemblies and mosques.

Third, the root principle in Islamic statutes is equality between men and women, apart from those areas in which the texts explicitly assign a prerogative or a distinction to one of the genders, for reasons pertaining not so much to gender as to social responsibility and legal status. Of particular relevance here is the significance of the Qur'anic verse that speaks of the creation of the two sexes from a single soul: "O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women" (Al-Nisa', 1). Al-Razi cited Abu Muslim who held that "created, of like nature, his

mate" means that the mate was created of the same genus as the soul and was thus identical (Rida, in Arabic, 1973, 330).

Thus, we are presented with the crucial fact, clarified in the above-mentioned Qur'anic verse, that human beings originate from two mates both created of a single genus or from a single substance. It is as though this verse, in the foregoing interpretation, was designed specifically to underscore the concept of similarity and equality between the genders and to forestall the notion of discrimination and preference between the two halves of humanity (Al-Ghannushi, in Arabic, 2000, 9).

If men and women are created equal, then they are inherently equal in their rights to life and to dignity, which are fundamental rights of all human beings in Islam. It follows, too, that they are equal in their responsibilities: "The Believers, men and women, are protectors of one another: they enjoy what is just, and forbid what is evil" (Al-Tawba, 71).

Similarly, they are equal in religious duties and in the rewards in the hereafter: "And their Lord hath accepted of them, and answered them: 'Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, male or female: ye are members, one of another'". (Al 'Imran, 195); Allah hath promised to Believers, men and women, "gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss," etc. (Al-Tawba, 72); and "It is not fitting for a Believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by Allah and His Messenger to have any option about their decision ...", etc. (Al-Ahzab, 36)

They are equal, too, in the punishments meted out to sinners, as can be seen in the divine statutes regarding male and female thieves (Al-Ma'ida, 38) and the adulterer and adulteress (Al-Nur, 2).

Furthermore, they are equal in their eligibility to engage in commercial transactions and contracts. Anyone who is rational, adult and otherwise legally competent has the right to dispose of his or her property freely, through sale, or as a gift, bequest or loan or as collateral, to empower others to act on his or her behalf, and to purchase goods and other such transactions. The verse in which this form of equality is grounded is: "To men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn" (Al-Nisa', 32). Nor does the marital contract in Islamic law confer upon the husband any right to interfere in the financial affairs of his wife, even on the grounds of his right to be her keeper, for this is an interpersonal rather than a financial right.

UNIVERSALITY AND DERIVATIVES: PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION

In the text of the Qur'an, there is a collection of verses that represent a complete vision of human beings, of society, of nature and of history. Undoubtedly, this vision was formed at a major turning point in the history of Arab society. It criticised and did away with many customs and traditions that were inconsistent with the humanity of human beings and provided alternatives appropriate to the level of knowledge and society in both Arab and world history at that time.

The broad outlines of this vision can be perceived in the following verses:

"Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into Nations and tribes, that Ye may know each other (Not that Ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most Righteous. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)" (Al-Hujurat, 13).

"O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women" (Al-Nisa', 1).

"We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains, but they refused to undertake it, being afraid

thereof. But man undertook it; he was indeed unjust and foolish” (Al-Ahzab 72).

These verses indicate the general nature of the Qur’anic provisions regarding the origin and nature of human beings and equality in gender relations, all of which affirm the loftiness of the Qur’an’s perception of human beings. The principle of the equality of all creatures and the principle of their participation in life on the basis of solidarity (Al-Hujurat) is evident. They also affirm that mankind is subject to testing by the Creator and acknowledge the courage of human beings, both male and female, as reflected in their acceptance of uncertainty in the face of their destiny (Al-Ahzab).

The general principles embodied in these verses, as well as others, enable one to infer the broad outlines of a social system that responds to the objectives accepted by the Islamic community in order to live a life of interdependence and consensus, while recognising the equality of all human beings, males and females. Nevertheless, several jurists set the examples given in these Qur’anic verses on a lower level than other suras devoted to the legislation of minute details concerning the relationship between men and women. Instead of bringing the subsidiary verses closer to the spirit of those dealing with the fundamental and general, the suras indicating equality were used to justify its opposite, i.e., to justify and legitimise the existing hierarchy.

JURISPRUDENCE LEGISLATES IN FAVOUR OF THE HIGHER STATUS OF MEN

Codification in Islamic jurisprudence with respect to the situation of women occupies a strategic cultural position, one that shapes the order of the relationship between men and women. The legislative efforts of jurisprudence gave the social system a form of legality in keeping with the spirit of the message of Islam. The legitimacy of laws thus derived was accepted because of the authority and official rank enjoyed by Islamic jurists, who were consulted not only in matters of personal status but also on a range of issues concerning society and life (Silini, background paper for the Report).

It may be said here that the male viewpoint

in the history of Islamic societies has violated the divine principle of equality bestowed upon human beings as a whole; it has construed everything that supports discrimination and differentiation as though it were an absolute rule. This is how an eternal curse was attached to women. Scores of Hadith or sayings were tossed about in a whirlpool of interpretations with the purpose of demonizing women and transforming them into creatures of absolute evil.

In making laws, Islamic jurisprudence referred to the substance of the Qur’an and the Sunna. Beforehand and afterwards, however, it also considered the requirements of a ‘balanced society’ oriented towards the legislation of personal status. The provisions of Islamic jurisprudence concerning women were established in relation to the situation and conditions of Islamic society at the time when such provisions were crystallised. They were put in place largely in order to preserve the morality of the prevailing social hierarchy and the rules of discrimination between men and women.

Juristic interpretations, formulated in the schools of Islamic jurisprudence, contributed to the establishment of norms sanctioning the principle of discrimination between the sexes. The contents of the *suras* asserting that man is the protector and provider and that a daughter is entitled to half a share of the inheritance were transformed into fundamental and general tenets, though they are not so and deal, in substance, only with subsidiary issues. They were broadened to include the relationship between men and women in different situations and in general in order to bolster discrimination between the two sexes. The authority of such subsidiary *suras* was reinforced by invoking the prophet’s Sunna, a long list of unconfirmed sayings of the Prophet that was used to diminish women’s humanity. As a result, the positive image of the equality and dignity conferred upon all human beings in the Qur’an was transformed into contradictory provisions. These generalised statements discriminate between what is perfect and what is imperfect, between the original and the branch, between the adult and the minor, between the straight and the crooked (Howeidy, background paper for the Report, 3-4; Bu Talib, in Arabic, 2005, 59-65).

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Men have always been given priority and preference in jurisprudential interpretations relative to women.

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The strategy of interpretation that led to laws affirming the inferiority of women centred on two principles: first, a disregard of the fundamental Qur'anic verses that recognise equality and honour human beings; and second, the use of subsidiary verses and other arguments for a hierarchy of the sexes, to justify inequality. The nobility of spirit that characterises Qur'anic texts was thus neglected.

The strictness of legislation in Islamic jurisprudence conceals other matters that originate in Arab Islamic society itself, particularly since jurists deliberately read the canonical provisions through the lens of custom. They believed that any other kind of readings would disrupt the continuity of the social order in its reinforcement of social cohesion, which, in their view, was congruent with "the order of nature".

Men have always been given priority and preference in jurisprudential studies relating to women. This is a predisposition that entrenched itself as a result of reading the Qur'an with a bias in men's favour. The assumptions of books on matrimony reveal a web of concepts, views and arguments whose function is to support men in a position higher than women in society, since the man is always the father, the husband, the son or some other male among the woman's agnates. The jurists, in general, remained loyal to such a view, which served as the foundation for numerous further rules in different areas of society, thus multiplying the complications involved in establishing a system that would allow for equity in the relations between men and women (Silini, background paper for the Report). Nonetheless, enlightened legal interpretations did exist (Box 6-2).

Historically, the dominant masculine

view in interpreting the Qur'an did have its critics, even in the middle ages, who expressed dissenting views and tried to change the prevailing bias. These writings and positions convey an altogether more humane approach to organising a system of relations between men and women in Islamic Arab society. In fact, there is in Arab tradition and in some of the phases of Islamic cultural development a collection of intuitive positions that go far in undermining the dominance of men in the Islamic culture of the time. Abul Hasan Al-Basri criticised polygamy and the Isma'ilis refused the principle thereof. Ibn Arabi (560-638 A.H.) in some of his writings considered women far superior to the demeaning images of his day (Al-Rasikhi, in Arabic, 2004, 161; Hamadi, in Arabic, 2003, 63-80).

To speak of texts opposed to the dominant masculine view of women's inferiority is simply to acknowledge the currents and counter-currents that remained a feature of Islamic culture. The existence of such texts does, however, show that it is possible to transcend dominant perceptions and admit that differences of opinion are legitimate. The independent reasoning (ijtihad) of enlightened jurists and scholars, who are sensitive to the laws of change and development in society, stands behind several endeavours today to crystallise a noble view of the Qur'an's perception of different social phenomena and historical changes (Al-Dayalimi, in Arabic, 2000, 79-83).

Jurisprudential writings suppressed the verses clearly referring to equality and honouring women in the Qur'anic text. They concentrated on legislation favouring the clan as the point of departure for the legislator. Thus the woman becomes, first and foremost, the custodian of the clan's progeny.

As a general rule, most jurisprudential endeavours do not go beyond a mass of contingent assumptions relating to two matters: a general discourse outlining all of the fundamental principles, and an interpretation considered by them to be the closest to the spirit of a given text and social reality. This feature underscores the relativity and specificity of the jurisprudential product as well as of the possibility of transcending it by referring to

BOX 6-2

Muhammad 'Abdu: On Polygamy

"It is undoubtedly possible to abolish this habit, polygamy. First, because the condition for polygamy is the establishment of justice and this condition is not there. Second, the mistreatment of women by their husbands and the denial of their right to maintenance and comfort are common. It is permitted, therefore, to the ruler or judge to prohibit polygamy in order to avoid mischief, which is rampant.

Third, it has been demonstrated that the origin of strife and animosity between children is that they were born of different mothers. Each is brought up hating the other and by the time they become of age, they are deadly enemies of one another (...). Therefore, the ruler or the religious judge may prohibit polygamy and the ownership of bondmaids in order to protect households from strife.

Source: 'Abdu, in Arabic, 1980, 94-95.

the fundamental principles set out in the non-interpreted text, the interests of humanity and their ultimate purposes (Al-Shatibi, in Arabic, n.d., 67-68). The examples derived from rules relating to women may in fact reflect the loyalty of the jurists to the customs that governed societies and seek a harmony that would guarantee a balance amidst their changing social dynamics.

Because, however, the dynamics of transformation in contemporary Arab societies are different from those in Arab societies at the time when the schools of jurisprudence were established, earlier endeavours are no longer appropriate to either the nature or pace of current social transformations. Rather, it is a right to try to open the gates of interpretation anew and to seek further understanding of the spirit of the Qur'anic text in order to produce jurisprudential texts based on values of equality. Such texts will seek to embody a jurisprudence of women that goes beyond the linguistic and historical equation of what is feminine with what is natural (pregnancy, childbirth, breast feeding, upbringing and cooking). They will contribute to the promotion of feminine cultural values and transform them into a general attitude (Al-Dayalimi, in Arabic, 2000, 51-57).

The Qur'an has granted human beings (women and men) an elevated position on earth. If Islamic jurists of old were loyal to the needs of their customs and the requirements of their society, those customs and requirements no longer satisfy the needs of our age and society. Thus, turning to international laws that eliminate all forms of discrimination between men and women in no way contradicts religious belief, since these laws are closer to the spirit of the religious texts while also being closer to the changes taking place in contemporary Arab societies.

THE ARAB WOMAN IN POPULAR PROVERBS

IN SUPPORT OF DISCRIMINATION

Arab popular culture projects contradictory images of women, girls and wives at different stages of their lives. Proverbs dealing with

BOX 6-3

'Abd al-Hadi Bu Talib: The Jurisprudence of Facilitation

Interpretation opens a way to the jurisprudence of facilitation, i.e., to justice and fairness, rather than confining judgments to copying the sayings of ancient jurists, particularly those which go too far in contradicting munificent

Islamic principles. Facilitation provides the requirements for reforming family relationships in the Muslim world, within proper Islamic orientations, which call for fairness, justice, mercy and equality.

Source: Bu Talib, in Arabic, 2005.

women are repeated in most Arab social classes and generally provide clear examples of the perception of women as inferior, indicating that popular awareness is isolated from the fundamental transformations taking place in Arab societies. The proverbs create several myths about the conditions and state of women, which are often at odds with women's actual circumstances.

Different generations in the history of Arab society have exchanged and reproduced many proverbs purveying the inferiority of women. Arab women are thus demeaned not only by conservative and traditional jurisprudential interpretations but also by sayings, myths and proverbs that confine them to a particular place in society.

Proverbs and colloquial sayings, descended from times immemorial, keep alive old texts, myths and sayings springing from an obscure web of ancient sources that speak of circumstances rather different from those of today. Yet because of the way in which proverbs are widely exchanged across society, and have their own catchy language and cadence, they have been transformed into a collective product and memory serving to perpetuate and entrench particular values within it (Al-Sa'ati, in Arabic, 2003, 75-84).

Anyone reviewing samples of Arab proverbs about women and their situation will note that they contain a number of contradictory images, particularly those about mothers, wives, married women and single women. Such contradictions, however, do not change the general image of women that they purvey, a biased image that reflects male superiority and attitudes and one that a male-dominated society readily circulates through society by various means.

The forms, degrees and characteristics of inferiority attributed to women in current proverbs betray a social conflict, translated into

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words and sentences, that stems from efforts to establish and justify women's "inferiority" and, indeed, to turn it into a quality impossible to change. As noted, proverbs are archives of a heritage embodying the experiences of human beings down the years. They variously express the ideas of lunatics, saints and sheikhs. Most have their own special catch phrases, rhythm and suggestiveness and use puns, anecdotes, erudite expressions and rhetoric to good effect. They therefore lodge in the popular mind and attain an emotive status that gives them a privileged position and time-tested credibility. Thus they are preserved and repeated and have wide resonance, particularly in societies where women and girls are mostly illiterate.

ATTITUDES IN PROVERBS PROMOTING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Different values coexist in today's Arab society, intertwined with various social and cultural attitudes in a complex network. If most proverbs repeated in parts of Arab society are biased in favour of masculine values and portray women as "lacking" and "evil", there are also new manifestations of popular wisdom emerging from social changes since the second half of the last century. The latter expose many traditional sayings as quite alien to today's reality and younger generations, where women have made themselves felt at the very heart of the dynamics of social transformation (Afarfar, in Arabic, 1996, 60-63).

Hundreds of popular proverbs imply that women should be segregated. These are common in more than one Arab country (Arab Mashreq countries, Egypt and the Arab Maghreb). They project an attitude akin to that which led to the burying of girls alive. In order to justify their retrograde spirit, these proverbs use moral and other arguments expressed in the language of tales and myths. Some also rely on psychology. In their various forms, these proverbs serve to underline the inferior social and moral position of women in society. Some go even further, considering a woman to have only half a mind, half a creed and half an inheritance and to be worth only half a male. Their general drift is to limit women's biological and domestic life,

denigrate their worth and independence and shore up men's alleged superiority.

The two following proverbs contain most of the elements mentioned above:

- "Better the voice of a she-devil than that of a girl".
- "If your wife gives birth to girls you shall suffer until the day you die".

Many proverbs put forward the image of a woman as a fiend who bears a permanent grudge and who is cunning, unfaithful and a slave to her sexual desires. This woman is, indeed, synonymous with devilish and reckless behaviour. Ironically, such proverbs project an image of women that unwittingly contradicts the ostensible justification for exclusion from society by showing women to possess a formidable power capable of breaking anyone who stands in their way. It is likely that such sayings originate in efforts to make men wary of women in general. This in turn produces counter-sayings among women that are expressed in tales told by grandmothers to their granddaughters (Mernissi, in Arabic, 1983, 40-59).

In proverbial wisdom, it is only through a man that a woman may reach a haven of security, since a woman cannot do without a man. Women are thus invited to accept the hierarchy established by the biased and conservative religious interpretations that such proverbs reinforce. The social bias against women is quite evident in most of these sayings. Some of them consider that "a maiden is a calamity" but that "marriage is a protection". Others claiming to speak on behalf of women define their life choices as "The hell of my husband rather than the paradise of my father" while a more sinister proverb says: "A girl belongs to her husband or to the grave". Such sayings clearly stem from a system of values and institutions that discriminates between the sexes from a patriarchal point of view and where man remains the husband and the father who guarantees the continuity of the hierarchical system (Sabbar, in Arabic, 1998, 49-67).

POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN

Nevertheless, there are proverbs that contradict those mentioned above. Several popular

traditions and texts present another image of woman, a woman who is intelligent, articulate and, indeed, something of an enchantress but in the positive sense of the word. In popular literature, Scheherazade, for example, exercises a thrilling power and influence through her tales. Proverbs about women as mothers and their position in the family and in society can also project an altogether different image of women. Such contradictory images of women in popular culture may be understood as expressing a range of emotional and psychological states rather than an established theoretical attitude. In the main, however, proverbs, as noted before, tend to inculcate the notion of the inferiority of women (Shams al-Din, in Arabic, 2002).

Below are some examples of the numerous proverbs that elevate women in their role as mothers and as daughters where the mother is considered more important than the father and as the true source of love, care and protection:

- “The mother builds a nest while the father runs away”.
- “He who has his mother need have no worry”.
- “To the man who loses his mother heaven says, ‘You have lost the one person on earth who loves you, poor creature’”.
- “Paradise lies at the feet of mothers”. (Hadith - Saying by the Prophet).

There is also a popular proverb that equates daughters with life itself: “He who has fathered no girls has not really lived”.

As such, popular proverbs contain the positive and the negative, clearly underlining the contradiction in the transitory and evolving nature of perceptions of women and their position in Arab societies.

WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB THOUGHT

TOWARDS THE EMERGENCE OF NEW SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

Before turning to the image of women in contemporary Arab thought and the intellectual reference points behind that image, it is necessary to emphasise that how

BOX 6-4

Sheikh Muhammad Al-Ghazali: Departing from Religious Teachings on Women

Muslims deviated from the teachings of their religion on the treatment of women. Dark stories spread among them, as did Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet), which were either fabricated or close to fabrication. They led to ignoring and neglecting Muslim women, far from both religion and temporal life. Teaching women was considered an act of disobedience to Allah. They were prohibited from going to the mosque. It was unthinkable for a woman to become acquainted with the affairs of the Muslims, or to involve herself in their current or future situation. Deriding women was common behaviour and the infringement of their material and moral rights was the custom. Only three years

ago, a well-known preacher stood up shouting, in sadness and anger: “May Allah bless the days when the woman went out only three times: from her mother’s womb to the world; from her father’s house to her husband’s house; and from her husband’s house to the grave”. I responded: “May Allah not bless those days nor bring them back in the history of our nation. They belong to the days of Jahiliyya (pre-Islamic ignorance), not to the days of Islam. They represent a victory for unjust traditions, not an extension of the Straight Way”. The decline of the Muslim nation into backwardness in science and education was due mainly to the practice of such deviation.

Source: Abu Shaqqa, in Arabic, 1999, 5.

contemporary Arab thought views women and the theories supporting those views are closely tied to the Arab Renaissance movement and its struggles against all forms of inherited traditional authority. For this reason, the intellectual effort related to the “question of women” is characterised by efforts to shrug off the heavy burden of traditional references in their various forms. Since this is a broad subject, the review will focus on the main stages in the development of women’s issues in contemporary Arab thought. In the present Report, these stages are termed “the realisation of difference”, “the awareness of transformation” and “institutionalisation”. The chapter concludes with an overview of the transformation of Arab awareness and its inherent contradictions (Abdellatif, in Arabic, 2003, 9-13).

The realisation of difference: the other woman in the mirror of the self

The “realisation of difference” refers to that moment in Arab thought when scholars identified the beginnings of the transformations that led to the Arab Renaissance. This was the period when reform-minded political and intellectual elites recognised that European societies had specific features that accounted for their strength and progress. They also understood that overcoming the slow development of Arab

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The reformers and pioneers of the Arab renaissance disputed that any contradictions existed between the values of the lifestyle emerging in contemporary Arab society, and the principles of Islamic law.

societies required making use of the foundations that had created, and continued to create, the attributes of renaissance and power in Europe and the advanced world.

An excellent representation of this particular moment is the reform project of Shaykh Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801-1873). This section refers to some of his texts in order to illustrate aspects of this particular moment in Arab thought, quoting from two influential books: *The Trusty Guide for the Education of Girls and Boys* and *Refining Gold in Summarizing Paris* (Al-Tahtawi, in Arabic, 1834 and 1870).

The writings of Al-Tahtawi were polemical in nature and were written in defence of his reformist project. When discussing women, he listed a number of prevailing views that prevented any improvement in their condition, such as the refusal to teach them how to read and write. He also challenged misogynist views that portray women as the embodiment of cunning or as creatures of inferior intellect, views that consider that a woman's role is, to quote Al-Tahtawi, no more than that of "a container that preserves offspring".

When confronting traditional discourse on women, Al-Tahtawi insists on the importance of education in life. He not only lists the advantages of education in the life of women, but he also goes much further, to open up

prospects of development for Arab women and to speak of changes quite advanced for the cultural and social system of his time. He links education and knowledge to the issue of work. In his opinion, "women, when necessary, can undertake the same kinds of jobs and work undertaken by men ... This work can preserve women from doing what is inappropriate and if unemployment is a shame for men, it is also a great shame for women" (Al-Tahtawi, in Arabic, 1973, 210).

Al-Tahtawi treated girls' education seriously and his texts took on the vexed questions of the mingling of the sexes and of the veil. When defending women's right to education and work, he resorted to history and to some aspects of Islamic law, attempting to reconcile history and tradition with modern gains in knowledge and social life. In the same way, he set out to establish justifications for co-education, provided that it did not offend modesty. He was very careful to reject all that contributed to the exclusion of women from the real world merely because men feared that work would require women to leave their homes. In his opinion, this was a matter of trust based on good upbringing and education. The new education created the possibility of raising girls in such a way as to enable them to assimilate the values of the age and to adapt themselves to their requirements ('Abdellatif, background paper for the Report).

The awareness of transformation: first attempts to restrict gender-biased jurisprudence

The writings of the reformers and the pioneers of the Arab Renaissance reflected a deep understanding of alternative and more positive images of women, taking modern European history as their guide. Their insights were brought to the fore in the works of Al-Tahtawi, but they show in other cases as well.

For instance, neither Qasim Amin (1863–1908) nor Al-Tahir Al-Haddad (1899-1935) hesitated to defend the idea that advantages could be gained from the experiences of European history and society. They both disputed that any contradictions existed between the latter, or the values of the lifestyle emerging in contemporary Arab society, and

BOX 6-5

Freedom Is a Woman

In the dark ages of Europe and elsewhere, the Woman was discarded and despised. She was considered a mere chattel. A man would sometimes sell his wife at a public auction. Writers and poets vied with one another in attacking and criticising her. Theologians had long discussions over "whether the woman had a soul". They claimed that she was "the gate to Hell" and the "factory of the devil's weapons". Her voice was likened to the hissing of snakes"; she was "the devil's arrows", "as poisonous as a cobra" and "as malicious as a dragon".

With the dawn of modern civilisation and as science and knowledge were transformed from theory and tradition into experimentation and analysis, the woman was among the subjects that

interested people. They realised (...) that success would hang on her education and self-development, for she was the mainstay of the family, the one who raised the children and man's partner in his life and livelihood. They advanced the woman, taught her and raised her status. She then started demanding her rights. There was disagreement among writers over the extent of those rights but they agreed in respecting the woman and holding her in high esteem. They even made her a symbol of virtue and pride. If they wanted to personify freedom, they erected a statue for it in the form of a woman. They did the same with unity, eloquence, work and other virtues. They represented them as women.

Source: Zaydan, in Arabic, 2002.

the principles of Islamic law. They also entered into a debate over the reclassification and interpretation of certain Qur'anic verses, with the aim of unmasking biased interpretations. Their efforts also influenced the pioneering work produced by Nazira Zayn al-Din (1908-1976) in *Unveiling and Veiling* (1998).

The works of Qasim Amin evince the transformation that took place among Arab elites on the nature of women's situation in Arab society and reveal the extent to which traditions and customs were questioned. This transformation appeared in varying degrees in different Arab countries despite the colonial presence that was their most evident reality. Amin was able to diagnose the situation of Arab women in general by considering that of Egyptian women in particular because of the cultural links between Arab countries and their common history and values, however variously expressed.

Amin drew attention to society's subordination of women. In his exposure, the Arab woman is an inferior being confined at home; assigned separate eating arrangements; unable to seek work; under close surveillance by her father, husband, brother and son; easily divorced; regarded as untrustworthy; denied a role in public life and institutions; denied a place in religious beliefs; and seen as lacking in taste and in value to the nation.

His portrayal was both a criticism and a call for reform, and he eloquently exposed the array of social factors entrenching social prejudice against women and the dialectics reproducing that entrenchment. He also sought ways of negating and transcending such entrenched prejudice (Fahmi, in Arabic, 1964, 115-132).

To this end, Amin formulated his reform programme and wrote *The Liberation of Women* (1899) and *The New Woman* (1900) under the inspiration of the new, progressive thinkers of the Arab Renaissance and their counterparts in Europe, notably the positivist philosophers. The theoretical background of his reform project was that which appeared with the emergence of industrial society and the transformations that it brought to the social structure and to general perceptions of society and history (Amin, in Arabic, 1899 and 1900).

Amin called for women to be liberated from tradition. He championed the removal of the veil and limits on men's right to divorce.

He also insisted on the equality of women and men in civil rights. His reform programme was a turning point in perceptions of the problems of Arab women, containing a critique that opens new prospects for approaching these problems, notwithstanding the fact that his ambitious ideas could not be implemented in his own time.

Reformers such as Qasim Amin, Nazira

BOX 6-6

Nazira Zayn al-Din: Time, Freedom and Liberation

"Whether we like it or not, we cannot block the path of the modern renaissance and the new ideas it gives us in sociology. Religion has been liberated, science has been liberated, the mind has been liber-

ated, thought has been liberated, art has been liberated, the society has been liberated and every thing in this world has been freed from the grip of slavery and bondage".

Source: Zayn al-Din, in Arabic, 1998, 121.

Zayn al-Din and later al-Tahir al-Haddad and others were acutely aware of the necessity for change in the position of women. Their efforts stand out in Arab cultural history because they succeeded in opening wide a door for women at the centre of the solid wall of Arab society. Amin's call for liberation prompted a lively debate that, in turn, contributed to the forging of new tools and concepts in Arab thought supporting the liberation of women and the development of Arab society ('Abdellatif, background paper for the Report, 15-22).

Institutionalisation: towards a new mindset on Arab women's issues

The foregoing account shows that the battle for the liberation of women in Arab thought and everyday life needs to be redoubled. In varying degrees, hostility towards women remains a scarring feature of ideas, attitudes and feelings among individuals and communities in most Arab countries. Nonetheless the transformation in approaches to the problematic situation of Arab women that took place during the last decades of the twentieth century continues to strengthen resistance to the various perceptions of women as inferior beings.

Certainly, it is possible to point to a slow, gradual process through which some of the needs of women in some Arab countries are being met, particularly in terms of family laws and political participation. To date, however, this budding process has not proved equal to the counterpressures exerted in many areas of society.

The battle for the liberation of women in Arab thought and everyday life needs to be redoubled.

The participation of women in civil society organisations devoted to legal and political action helped to re-educate society.

The most significant aspect of women's activism in the Arab world today is its transcendence of traditional expectations; it is now a comprehensive position in step with other major changes in Arab societies involving questions of renaissance.

Arab women have made the project of political and economic reform...part of their direct objectives.

It eventually became clear that the theoretical discourse of the reformist movement that characterised Arab social and political thought through the first half of the twentieth century was not able to overturn conservative traditions and thinking regarding women or to change women's position in Arab society in any fundamental way. Thus, starting in the 1970s and in response to these challenges, several Arab governments sought to introduce women as a variable into their development plans and programmes as part of a new vision of development. This vision was not limited to economic growth but sought rather to find in economic growth the key to human development in general.

The direction taken by feminist issues on the international level in the last 30 years should be placed in this context. It marks when awareness of the importance of institutionalisation arose. Regional and international conferences were convened with the aim of putting an end to the inferior situation of women globally and in an attempt to produce a demand-based discourse appropriate to this situation while keeping in mind the disparities in women's conditions around the world. This period saw a profound shift away from trying to address the social problems of one particular gender and towards dealing with human development as a whole.

ASPECTS OF THE NEW AWARENESS: INDICATORS AND PARADOXES

Any observer of women's issues in contemporary Arab thought will note the appearance of new indicators reflecting a transformation in these issues with their institutionalisation. The participation of women in civil society organisations devoted to legal and political action helped to re-educate society and foster acceptance of an active female presence. It replaced old and limiting feminine stereotypes with an image of women engaged in a broad range of activities, affording them much greater space for action, production and creativity.

New developments in economic theory and the social sciences, in psychology and psychoanalysis and in general awareness of matters relating to sexual life all contributed to

enriching perceptions and attitudes regarding women's issues and position in society. They constituted a new source of authority resting on modern epistemological gains, scientific and analytical thinking and innovative methodologies. Fresh intellectual perspectives helped to restrict the scope of conservative thinking, traditional knowledge and regressive attitudes in this field.

The concepts, analyses and definitions engendered by the rise of human sciences gave birth to new ideas for improving the conditions of women globally. These developments, which took root thanks to the efforts of women's movements, promoted the idea that history and culture play an important role in constructing social hierarchies. A number of influential concepts came to be applied to illuminate the reality of Arab women – concepts such as equality, justice, participation, empowerment, gender and human development. Together, they ushered in new perceptions relating to social, political and developmental affairs.

This intellectual and methodological revolution, together with the critique of Arab-Islamic thought, brought a new critical approach to bear on traditional customs and on the development of thinking about society in the Arab world (Al-Jabiri, in Arabic, 1984, 1986, 1990, and 2000; Arkoun, in French, 1984). Perceptions of, and attitudes towards, women's issues and how they could be approached and overcome evolved, resulting in new data and concepts and a more progressive discourse that enabled Arab thought to contain yet more powerfully the influence of tradition both in culture and in the popular heritage.

The most significant aspect of women's activism in the Arab world today is its transcendence of traditional expectations; it is now a comprehensive position in step with other major changes in Arab societies involving questions of renaissance, development and progress. Arab women have made the project of political and economic reform and of the establishment of a positive interaction with the human rights system part of their direct objectives; this is reflected in the increasing presence of women in the organisations of civil and political society. This trend augurs well for the more profound interaction of

women with the question of change and for their participation in constructing such change, thereby taking public affairs into their own hands. Its importance should not be underestimated in a struggle that encompasses all areas of activity within society without exception ('Abdellatif, background paper for the Report, 22-35).

A key tenet of the project of social transformation to which the Arab women's movement has linked itself is the role of social intermediaries in realising social objectives. The movement now has access to new means and methods of expanding and enhancing public awareness of women's issues and of communicating with its global counterparts.

Contemporary media forms such as the Internet, chat rooms, satellite television channels and their specialised programmes are based on the power of open public dialogue, quick communication and accessible communities of thought and practice. For women, they open up a new avenue of liberation that allows them to occupy spaces that they could not have entered through the conventional print media. The latter in any case are retreating little by little before these new communication technologies that are helping to shake the foundations of the conservative elements of our heritage, particularly of those traditions and ideas that condone hierarchy and look upon it as "natural". These new media help to promote a gender awareness oriented towards social cohesion, equality and the principle of equity as the appropriate alternatives to discrimination between the sexes (Mernissi, in French, 1984, 13-35; 'Abdellatif, background paper for the Report, 15-22).

Yet this qualitative change in Arab thinking should not lead one to neglect the major contradiction easily apparent to any observer of the history of ideas: the large-scale reappearance of traditional perceptions and conservative views about the role of women in society. The latter are as obvious in discourse as they are in clothes and in daily rituals. All aim to confront the transformation achieved by the institutionalisation that raised feminist issues from the local to the universal level and gave them greater depth by linking them to the problems of human development as a whole.

The globalisation of networks for the promulgation of religious edicts (fatwas), for example, has provided conservatives and traditionalists with new platforms from which to attack all discourses that favour liberation, development and the participation of women in production and creative work.

Unfortunately, the continued sway of such throwbacks and restrictions, which attempt to mobilise tradition to resolve the problems of Arab society by excluding women and isolating them at home, represents an obvious paradox. It may be seen as a mark of social failure, of the inability of educational institutions and civil society organisations, despite their increasing numbers, to promote the values of modern knowledge and political reform across society. These are the values conducive to expanding the scope of freedom, the rotation of power and the spirit of citizenship. They are essential in overcoming a conservatism that remains blind to historical change and its role in the development of people's perceptions of themselves and their societies ('Abdellatif, 1997, 67-80).

WOMEN IN THE ARAB NOVEL

IN SEARCH OF A NEW IMAGE OF ARAB WOMEN

This section offers specific examples of the role played by the novel in the process of inculcating, or weakening and critiquing, conservative social values related to the situation of women.

The Arab novel has played a salutary role in destroying the stereotypes of women in our society. The sensitivity of Arab novels to social issues and their presentation of those issues in their true diversity and richness have helped to overcome prevailing stereotypes. The latter have now been replaced in the world of fiction by scores of examples and images that reflect a wide range of women in the reality of Arab society.

In attempting to build new perceptions of women in fiction, the Arab novel has not only attacked female stereotypes; it has also shed light on aspects of women's oppression and their role as accessories in perpetuating male

The women's movement now has access to new digital means and methods of enhancing public awareness of women's issues.

Unfortunately, the globalisation of networks for the promulgation of religious edicts (fatwas) has provided conservatives and traditionalists with new platforms.

The Arab novel has played a salutary role in destroying the stereotypes of women in our society.

dominance. The confusion and contradictions that many Arabic novels reveal point to conditions of cultural refraction that may be interpreted in the context of the global environment and the transitional historical stage through which Arab societies are passing, both of which frame the world of fiction.

IMAGES OF WOMEN REFRACTED IN THE ARAB NOVEL

In order to discover the worlds of women in the Arab novel, one relies on the concept of the “image” and uses it in order to understand the role of the novel in constructing and reconstructing women’s situations in society. Although “images” are too restrictive to represent the full diversity of daily life and are a feature specific to fictional narration, they enable one to establish models that, to a great extent, reflect and express the struggles and changes taking place in reality.

The concern here is with how these images interact with one another, for the Arabic novel presents a dossier of givens that reflect different degrees of awareness among Arab female and male authors of the challenges in Arab society in all their complexity, instability and flux.

The worlds constructed by major Arabic novelists (such as Najib Mahfuz, ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, Hanna Mina and others) in their narrative innovation sharply observe the transformations and contradictions of the Arab social situation in all its aspects, especially male-female relationships.

Najib Mahfuz’s fictional world, for instance, which is the most prominent world establishing narrative spaces in contemporary Arabic writing, observes, records and builds in the imagination a vast array of images and situations relating to women in the Egyptian society and the Arab society. His trilogy, *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (Between the Two Palaces), *Qasr al-Shawq* (The Palace of Longing) and *al-Sukkariyya* (Sugar Street, a neighbourhood in Cairo), published in the 1960s (Mahfuz, in Arabic, 1957 A,B,C), produces a panorama of women in Arab society across half a century. The varied pictures of women and their suffering, captured with a large degree of accuracy, reflect scenes, situations and events

and various aspects of death, life, sadness, happiness, violence, pleasure, marriage and divorce. All this produces a fictional world that sometimes outdoes the real one in its complications and richness.

It is possible to speak of a network of values connected to a certain vision of women threaded through the succession of events and the multiplicity of women in the trilogy. “Ahmad ‘Abd al-Jawad’s” dominance in the books, as a representative of masculine patriarchal despotism, contrasts with the submissiveness of his wife, “Amina”, in all her psychological and social constriction. Trying to picture the worlds of Amina, who is fortified by her submission, enables people to understand through the novel what they sometimes fail to see accurately and clearly in life. However, following the couple’s progeny through its large social world provides evidence of a qualitative change in how society views women. This is what makes the Report team speak of the trilogy as a history of despotism and the manners of submission, as women have lived it and continue to live through it. It is, at the same time, also a history of the splits and contradictions created by domination and submission – one that prompts stirrings of rebellion against a reality that no longer fits in with the new values of contemporary society.

This does not mean that the contrast is constructed simply. The personalities of other men – “Abd al-Jawad’s” sons – and other personalities – “Amina’s” daughters and grand daughters – do reflect other aspects of the two major personalities whether dormant or exposed. It is possible to read in “Fahmi’s” romanticism, “Kamal’s” hesitation and “Yasin’s” recklessness (Yasin is Kamal’s first son by his first wife) something that explains the relationship between Amina and her daughters, “Khadija and ‘A’isha”.

The same thing applies to grandchildren. In *al-Sukkariyyah*, which is the last part of the trilogy, the age of Marxist revolutionary women is reached and the readers find themselves face to face with indications of the birth of a new society, a world that combines many contradictions and in which one finds contradictory kinds of values. At this specific point, the development of the novel matches

The confusions and contradictions that many Arabic novels reveal point to conditions of cultural refraction.

All this produces a fictional world that sometimes outdoes the real one in its complications and richness.

the complexities of the real situation through which Arab societies actually lived, wherein relationships between men and women are fraught with contradictions such that the values of inferiority and liberation coexist amid images of imitation, collusion and role reversals. Thus a situational novel mirroring reality can become a lamp that helps to shed light on the real world.

*NOVELS WRITTEN BY WOMEN:
THE BEGINNINGS OF INDIVIDUAL
CONSCIOUSNESS AND FIRST
CONFRONTATIONS WITH THE
CULTURE OF INFERIORITY*

The images of women created by female Arab novelists provide readers with a vocabulary for approaching assumptions about women's inferiority and ways to overcome such thinking. These writings seek to open up new creative space in the Arab novel in support of new, alternative values. The trend starts with the appearance of the novel *Ana Abya* (I Live) (Ba'labakki, 1958), the published works of Colette Khoury such as *Ayyam ma'ab* (Days with Him) and *Layla Wahida* (A Single Night) (Khoury, 1959 and 1961), the novels of Ghada al-Samman, and those written by the generation of Ahlam Mustaghanimi, Huda Barakat, Radwa 'Ashur, Laila Al Atrash, Sahar Khalifa and Layla al-'Uthman. In these works, the reader is faced with an explanation of certain elements of female fragmentation. A number of elements and givens exist that approximate, in the imaginary world of fiction, the actual circumstances of the Arab woman, which testifies to the intersections and interventions between fiction and the reality of women in society.

In her textual study of novels by Arab women, Bothayna Sha'ban analyses their general characteristics as well as their success in portraying the various manifestations of woman's inferiority and exclusion and the attempts made to overcome this state as embodied in the novels' characters (Sha'ban, in Arabic, 1999). In another study of Arab women novelists, Fowziyah Abu-Khalid constructs a four-part template that allows her to transcend prevailing stereotypes of the woman (the woman as riddle, as seductress, as

symbol of cunning and as symbol of honour). This enables her to construct an approach that transforms the numerous events and images of these novels into patterns that can be analysed and that help to identify models of women as refracted by the worlds of the novel (Abu-Khalid, background paper for the Report).

According to Sha'ban, there are four main images of women to be found in women's novels: the woman deprived of her rights, the militant woman, the rebellious woman and the multiple woman. Each of these represents the different course of women's lives under common conditions in reality.

The image of the woman deprived of her rights, for example, is to be found very clearly in the novels *Misk Al-Ghazal* (The Musk of the Gazelle) (Al-Shaykh, 1988) and *Khadija wa-Sawsan* (Khadija and Sawsan) ('Ashur, 1989). The many facets of the image of the woman deprived of her rights that can be found in Arab creative writings must be acknowledged. These writings switch between capturing the deprivation of rights as represented in the unequal relations between men and women, and oppression at the hands of authority figures in social structures, as embodied in customs and traditions and tribal, sectarian, class or patriarchal systems. An example is the case of "Wasmiyya", who emerges from the sea in an early work of Layla Al-'Uthman. These writings present the reader with a further code reflecting the intertwining of two images: that of the woman deprived of her rights and reality (al-'Uthman, 2000). Another example is to be found in the novel by the Saudi writer Qumasha al-'Alyan (2000), *Untha Al-'Ankabut* (The Female Spider), in which she faithfully adheres to the literal meaning of the Saudi proverb that says "Break a girl's rib and ten more will grow" (Abu-Khalid, background paper for the Report).

The image of the woman as activist is cast in terms of the women's struggle in several novels from various Arab countries. They include *Al-Watan fi Al-'Aynayn* (The Cherished Motherland) (Na'na', 1979) and *Al-Gbulama* (The Tomboy) (Mamduh, 2000) as well as Sahar Khalifa's two works, *Al-Sabbar* (The Cactus) (1976) and *'Abbad Al-Shams* (The Sunflowers) (1984), which contain examples

Four images found in women's novels are those of the woman deprived of her rights, the militant, the rebellious and the multiple woman.

The images of women created by female Arab novelists provide readers with a vocabulary for approaching assumptions about women's inferiority and ways to overcome such thinking.

Novels of female rebellion represent a cry of protest in which the writers proclaim the need to end the age of tyranny.

of Arab women active in the resistance in the occupied Palestinian territory. The Lebanese novelist Hanan Al-Shaykh, in her novel *Hikayat Zahra* (The Story of Zahra) (Al-Shaykh, 1980) describes the life and sufferings of a woman of the people in southern Lebanon during the civil war and the forms of resistance that express the capacities of human beings to face their destiny (Sha'ban, in Arabic, 1999, 168).

The image of the rebellious woman shatters the conventional portrait of the contented and unassuming female or of the beautiful and cunning she-devil. It transforms the woman into a positive actor in society's struggle to overcome the hierarchy condoned by the values of prevailing Arab culture. Images of rebellious women are instructive: they show that a woman's rebellion is not a negative value since the energy of revolt is directed towards building new values within society. While rebellion is usually read as a reaction to a specific reality, these images help one to fathom its inner dimensions and to understand the mental and emotional states through which blind imitation and stifling traditions within social relations may be confronted.

Novels of female rebellion represent a cry of protest in which the writers proclaim, through their protagonists, the need to end the age of tyranny in all its apparent and hidden forms. Consequently, the subject of freedom becomes a central starting point from which the female writer directs criticism at male domination and violence and gives voice to the woman as a human being in search of equality, freedom and citizenship.

The fourth and last model, referred to as the "multiple woman", provides an image that encompasses and transcends the other models. The term "multiple" here indicates splitting and fragmentation, and refers to multiple identities within one being, contradiction, collusion and hesitation. The model consists of a complex web of images of multiplicity, which no sooner complete themselves than they start anew and continue, expressing the birth pangs of Arab societies during their present transitional stage.

The multiplicity of this model not only expresses the woman's own self; it also touches upon the self of the group and of society, man and woman, woman and woman. According to

Abu-Khalid, it also deals with "the relationship between the emotional and the cerebral, the private and the public, the actual and the desired". In all these varied cases, one witnesses the situation of Arab women expressed through a diversity of lives (Abu-Khalid, background paper for the Report).

In Sahar Khalifa's "Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman", the process by which the female stereotype is shaken is quite apparent in the writing. The process embodies a very careful narration of small details in that the text opens a window onto a woman who is both realistic and unrealistic, revealing the multiple in the one. In the beginning of the novel, she says, "I am the daughter of the inspector. I remained so until I got married and became the wife of a merchant. Sometimes I am both at the same time. When my husband wants to be ironic, he calls me 'the inspector's daughter' and when my father is angry he calls me 'the merchant's wife'". The contradiction exists between the internal, central self within and the social self accepted by others; the gap between what the protagonist considers to be the right understanding and balance and what others consider to be so is enormous. "For these reasons I found it convenient to appear stupid, so I kept my questions, my impressions and my tongue to myself" (Khalifa, 1986, 5).

In Ahlam Mustaghanimi's trilogy, *Dhakirat Al-Jasad* (The Memory of the Body), *Fawda Al-Hawass* (The Chaos of the Senses) and *'Abir Sabil* (Passerby), complex feminist worlds counter the male prejudice that places women in one single mould (Mustaghanimi, 1993, 1998, 2004).

The fourth image of women in Arab feminist novels can be found in the works of Huda Barakat and 'Ulwiya Subh, which depict a number of aspects of the civil war in Lebanon. It can also be found in Batul Al-Khudari's novels *Kam Badat Al-Sama' Qariba* (How Close Seemed the Sky) (2000) and *Ghayib* (Absent) (2004), which reflect the reality of Iraqi women under sanctions and then under the American occupation, and the problems of multisectarianism (Abu-Khalid, background paper for the Report).

Most of these novels illustrate the multiplicity of image of Arab women in the

space once occupied by single, closed and paltry stereotypes whose inadequacy appears only the greater amid the social transformations that these works portend. The anxieties, fears and aspirations that they portray are not just those of characters in novels. Rather, they can be viewed as those of individuals facing their destiny in society with energy and determination, a spirit whose warmth and energy the Arab novel captures in its pursuit of a society of equality between the sexes.

THE IMAGE OF ARAB WOMEN IN FILMS

PATTERNS OF STEREOTYPING

The most representative model of women in the Arab cinema is that found in Egyptian films during Egyptian cinema's 70 years of output. These are films that reflect society's perception of itself and of the relationships among its members in the light of both prevailing and emerging social values.

Studies of the image of women in Arab films variously describe and define the aspects of this image. The first studies went hand in hand with the achievements of the Egyptian cinema themselves and revealed that female characters in the films produced between 1962 and 1972 (410 films) showed the following diversity, by percentage:

43.4%	no given profession
20.0%	housewives, wives, divorcees, widows, spinsters
20.5%	working women
10.5%	students
9.5%	artists
5.4%	delinquents

Farid, background paper for the Report.

The most significant, and by far the highest, percentage is that of women without any profession, i.e., women who are simply females. In fact, the woman as just a female accounts for more than 80 per cent of women's roles in commercial Arab films, and this portrayal has had the greatest influence on the public. In

such films, the woman is a cunning devil who seeks nothing but pleasure, marital or extra-marital. All she wants is to catch a man, any man, since this is every woman's highest goal (Ramzi, 2004, 177).

Another study of the main characteristics of the cinema in the 1990s lists 31 films produced between 1990 and 2000 and records the following criticisms:

- Shortcomings in the presentation and embodiment of the image of women, and the confinement of the latter to a number of similar models, with the purpose of titillating the public;
- An exaggerated representation of the violence perpetrated by, and against, women;
- The political roles featured in the sample turn out to be largely superficial and unconvincing and have little to do with women's actual roles in life;
- During the 1990s, the films neglected the problems facing peasant and working women, concentrating only on modern urban women without, however, reflecting the various dimensions of their personality as human beings;
- The films offered no portrayals of an exemplary woman who could be counted on to remain steadfast in the face of problems;
- Women's social, political and cultural roles were conspicuously absent from the films, indicating that Arab cinema shows no concern for the evolution of women's position in Arab societies (Farid, background paper for the Report).

Notwithstanding such criticism, it can be said that Arab cinema has, at times, played an important role by raising public awareness of women's issues and the injustice that has beset them as a result of traditions or unfair laws. Here it is worth mentioning Fatin 'Abd Al-Wahhab's movie, "*al-Ustahda Fatima*" ("Mrs. Fatima") (1952 – starring Fatin Hamama and Kamal Al-Shinnawi), which depicts the story of a female lawyer confronting her fiancé's resistance to her working by challenging him and proving her professional competence. The actress Fatin Hamama played many roles depicting women who struggle through poverty, crime, oppression and submission.

The woman as just a female accounts for over 80 per cent of women's roles in commercial Arab films.

The Arab cinema, at times, has played an important role by raising public awareness of women's issues and the injustice that has beset them as a result of traditions or unfair laws.

The films made in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia have been increasingly concerned with matters considered taboo.

The new cinema emerging in more than one Arab country, sends progressive messages that reflect the wishes of new generations of women seeking freedom and self-assertion in order to realise their full human potential without being diminished or demeaned.

In Henry Barakat's "*Du'a al-Karawan*" ("The Call of the Curlew", 1959, starring Fatin Hamama, Ahmed Mazhar, Amina Rizq and Zahra al-'Ula), a woman experiences the pain of rape, poverty and psychological and spiritual torture before she finds love. This proves to be the path of her deliverance from this earthly hell, in the person of a man distinguished from others by his humanity. In another Barakat movie, "*Afwab wa-Aranib*" ("Mouths and Rabbits", 1977, Fatin Hamama, Mahmud Yasin, and Farid Shawqi), a woman lives the reality of poverty and misery and faces her man-made destiny (forgery of a marriage contract in exchange for money) before the truth is revealed in the last moments. Another Fatin Hamama movie sheds light on the trials of women through divorce. Sa'id Marzuq's "*Uridu Hallan*" ("I Need a Solution", 1975, starring Fatin Hamama, Rushdi Abaza and Amina Rizq) tells the story of a woman who finds it impossible to live with her husband, asks for divorce and undergoes an agonising ordeal before she finally receives it.

LOVE, FREEDOM AND VIOLENCE

In the second half of 2004, a storm broke upon Egyptian film-making and the Arab world after the Egyptian film, "*Bahibb is-Sima*" ("I Love the Cinema"), directed by Usama Fawzi, caused a public outcry. The film presents the character of a Coptic woman who suffers from sexual deprivation because of her husband's religious extremism and enters into a sexual relationship with another man. The censors first refused to let the film be released, then allowed it after cutting some scenes, and then reduced some of the cuts. Nevertheless, private individuals and institutions took the film to court and asked for it to be banned. More significantly, both Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church made common cause against the film.

A second major outcry occurred in 2005 and concerned the Egyptian film, "*Al-Babithat 'an Al-Hurriyya*" ("Women Searching for Freedom"), directed by Inas Al-Dighaydi. The film deals with the problems of three women from Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco living in Paris and searching for the freedom that they had lost in their own countries. Scores of

articles were written against the film, which was dubbed "Women in Search of Sex". Posters were vandalised and there was a general call for people not to see the film. The director was subjected to numerous false accusations and received several death threats.

In Syria, Muhammad Malas directed the film "*Bab Al-Maqam*" about a true incident that took place in Aleppo at the beginning of the new millennium when a young Syrian killed his sister because she loved to sing the songs of Umm Kulthum at home. According to her father, if she loved those songs, she must have been in love, and if she was in love, "she had committed a shameful act". Though made over a year ago, the film has yet to be shown to the public.

In the same context, the films made in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia have been increasingly concerned with matters considered taboo, such as problems of sexual violence, the unfairness of laws, and problems of marginalisation and exclusion. This new type of film-making targets and rejects the perception of women as inferior, thus giving greater depth to the role of the new cinema as a force opposed to male dominance.

The most important contribution of Arab cinema to challenging society's sexual hierarchy is its graphic exposure of the broken spirit of submissive women. Such films openly confront inherited values of submission legitimised by obsolete traditions.

Arab cinema plays a dual role stemming from its commercial nature. On the one hand, using the power of moving images to purvey stereotypes, it generalises values of sexual discrimination. At the same time, particularly with the new cinema emerging in more than one Arab country, it sends progressive messages that reflect the wishes of new generations of women seeking freedom and self-assertion in order to realise their full human potential without being diminished or demeaned.

WOMEN IN THE CULTURE OF INFORMATION

THE BATTLE FOR THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN ARAB SOCIETY'S TRANSITIONAL PHASE

The information revolution has swept through societies, creating new cultural institutions capable of influencing and guiding public opinion. Images broadcast instantaneously around the world dominate the news and thrust themselves into people's lives. The psychological and social results of this revolution have yet to be really understood since it is a new experience not only in the Arab region but globally, albeit in varying degrees.

Television and, most dramatically, the Internet underwent a major expansion at the end of the last century and the beginning of the third millennium. Similarly, as noted earlier, modern media have come to assume an important cultural role in connection with women's issues and in popularising images of women in the Arab mind and social ethos, transforming them into actors in the larger changes in society.

In this context, television serials are especially influential in challenging or entrenching the traditional image of women, as are the television advertisements that portray women through different images and settings. This is true not only of Arab television channels but of that vast network of channels that enter Arab homes and present Arab families with images and attitudes that contain more disparities than similarities. The Arab living room has become a veritable battleground in the war of information. Like the wars over the interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, the clash of popular proverbs and the struggles of Arab civil society to promote the values of freedom and equality, it is a conflict that confronts citizens with different and confusing choices (Ramzi, 2004, 19).

Portrayals of women in the media reflect the contradictions of the transitional period that Arab societies are going through, where a variety of images coexist with varying degrees of tolerance and where the dynamics of social

reality support some images and challenge others. Contradiction is the outstanding characteristic of images of Arab women in the media as in society itself.

Women's presence on Arab television raises several questions but here the Report focuses on television's role in spreading and consolidating the idea of women's inferiority through programmes devoted to delivering religious edicts or fatwas. Other programmes will also be mentioned in order to underline some of the positive aspects that reflect the culture of development and change in Arab society.

"FATWAS" AND THE LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL JURISPRUDENCE

Most Arab satellite channels produce religious programmes aimed at spreading an Islamic culture in response to changes taking place in the world. These programmes bear revealing titles such as "Religion and Society", "Shari'a and Life" and "Problems of a Contemporary Muslim". The language of the fatwa is very much in evidence in these programmes, which have turned certain sheikhs into celebrities and the public who ask questions into actors. This makes for lively debate, and it also produces effective propaganda.

In the programme "Shari'a and Life" shown by Al Jazeera, for example, the viewer finds several topics relating to family problems and gender relations. However, despite the moderate tone that characterises some of the episodes of this programme, most of its attitudes ultimately buttress a perception of women as inferior, taking their cue from a restrictive interpretation of texts and customs in Arab society (Touaiti, background paper for the Report).

If the changes presently taking place in Arab society require new efforts of interpretation by specialised jurists and scholars in order to produce laws appropriate to today, the fatwa channels, catapulted into public prominence by information technology, endorse values that are no longer suited to social transformation in Arab countries today (Touaiti, background paper for the Report).

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have not broached the subject of independent reasoning in religious jurisprudence (ijtihad). They remain limited to efforts aimed at strengthening the existing gender hierarchy regardless of the changes that have taken place in society and through history. The jurists entrusted with the task of issuing fatwas are apparently out of touch with their world, insist on maintaining the prevalent patriarchal system of Arab societies and evidently see no need to modernise or develop Islamic jurisprudence in the light of new social realities.

OTHER MEDIA MESSAGES UNHELPFUL TO THE RISE OF WOMEN

Media events and activities in the Arab region are characterised by great and increasing diversity and a trend towards polarisation. This results in numerous negative outcomes for the rise of women in the Arab world.

On the one hand, an increasing number of conservative channels are consolidating the image of women on the lower rungs of the gender hierarchy. On the other hand, an equally large and increasing number of channels that claim modernity in fact project a negative portrayal of women, seen primarily as physical bodies and mere commodities, whether in advertisements or in video clips (song and dance routines) that tend towards indecency.

Despite the diversity of media messages, a large number of them carry values that celebrate the rise of the individual at the expense of the community and glamourise instant gratification, easy and quick profits, and flashy stardom. In other words, these messages do the work of modern advertising, which markets consumerism and pleasure. Such an industry downplays or excludes a culture of long-term effort, cooperation, solidarity and service to others. Some researchers consider that successful films are not just cinema productions; they have become vehicles for selling food, music, clothes and toys (Barber, in

French, 1999, 70-74). Of concern here is that these orientations often devalue women and cheapen their human dignity.

The Arab media often adopt strategies and criteria for work, recruitment and relations with other media and the public that come from operating within a larger global media system guided by a paternalistic business ideology (David, 1996).¹ Moreover, these Arab media operate in societies governed by strong central powers where the worlds of money, authority and the media intermingle in the shadow of fierce competition with Arab and Western satellite channels for a constrained advertising market. This makes most media channels run after a large Arab public with significant purchasing power, especially in the Gulf States.

The industry has preconceived ideas about this public, drawn primarily from Western media, and shows little sign of understanding the realities, changes and paradoxes that are operating within it. This is why some of these channels, in their early period of growth, turned to men for politics and to women for entertainment while encouraging the latter to believe that appearance on television by itself is a form of accomplishment. Such encouragement prompted many women to emphasise an attractive appearance, thereby creating a media trend that ended in reducing capable media women to their looks alone. However, this trend quickly receded thanks to fierce competition and other developments where superficial criteria of appearance alone were no longer sufficient and the requirement for success extended more to education, professionalism, mastery of languages and wide general knowledge (Kadiri, background paper for the Report).

¹ Studies conducted by the Global Media Monitoring Project on women's participation in the news in 70 countries have shown that women constitute 43 per cent of journalists but only 17 per cent of these conduct interviews and 29 per cent of women who are interviewed are victims of various accidents.

SUMMARY

This chapter has presented aspects and examples of the role played by certain cultural constructs in entrenching or challenging the inferior status of women in Arab societies. Diverse currents from the cultural heritage have been reviewed, some of whose formulations reflect a conservative stance that hinders society's evolutionary dynamic. Other elements aim at containing and indigenising the source texts of modernism within the culture and the society of the Arab countries.

It follows that the living dialectics that reflect prevailing cultural patterns in Arab societies must not be ignored. The birth pangs and tensions that attend women's changing situation in Arab society reflect the vitality of this process and indicate a movement in societal consciousness that should not be underestimated. The persistence of male dominance and its resistance to confrontation illustrate the difficulties facing the ongoing transformation. Breakthroughs achieved thus far by pioneering actors show that it is possible to transcend dominant conservative attitudes in this culture.

It is certain that this transformation will require a significant expansion of the practice of political, legal and theological interpretations that are conducive to the spread of values of enlightenment and the principles of human development that reinforce the larger liberation project in society.

