

# *Tracey McDonald*

## **A view from the west: Religious, Cultural and Political consideration on Empowerment of Arabic Women**

### **Introduction**

As a non-Muslim woman who has worked with a range of cultures and groups striving to attain health, social acknowledgement and personal empowerment, I am aware of many of the circumstances that strip away independence and self-efficacy as well as the processes that promote personal freedom and dignity. It is apparent that various social development imperatives currently faced by some Arabic women are being influenced by similar circumstances in other countries and therefore this discussion is offered as a sharing of insights on factors that affect women's opportunities for human development.

Internationally and individually the notion of 'freedom' is intertwined with 'choice' and also with 'identity'. Political reform that results in good governance will lead to a society that is free in the comprehensive sense and this equates with human development<sup>1</sup>. A perennial challenge for any nation is to find acceptable ways to reconcile religious faith with people's freedom of opinion, association and expression so that they may participate fully in families, communities and society. If this can be achieved, reconciliation such as this would embody the principles of universal human rights.

*Ultimately, the challenge before the Islamists is how to develop an alternative Islamic vision of women that can co-exist with differing or opposing trends and advance women's position in discourse and practice, not as a result of, but as one of the conditions for building the Islamic society they desire<sup>ii</sup>.*

Empowerment is about self-actualization as well as exerting a positive influence on those around you. Self-determination and self-sufficiency are fundamental characteristics of an empowered person and in reaching such an evolved state, women and men increase their opportunities to stabilise healthy families and communities as well as contributing to social and national development. In family contexts, empowered women are able to build a relationship of mutual respect with their husbands and other family members and this leads to joint decision-making and shared responsibility for financial management.

Empowerment is not able to be bestowed by one person or group onto another. If power can be given it can also be removed thereby undermining the nature of liberation and enablement which typify genuine empowerment. Shifts of power rarely occur without some resistance or reluctance from those in powerful positions and rarely without strong determination to succeed by those who want to take power. Struggles

such as these have occurred between social, political, ethnic and gender groups in all countries and the resilience that people seem to develop as a result equips them to face obstacles and to strategise more effectively against opposition and hurdles to progress.

Before any shifts in power can occur, certain developmental steps need to be taken by those who seek to improve their situations:

- Discussion and analysis of the social, economic, cultural and political circumstances that enhance or inhibit their capacity to take action
- Growth of self-awareness and confidence in their abilities and potential to bring about desired change
- Understanding that a range of options for action exist that could inform planning and effective action
- Motivation to gather support from others to take action that will lead to desired change.

## **WHY IS GENDER EMPOWERMENT CRUCIAL FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY?**

A wealth of research is available to support the claim that well-educated and self-directing women are able to contribute to social development and national productivity. The benefits to women and their societies of being productive contributors to their national development have been enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals as Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. In so doing countries could benefit from a decline in human poverty and an increase in social capital and national productivity. It becomes a vexed question therefore as to why Arabic women in some countries remain in isolation living a life deprived of basic freedoms that many other Arabic and Western women enjoy and regard as their right.

### **The health issue**

International support for women in the Arab world is strong among Arabic and other women activists. While it is true that western women still have some way to go in terms of empowerment in certain areas, the struggle in which they are engaged and continue to pursue establishes a bond between all women working to empower themselves and others, regardless of where they may be. In Arabic lands it is the women from lower to middle socio-economic groups who seem to be most discriminated against as they strive to access education, training, employment and to regain control over their own fertility and health.

Arabic women's access to health services is determined by their social circumstances. Social deprivation includes restrictions on social participation, limits on education causing illiteracy that further limit access to information, and a lack of resources for or

priority given to women's health including reproductive health. Women who have been confined by culture and tradition and limited to their biological, reproductive function can be faced with multiple pregnancies from an early age, dependence on family for food and shelter and not ever earning income because of illiteracy and cultural restrictions on social contacts.

The total fertility rate for the Arab world in 2000 was 3.4 children per women while the world average was 2.7 but by 2008 it had fallen to 1.95<sup>3</sup>. Previous generations of Arab women had an average of 6-8 children per woman. Internationally fertility decline usually occurs as a result of changing roles of women and children in the family and society as well as shifts in economic priorities and improved access to education. Interestingly, while there has been a decline in Arabic women's fertility, there has been little in the way of concurrent empowerment such as that seen in Asian and Latin American countries at similar levels of economic development<sup>4</sup>. Gynaecological morbidity is under-reported in Arabic population data and the political reasons for hiding this information are not easily determined. Neglect and dismissal of women's health as an issue within Arabic society conceals issues such as anaemia, genital prolapse, maternal soft-tissue damage and reproductive tract infections as well as discouraging discussion, scrutiny and effective efforts to reverse the situation.

Women's education level is a key indicator of empowerment and status however women's exercise of autonomy over such issues as fertility control does not seem to be associated with education alone. While acknowledging regional and national differences, a study in 2004 in Oman found that contraceptive use is more likely to be a choice made by women who are both educated and employed. The issue of autonomy in contraceptive use is strongly influenced by traditional factors where husbands decide on the number and timing of pregnancies and the type and use of contraception<sup>5</sup>. Women who are educated are more able to assert their views within the family and have the capacity to access information about family planning and health issues as well as being better able to access the health system.

In some Arabic cultures and geographic regions women continue to be denied access to basic health services and are constrained to a lifestyle that undermines their physical and mental health. Characteristics of communities where cultural practices and traditions limit women to home service, child-bearing and tending to elders' and husband's needs usually depict men as rational, strong and decisive whereas women are depicted as weak, emotional and compulsive. Consequently reactionary strategies, which are in direct conflict with Qur'anic values, include having women wear traditional clothing that restricts their movement, vision, hearing and human contact. Unsurprisingly women treated in this way for long periods eventually suffer health breakdown through lack of physical exercise, poor nutrition, accidents from being swaddled in restrictive clothes, random violence from family members and lack of environmental stimulation. Coupled with cultural traditions and interpretations of Islamic texts that devalue

women, the ill-health and disabilities caused by these and other physical and social restrictions are not fully reported and therefore women and girls may not receive the attention needed from health professionals. This inevitable human poverty is passed from generation to generation of women.

Women's autonomy and the rise of community development organisations which are the main vehicles of demographic change have been restricted in Arabic nations through political authority rather than Islamic leaders, although sometimes it appears convenient for political leaders to attribute the cause of such limitations to religious fundamentalism. As Arab women increasingly recognise their rights, expand and enrich social and personal constructions of gender, and work to separate religion from culture and tradition, opportunities increase for them to advocate for and exercise the individual and collective rights that reflect the egalitarian principles of Islam<sup>6</sup> contained in the Qur'an and principles set down by the Prophet.

From a western perspective, the right to practise one's religion is a matter of choice and no one has an equal right to interfere unless said practice infringes on the rights of others or causes disturbances in public order. However where evidence is found that women are being forced to display symbols of a religion or behave in ways that are counter to their health and well-being, then concern increases for such women who seem not to be able to exercise legitimate choices because of pressure from traditional family or cultural communities that present themselves as religious when in fact their choices are not endorsed by Islam.

Social support for cultural change is a pre-requisite to women's education, personal development and active participation in society. Where social support is lacking, cultural and traditional practices such as genital mutilation and physical violence on women are likely to continue and women will not be able to speak against it to any significant effect. If women can build on the strengths of community and social networks it becomes possible to garner social support against culturally embedded impediments to health and wellbeing and to provide outreach services that can make a difference in the quality of their lives.

### **Health and wellbeing goals:**

1. Help women to take responsibility for their own health through greater understanding of health, women's health, reproductive health and their right to access appropriate and safe health advice and treatment
2. Policy in this area would need to focus on participation by women in health education and access to health treatment services. Women who are informed of their rights to access appropriate services are better placed to be self-sufficient and to make choices about treatment, contraception and family health promotion.
3. Policy to address human poverty which has elements of restrictions on health,

knowledge and income would also have to address normalised violence towards women in society.

### **Criminalising violence against women and girls:**

1. Violence in this context refers to intimidation and neglect as well as including the actions of families and communities who hold women responsible for social issues and problems. Violence justified by references to religion, culture and tradition needs to be perceived by society as unacceptable if change is to occur.
2. Policy in this area would involve criminalising all violence and abuse against women and setting in place legal orders protecting women who anticipate violent attacks or other abuses. Along with these legal instruments there needs to be a well-resourced system of supports such as refuges for women and children fleeing from violent and abusive husbands and other family members.

### **Portrayals of Muslim women**

If one were to believe the media it would be easy to conclude that all Muslim women are oppressed and in need of rescuing. The media must bear some responsibility for shaping public opinion about these matters when they extrapolate reports of discriminatory practices in some countries on the assumption that all Muslims are affected. As a result overt symbols worn by Muslim women are often perceived by non-Muslims as symbols of oppression and a lack of gender equality, when in fact, many Muslim women choose to wear the veil or hijab as a sign that they have committed themselves to a life of modesty and religious observance under Islam.

Despite the many highly-educated, dynamic and politically savvy women who are Muslims, and even though Muslim women in countries like Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Turkey have held high office, the impression persists among western observers that all Muslim women are constrained by men in the name of Islam.

The most visible symbol of Islam worn by women is the hijab or headscarf and naqib or face veil. Veil wearing has been described in the western media as a symbol of oppression, a political statement, a cultural provocation and a symbol of modesty<sup>7</sup>. In 2004 the French government banned the wearing of the hijab at schools on the basis that some girls were being forced to wear it to send a political message and cause public unrest. In September 2010 France banned the wearing of the burqa in public. An argument justifying this decision was made by the French government that Muslim women displaying these symbols were interfering with public order and imposing a cultural change on French society that does not align with their national identity or culture<sup>8</sup>. It is interesting that a similar argument was put to me by Muslim women who claimed to be resisting western cultural imperialism by choosing to wear the hijab. Similarly in Australia the wearing of the full body veil by one schoolgirl was deemed to be iconic defi-

ance of school rules rather than a religious decision<sup>9</sup>. Veil wearing by Islamic women in western societies has become a potent symbol of cultural threat to democratic and secular societies<sup>10</sup> and in many countries there has been a surge of reactionary nationalism from the non-Muslim community.

Expressions of nationalism can be regarded as counter-religious where symbols of national pride are used to intimidate religious and cultural groups identified through their own symbolism. Similarly expressions of faith which involve evening and pre-dawn prayers or liturgical services can stimulate community action and government restrictions on building temples and mosques in close proximity to residential areas. The ringing of church bells also attracts resistance from nearby residents although some of the complaints could be attributed to religious competition. At the heart of this secular and multi-faith tension is religious freedom and the right to associate with like-minded people and to express one's beliefs through symbols, ceremonies and events.

While the Islamic texts are shared across the world, interpretations of meaning vary and decisions on implementation are embedded in local culture and tradition. Traditionalists cling to the version that restricts women's roles in society and in the family to being wives and mothers. Conservative adherence requires strict dress and behaviour codes to segregate women from men and women wear full body veils, including face coverings. For many liberal Muslims the conservative position is based on tradition and culture rather than religion. The liberal view argues that women are equal to men in all areas of life and that any interpretations that promote discrimination against women are outdated and irrelevant in contemporary society. Dress and symbols such as hijab are a matter of personal choice made by a woman at maturity, generally deemed to have occurred at around age 14. Increased visibility of veiled women in both Arabic and western countries could be seen as an indication of growing religious commitment, or it could indicate that more women are allowed by their culture to circulate in public because they are veiled.

Adhering to tradition can increase a woman's leverage in family negotiations where permission for girls to attend school is sought from men. If girls and women are permitted some freedoms, the expectation remains that their first priority will be to fulfil their traditional roles and behave according to culture. The misuse of culture and tradition to deny women and girls opportunities to lead a healthy and active lifestyle and restrict access to health services and education, invariably weakens them physically, mentally and socially. While ever women are regarded as having less value than men, the benefits of democracy can be denied to them.

Muslim women from various groups in Australia have experienced living in a democracy for generations and they are comfortable in the fact that they are all different just as women in other parts of society are different from each other. They have different roles and they see women's roles in terms of their responsibilities to family and com-

munity as well as to society and their employers. They regard their religion and its practice as a matter between them and their God although all say that they have studied and are inspired by the Islamic texts and the words of the Prophet which endorse equality of the sexes despite the differences in roles they may undertake.

### **Culture, tradition, religion and politics**

Systematic discrimination against women does occur in some countries and societies however on closer scrutiny these discriminatory practices generally relate more to local cultures, traditions and norms than to religion. Frequently in these countries more pressing social and civil issues are dominant. For instance, a war-torn environment with no infrastructure or means of food production, causing poverty, malnutrition and infectious diseases threatens the very survival of all. As well, with no schools or teachers, levels of education are low to non-existent leaving the people ignorant of basic survival strategies and feeling completely powerless. Under these circumstances the strong will endure only if they successfully compete for food, resources, influence and power.

Women, who have been isolated and prevented from accessing education, health services and income and whose self-image contributes to their own oppression, can benefit from accessing structured groups with a defined purpose such as learning domestic skills or basic literacy. The experiences and learning extends beyond defined group goals to strengthen their self-esteem and feelings of competence that transfer to other facets of their lives and build towards empowerment. The benefits of such groups are that they learn skills that are practical and readily applicable to their circumstances; and that they experience personal development and increased awareness of how their world works and can identify opportunities within it. Armed with these accomplishments, women can provide guidance to other women and girls and encourage them to become involved in their own development.

There is increasing disagreement among Muslims with interpretations of Islamic texts to justify gender inequity which they claim contain no such endorsement. Their struggle for justice includes challenging oppressive practices and ideas and finding inspiration in the Qur'an and Principles which clearly states that men and women are equal before God. Islam itself is not misogynistic however certain biased interpretations of Islamic texts over many centuries have been used to justify the consolidation of male domination of women. Women scholars are reinterpreting the texts and are making some headway in getting their interpretations accepted within the Islamic scholarly community. Their goals in eradicating discriminatory interpretations of Islam include working to free women from the constraints of poverty, ignorance and discrimination so that they may take control of their lives.

## **Riffat Hassan on women in Islam**

What I will say may surprise both Muslims who ‘know’ women’s place and non-Muslims who ‘know’ what Islam means for women. It is this: I am a Muslim, a theologian, and a women’s rights activist, and while I am critical in a number of ways of the life that most Muslim societies offer to women, twenty years of theological study, as well as my own deepest faith, convince me that in real Islam, the Islam of the Qur’an, women and men are equals. Liberating ideas lie at the heart of most enduring faiths, and Islam shares in these.

The dominant, patriarchal interpretations of Islam have fostered the myth of women’s inferiority in several ways. They have used sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (including disputed sayings) to undermine the intent and teachings of the Qur’an, which Muslims regard as the Word of God. They have taken Qur’anic verses out of context and read them literally, ignoring the fact that the Qur’an often uses symbolic language to portray deep truths. And they have failed to account for the overriding ethical values of the Qur’an, which stresses that human beings – women as well as men – have been designated to be God’s ‘khalifah’ (viceregent) on earth and to establish a social order characterized by justice and compassion

Ref: <http://www.religiousconsultation.org/hassan.htm>

Scholars like Riffat Hassan have identified and disseminated new truths in the Qur’an and made significant contributions to contemporary understandings of Islam. In particular it has been found that the rights given to women by the Qur’an in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century were ignored by male scholars in subsequent generations and only recently have these been made generally available to Muslims because of the work of female intellectuals. Muslim women across the world are engaging in scholarship and teaching that further defines Islamic texts and brings new Islamic knowledge into both Muslim and non-Muslim societies. This wave of scholarship is not biased by medieval jurists’ interpretations of women’s issues and the role of women in serving men’s lives. Rather Islamic feminist discourse claims that they are responding to both traditionalism and western norms and, in the process, recapturing the faith as revealed by the Prophet<sup>11</sup>.

Pressure from women scholars on existing authoritarian attitudes by incumbent male scholars may only be small, but it is possible that the work of these women is having an inhibiting effect on the oppressive diatribe of some male scholars or clerics. Through their efforts revelations of new truths are gradually eroding the legitimacy of misogynistic interpretations of Islam and Shari’ah law in the eyes of both Muslim and non-Muslims.

Goals for endorsement of women’s views and rights:

1. Women’s rights need to be enshrined in law as well as social life (CEDAW)
2. Girls and women need to be supported in learning about their human right to learn



and develop

3. Support women's access to local groups providing a forum for social networking and skill enhancement

### **Recognising oppression**

Emancipation begins with an acknowledgement that one exists and has a value. Disempowerment therefore reverses these key elements by ensuring that voice is silenced and their contribution is not visible in the greater scheme of things. Supremacy is gained if the contribution made by the subordinated person is either ignored or given a very low value. Oppressive processes such as these have occurred in many countries and over many decades resulting in whole countries being oppressed under dictatorships or groups within countries being oppressed and disempowered by the dominant power putsch.

Mechanisms of systematic oppression include the use of tradition and culture to ensure that particular groups within a society are prevented from accessing the means of self-development such as education. Only 14 years ago it was reported that in most Arab countries the majority of women were illiterate<sup>12</sup> and in some countries such as Morocco and Yemen only around one in ten women were literate while other areas such as Jordan illiteracy among young women was around 3.5%. Illiteracy makes women less able to negotiate life determining decisions such as marriage, child-bearing and family and social role responsibilities.

In general terms, it is possible that issues associated with the establishment of differences in power and status between men and women could relate more closely to education, ability and culture than to any desire by one gender to oppress another, although the effect of this difference may be that one group leads and the other follows. Work undertaken by Friere in the 1970s in Brazil<sup>13</sup> provides considerable insights into the processes and manifestation of oppression. Horizontal violence is a term devised by Friere to describe how oppressed groups eventually begin to oppress each other and themselves. Originally the term referred to populations enduring torture and misery under despotic dictatorships resulting in the oppressed people becoming more and more self-deprecating as they internalise the opinion their oppressors hold of them. Oppression is said to be achieved at the point where oppressed people begin to refer to themselves as ignorant and believe that the oppressor is all powerful and is therefore invulnerable. Horizontal violence is said to occur when oppressed people begin to copy the torture and cruelty of the oppressor to whom they defer, and feel justified in perpetrating it on other oppressed people.

Social difference between people and groups is generally established through conversations and text, or discourse, around particular topics or concepts. Frequently the goal of this process is to create a cultural identity that services a political outcome. Success

in such a venture relies on being able to establish cultural and other defining characteristics for one's own group as being the implicit 'norm' against which other groups are compared<sup>14</sup>. Power relationships, in particular any inequalities in status or structures that nourish social inequalities, are derived from the relationship between knowledge and power, specifically the use of knowledge by one group to define other groups and to control them and their options<sup>15</sup>.

Divergent perspectives in discourse about differences in status and power become especially problematic when claims of objectivity, religious edict or scientific rigor are made by any of the competing groups wishing to justify the oppression; or if the underlying agenda or cultural background of those involved in the discourse is covert and even predatory simply because exploitation is an easy option. Conversations by Arabic men around women's roles and the value of educating girls, for example, need to be considered alongside a long history of male reliance on women to maintain the social integrity of Arabic culture and tradition. At the same time Arabic men claim to be protecting women from exposure to information, social contacts and experiences that could cause them to be less fearful of the world and more discontent with their current situation. Ostensibly control over women is enshrined so as to benefit Arabic society, but it also curtails the development of women's potential and the allocation of family and social resources in ways that prioritise male dominance.

Arab society is not alone in undervaluing women's participation in social and economic activities or their contribution to social capital. However attempts to challenge male supremacy in a society that sanctions harsher punishments for women than for men can effectively deter an oppositional groundswell.

Incumbent authorities are able to repress and coerce others to achieve their goals nevertheless revolutionary efforts have access to strategies that highlight despotic and self-serving leaders. In this way authoritarian control and influence can be loosened, making way for new ideas and social change that can moderate or remove power differentials between men and women. Strategies can include withholding participation or services; exposing violations of core Islamic rules; and scholarly critique of civic rules and laws. Eventually these strategies can reduce leader or government credibility and expand oppositional pressure thus allowing greater voice on emancipatory issues and agenda setting.

### **Changing the rules**

Struggles over rules that favour dominant powers can be handicapped by lack of resources, poor access to data and restrictions on freedoms as well as fear of retribution and reprisals. Consequently revolutionary efforts are often self-limiting and caution usually produces goals that fall within a safe threshold allowed by the dominant group. Where larger groups form the threshold can be increased. Coalitions of people sympa-

thetic to feminist causes face difficulties in uniting behind most programs and strategies. Small groups of traditionalists may not want to support liberal interpretations of Qur'an texts. Tribal groups may lack the education or sophistication to appreciate the agendas being put forward by educated people or those from elite groups.

In any oppositional situation, it is crucial that the desire for change across all ideologies and cultures be consolidated before moving to pressure authoritative figures. Not to do so could fragment and further divide women's groups in terms of fervour, control, tribal allegiances and geographic locations. Fragmentation poses obstacles to winning support for reform of rules, laws, cultural practices and power sharing.

An obvious strategy used by dominant groups to fragment opposition is to control freedom of association with others thus rendering large group formation problematic. If groups do form, the strategy is to take control of the group so that its activities are controlled and its scope of influence is restricted. On a personal level an effective deterrent to group formation can be seen in traditional Arabic dress. Women who are fully veiled cannot easily or safely recognise each other and therefore cannot locate those who may be for or against discussions around struggles for social change. By not having opportunities to freely communicate with people during conversations, the danger for veiled women of being discovered as a revolutionary and being severely punished is all too real in such communities.

Because Arab countries have a range of unique national characteristics it is necessary for any coalition for reform to be clear about what types of systems, frameworks or outcomes would be effective in shifting credibility away from incumbent authorities who are counter-revolutionary and able to undermine reform by compartmentalising activists or ridiculing their efforts.

Oppositional activists, even if rebuffed by incumbent authorities, can achieve some outcomes just by calling for reform. The main result is that incumbent leaders can be taught about the benefits to them of embracing change and at the same time, observers can be educated about the limitations of the current regime in terms of meeting their obligations under Islam to women, girls and others. Exposure of hypocrisy and corruption at this level can erode legitimacy of entrenched inequality and gain the support of social change leaders, donor nations and sponsoring partners at the international level.

### **Social policy goals:**

1. Provide opportunities for women to access new ideas, information on health, legal rights and social resources.
2. Legal rights include human rights and rights under Shar'ia law as well as state laws therefore the judiciary needs to be convinced to adopt contemporary versions of Islamic texts

3. Support scholarship by women and assist in dissemination of new interpretations of Islamic texts to all Muslims
4. Campaigns to promote social support for women and girls' education, personal development and participation in public life
5. Enhance the social and financial status of women through loans and credit schemes available only to women for economically viable projects that support their business participation at the national level
6. Involve women of all ages and social levels in identifying and establishing projects within their communities and nationally.
7. Develop and project realistic portrayals of women as role-models across a range of social development levels – and campaign against sentimental, derogatory and demoralizing gender stereotypes

## **WHAT IMPEDIMENTS ARE FACED BY ARAB STATES?**

### **Globalisation**

Arab countries are heavily dependent on oil revenues for their economic survival and are involved either directly or indirectly in oil exports to other countries. The substantial revenues from oil provide these nations with opportunities to establish health, education and welfare systems that have the potential to move their economies forward. It is interesting therefore that social conservatism has continued to feature strongly in Arabic societies as evidenced by the continuing low labour force participation by married women. Generous subsidies to families during the oil boom period of the 1970-mid 1980s had the effect of reducing financial costs associated with having larger families and this in turn prevented many married women from being able to enter the paid workforce. However as oil revenues from global trade declined economic reform disadvantaged families and fertility rates fell but married women have not returned to paid work en masse.

In global terms the issue of identity or nation-hood has become increasingly diffused through the impact of international trade agreements and political alliances which have shifted economic priorities between nations to achieve some organisational or policy outcome. Opportunities for social and economic development can accompany these global processes. As well as generating social and cultural change, these processes also influence the role of the nation state<sup>16</sup>. Choices made by nations to be involved in economic development through international linkages inevitably lead to a re-examination of internal policies and relationships between state and faiths, between social stratification, culture and tradition, and between political philosophies that may or may not include theocratic positions.

Cultural, religious and political influences on national identity can strengthen or undermine national competitiveness and even economic viability in the global economic

and political arenas of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The concept of ‘world citizenship’ is part of how a nation presents itself to others. Within a community of nations, particular states can be defined in terms of their global reputation which in turn can be altered through international endorsement or criticism of their national policies and actions. Access to political support, donor contributions, military alliances and trade can pivot on the reputation built up by each nation. Vulnerable authoritarian leaders are sensitive to international and internal critiques and changing politico-economic circumstances. International critique can come from foreign observers, political allies and donor countries, and internally groups can monitor and report on good and bad performance by national leaders and those in authority in religious and social roles. In strategic terms, political demands that are unified are more likely to sway political will towards change than the efforts of separate groups promoting single issues. However to achieve unification and internal cohesion, unified groups or coalitions are faced with overcoming ideological, political, cultural and sometimes tribal differences.

Movements towards the empowerment of women in Arabic cultures have challenged the notion of women’s roles being restricted to the family and also that the family is the only social building block in Arabic society. The external pressures of globalisation have triggered an internal re-evaluation of Arabic culture, values and behaviours that contribute to or detract from social capital and national development. It is important that these external pressures are not imposed as a type of cultural imperialism from western nations, but rather, that Arab culture and national identity is preserved in ways that truly enshrine human rights and freedoms. If this transformation is achieved the opportunity for Arabic nations to build robust international partnerships that can further stimulate their national capacity will be enhanced through the support of men and women in their human development and social participation.

All economically driven governments focus on national accounts and international ratings to measure their performance in the global economy however a more inclusive evaluation would have human welfare at the core of human development which drives national development. Under such an approach the contribution and participation of women would be acknowledged within national productivity measures.

### **Political and socio-economic development goals:**

1. Accelerate economic growth that creates equal employment opportunities for men and women.
2. Support Arab countries to develop the social, health and education infrastructure needed to enable people to reach their full potential.

### **Failure to maximise the contribution of women**

Arabic society has always been patriarchal with younger brothers subordinate to the eldest son and all women and girls subordinate to males in the family or through mar-

riage. The subordination of women has been enforced through Shari'ah law however as families choose to have fewer children and higher standards of education become available for girls, adherence to these laws is becoming less strict<sup>17</sup>. Participation by girls in basic education has steadily increased over time but it is not clear whether gender equality in schools has been achieved in all Arabic countries<sup>18</sup>. Girls need access to 12 years of basic education, uncluttered by culture and tradition, so that they can overcome illiteracy and learn about the world beyond their family or community.

Many women in the Arab world continue to experience the full range of human development deficits as well as inequality within national laws. It is not unexpected that some Shari'ah judiciary who interpret the Qu'oran through the lens of culture and tradition regard democracy as antithetical to their way of life which depends on maintaining gender inequality. In some Arab states women are highly educated and some occupy positions of authority in local, provincial and national governments. It is essential that women in these positions continue the struggle to promote women's rights and remove gender discrimination inherent in Shari'ah law where it relates to personal and social status and access by women to basic services such as health, education and financial security.

Women are almost as well educated as men in Arabic countries and while their labour-force participation is still low, it is increasing<sup>19</sup>. Employed women are often in contact with men who are not related to them and with whom they compete for work and this places the traditional patriarchal order under challenge as demographic and social change accelerates. Women's participation rates in paid employment remain low across all Arabic countries. Possible causes include provisions in Shari'ah law that does not oblige women to contribute to family finances from their incomes and some husbands may be reluctant to allow them to seek employment if they cannot claim some of the income. Part-time employment could be seen as an alternative for women to gain some income while having children and meeting motherhood duties. By earning some money a married woman is able to supplement the husband's wages however this compromise option dilutes the potential for empowerment that full employment can bring.

Partly in response to political criticism from international sources, efforts have been made to achieve mainstream developments in Arabic lands in terms of the visibility of women in leadership positions. Increasing women's political participation equates with the concept of political culture in which political ideology, language and frameworks become established and tend to set the expectations of the people. If women are full participants in political roles it becomes possible to reinforce their status quo by determining meaning and using political symbolism to cement political culture<sup>20</sup>. Overall where this has occurred society has benefited from the influence of younger groups and leaders who have embraced political and social change which in turn allows for greater appreciation of democracy and what it can contribute to human and national development<sup>21</sup>.

The advancement of women in these countries equates with the principles of human development, that is that:

1. women and men have equal opportunity in terms of employment and self-development
2. citizenship for both men and women bestows the same guaranteed rights
3. differences between the sexes are acknowledged without implying that one is valued over the other which leads to gender discrimination.

National instruments that guarantee women's political rights and equality with men in political and civil processes need to be monitored and reported against in terms of what actually occurs. Quota systems can promote women to representative positions however if their scope of activities is restricted locally there is a danger of tokenism and a waste of opportunity for women's development. Cultural and social pressure can also deter women from choosing to exercise their rights even when appointed via a quota system or affirmative action. Those appointed may also face criticism that they are tokens rather than achieving their position through merit. Women in these positions are easily marginalised in a male-dominated environment or they may be allocated to women-only matters rather than able to fully participate in government.

Tokenism in the form of appointing only women from certain social classes or families to leadership and high profile positions may further disempowerment other Arab women who are beset by every component of human poverty. Alternatively, while there may be some tokenism attached to appointments of Arabic women to high profile positions, the fact is that women become more visible and this increases the general empowerment of women.

### **Goals for culture change regarding the value of women:**

1. Ensure that girls participate in at least 12 years of general schooling
2. Clearly delineate religion, culture and tradition in relation to women and symbolism.
3. Support strategies that identify and respond to political exploitation of women in terms of symbols and dominance
4. Provide an environment in which all can develop to a full sense of belonging and participation in society
5. National laws that implement equal opportunity in employment and prevent systematic discrimination against women in employment.
6. Employment environments regulated to ensure woman are able to participate with dignity and not be subjected to harassment and abuse.
7. Labour laws established that provide equal status to men and women as well as an efficient and transparent set of employment processes

## **Distorted views of Islam**

Widespread perceptions of Islam as encouraging violent terrorists to destroy non-Muslim targets have their origins in shocking attacks on innocents over the past decades caused by people who have used Islam as their reason for violence and criminal activities. Terrorist attacks in the name of Islam have been so devastating that international attitudes towards Muslims are now tainted with fear and distrust. Non-Muslims do not understand why these attacks occurred, and why they were perpetrated in the name of Islam. Concerns are intensified when they see evidence of Muslims in some countries celebrating civilian deaths caused by terrorist bombings. It is possible that a better understanding of what Islam really stands for could allay some of these fears and bring such situations into clearer perspective.

All religions have fanatical followers but the majority of the congregation do not behave in similar fashion. So it is for Muslims who follow Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance. Self-defence is condoned in Islam and in other religions, and when the community has to defend itself, it is the role of the state to call upon individuals to defend their homeland or place of citizenship in times of war. The killing of innocents is prohibited and Islamic law imposes the death penalty on anyone who deliberately kills another person.

Suicide bombing and the killing of innocents is prohibited in Islam and this includes the killing of oneself. The spreading of injustice, exploitation of the weak and breaking of the law is regarded as corrupt and Muslim law is compelled put a stop to such activities. Therefore Islam encourages the use of force by the law to stop such activities and bring them to justice.

Jihad is a self-defence doctrine and can only be used by a Muslim state against imminent and certain aggression by an enemy. Jihad cannot be declared against another Muslim state; against another country at peace with the Muslim country; against other religions or a person or community on the basis of being different. Offensive jihad is not in line with the Qur'an despite statements made by captured terrorists that this is so.

Secularist views are often expounded through various forms of media, making religious leaders feel as if their congregations and faiths are being misrepresented or their issues and views ignored in the public space. As a result the worthwhile elements of religion and philosophy of altruistic values that run through all faiths can receive less media attention.

Among many religious leaders there is a view that the media promotes an anti-religious view rather than the unbiased commentary on civil matters that is expected of media presenters. As well, there is a perception that media staff are poorly informed about religion and therefore tend to focus on negative stories that can be sensationalised. In-



temperate reporting of stories as though they have been triggered by religious symbolism can misinform the general public and vilify certain religious groups. Superficial, sensationalist reporting can also trigger violence and hatred especially in circumstances where the causal issues may be poverty, inequity, or discrimination.

### **Information policy goals:**

1. Information on Qur'anic texts and Islamic Principles needs to be available to media representatives along with briefings and explanations
2. Radical behaviour in the name of Islam needs to be criticised by Muslim leaders as political and not representative of Islam
3. Internationally, media needs to be held accountable for the results of misinformation and biased reporting that inflames violence and bigotry.
4. Constructive media efforts should be acknowledged and efforts made to provide students of media studies with a greater understanding of religions and their contribution to social capital.

### **General world decline in religious literacy**

General religious illiteracy within a society has an effect similar to a society dominated by one religion. That is, a general lack of understanding of and tolerance for different faiths which is essential for a nation with diplomatic, trade, professional and sporting relationships with other countries. Religious illiteracy in schools also restricts the growth of social capital gained through exposure to different belief systems and how these are manifested through good works and generosity to others, for example, through volunteering.

Religious and civic freedoms are acknowledged under the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981) and other international conventions and agreements. The intent of the latter declaration was to curtail state interference in religious matters.

As global involvement and national development occur within states, evolving relationships between religion and state are often reassessed along with the continuing relevance and influence of culture and tradition to national political identity. A major player in this reassessment is secularism, which while not a religion, does promote engagement in debates on the allocation of resources and the effects of religious symbols and activities on public life.

The issue of single faith schools needs to be examined in terms of their symbolic value. The teaching of practices focused on reinforcing traditional and cultural understandings that devalue women could be seen to be making use of children to send a message

to other groups about the size and vigour of their particular religion or ethnic culture. Children in these situations have no freedom of choice and because they are in a trust relationship with their parents and teachers, they believe what they are taught and can be shaped to cultural conformity rather than being liberated through education. For religious choice to have validity other equally worthwhile options must be available for consideration before choosing to commit to a religion or way of life.

## **POSSIBLE ROLE OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN ADAPTION OF APPROPRIATE AND FORWARD-LOOKING RESPONSES**

### **Donor policy opportunity**

Where Arab states are in receipt of donor aid, there is an opportunity to direct funding and to monitor implementation. In some Arab countries service industries are not well-funded and community programs have uncertain support. These service areas are a preferred employment option for women and when curtailed it is women and their families who suffer the effects of unemployment.

### **Policy goals:**

1. Social justice criteria attached to donor aid could facilitate a reversal of human poverty which in Arabic nations has a dire effect on restricting women's participation and opportunities to develop skills and knowledge
2. Mechanisms included in donor agreements could emphasise women's participation as well as the establishment of health, education and welfare safety nets

### **Social institutions -Religion and state**

Internally, societies tend to reposition in terms of national development priorities which often hinge on achieving planned social change. Important among these considerations is the contribution to cultural, social and spiritual capital that can be made by religious faiths. Societies need to be able to define the social and political space that enables communities to practise their religious activities while also adhering to their civic responsibilities.

The nexus between civic and religious commitment enables a society to engage in free and open debate and criticism of all aspects of social, cultural, political and religious life. It is in this context that people of faith are free to criticise civil society in terms of moral and cultural events or trends and likewise, members of a civil society can criticise religious activities that interfere with civic order and social integration, for example.

In most societies religious groups share with the state responsibility for creating social capital which supports social and economic development as well as providing opportunities for faiths to grow and maintain their cultural, linguistic and spiritual traditions as well as their religious communities. For faith-based communities to be able to credibly criticise social trends such as gambling, an inclusive and cross-cultural involvement that maintains an awareness of other religious and social values is needed.

The right to religious freedom ensures that religion and state have a dynamic relationship which can adjust to changing realities. While the religious beliefs of a faith-based community is not a matter for the state, governments need to be vigilant to ensure no corrupted or perverted religion emerges, for example, a sect advocating terrorism or treason, sexual abuse, mutilation, gender inequality or oppression. The line between transcendent and perverted religion is sometimes not clear however there is general agreement that the emergence of terrorism claiming to be acting for Islam despite the Qur'an clearly decrying violence constitutes a perversion of religion for political gain<sup>22</sup>. Further examples of such perversion can be seen in western groups wrongly claiming to be religions in order to access tax relief, or cults that capture the energy and livelihoods of members who must surrender their independence to remain part of the cult. Clearly there is a need to differentiate between religion, culture or tradition and fraudulent or criminal activities that undermine the rights of other people.

### **State policy goals:**

1. To achieve fairer and more accessible state services and programs that promote fairness and responsiveness to all members of society
2. State services need to be designed, delivered and evaluated in terms of equity, access and appropriateness of service types and distribution
3. State role in validating claims associated with religious status
4. State role in addressing cultural, racial and religious intolerance
5. State role in bringing crimes perpetrated in the name of Islam to justice
6. State clarification of political, cultural, traditional and religious practices where women and girls are concerned
7. State role in establishing equal participation in schooling and accessing health services by girls and women of all ages

Social change within the Arabic states in relation to gender equity will depend on a groundswell of support for the emancipation of women and a realisation that in so doing, men also gain an opportunity for human and social development.

Women's participation in activities outside the family promotes personal development and mental health derived from self-confidence and the acquisition of skills. Within the family the value of women's participation in terms of family and social cohesion is also fundamental to national development.

There is evidence that Arabic women are engaged in a struggle for equality and freedom of choice that will apply to all women and not just the chosen few. Assistance and support needs to be given to these efforts to ensure that all women have access to basic development opportunities as well as adequate health and education services.

### **Policy:**

1. National systems of health, education and service structures need to be monitored to ensure that they facilitate equal access to health and learning, and follow Islamic teachings that prohibit any religious or cultural observances that undermine health or personal development

### **CONCLUSION**

If gender equality is to be adopted by Arabic nations many reforms are needed, including greater transparency around social priorities and the eradication of human poverty. For this to occur extraordinary powers held by incumbent leaders in religion, law, politics and culture have to be curtailed so that legitimate opportunities become available for women to take up their responsibilities regarding personal and national development.

Token efforts to promote women and allow women's associations to perform a limited range of activities around family and community are only designed to forestall change and empowerment. Leaders' legitimacy may need to be contested in such circumstances as well as challenges made to the constraints placed on women who oppose entrenched power positions. Gender equity can only be achieved by Arabic women through a gradual erosion of male control and a concomitant increase in the empowerment of women.

### **Exemplar- Religion and state in Australia**

Under Judeo-Christian frameworks there is an effort to maintain a distance between religion and state although they are closely linked on many levels. In Australia government funding for religious schools has led to increased accountability for curriculum and teaching standards as well as a requirement to meet national performance standards in student participation and learning outcomes.

Australian religious schools are often regarded as being part of the private sector with contributions to costs being made by parents. Government grants also extend to ethno-religious schools and confessional universities on the basis of promoting cultural diversity. The government also funds religious as well as public hospitals and health agencies providing services and charity to disadvantaged groups.

Faith-based schools for children also tend to be ethnocentric to some extent and debates

have arisen regarding compatibility between multi-cultural policies and religious beliefs that centralise religious observances and ethnicity and promote social isolation<sup>23</sup>. Ethno-religious schools have been challenged in relation to access to government funding particularly where some doubts exist as to whether the curriculum adheres to national standards and whether the content focus of history and social subjects is on narrow versions of the past in the home country or on preparing pupils for the future<sup>24</sup>. The argument is linked to whether teaching a politically and culturally shaped version of the past will be detrimental to pupils' opportunities in life in Australia.

In 1981 an Australian High Court action<sup>25</sup> occurred in relation to funding of religious schools and, after hearing arguments from national state and religious leaders, it was clarified that no state of Australia is able to establish any faith as the established religion of Australia and that government funding of faith-based schools does not constitute establishing a national religion.

In other aspects of Australian society, religion has been incorporated into military service as well as in the performance of commemorative ceremonies and marriages; and discrimination on the basis of religion has been included in the racial discrimination acts. Australia has had a long-term commitment to multiculturalism emphasising community harmony, responsibility, respect, fairness and benefits for all<sup>26</sup> and in 2010 the policy is moving to centralise citizenship rather than cultural diversity to ensure the ongoing certainty of public order.

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