

# Throwing Off the Veil

Hoda Sha'arawi should best be remembered for her role in founding Egypt's Feminist Union – the first such organisation in the Arab region – and for fighting to establish a minimum marriage age for women, reform family law, restrict polygamy and promote the education of girls. And yet, among all her achievements, it is telling that contemporary Arab historians inevitably focus first on one bold, symbolic act at the central train station in Cairo. In the first week of March 1923, Sha'arawi deliberately did the unthinkable: she removed her veil in public.

In some respects, the Arab region is the same place for women that it was 86 years ago, almost to the day. In the more conservative parts of the Arab region, most particularly Saudi Arabia, women are not allowed to drive a car, sail a boat or fly a plane. They still cannot expose hair, wrists and ankles in public, or travel without the permission of a male relative: usually a father, husband or – in some ways more constraining for its role reversal – a son. Saudi Arabia is not alone in segregating the sexes in many public settings, ranging from schools and universities to restaurants and banks. And despite some incremental reforms in family law across the Gulf region, a woman who angers her husband is still prone to the triple talaq, the controversial oral divorce, with little to no recourse to alimony.

The deep gender disparities of the region were raised six years ago by the United Nations in the Arab Human Development Report, which was researched and drafted by Arab intellectuals and scholars. Stating unequivocally that the Arab region as a whole failed to “treat its womenfolk as full citizens”, it concluded that the oppression of women represented one of the root causes of backwardness in the Arab world and the dearth of creativity. Put another way, a community is doomed to lack the competitive edge if it routinely stifles half of its production potential.

There is still a culture of stigma attached to women who opt for certain careers. In the media, for instance, Gulf nationals account for a mere 10 per cent of journalists in the comparatively liberal United Arab Emirates (UAE) – and out of these, barely a sliver are women. This lacuna is particularly evident in reporting on controversial local issues, such as sexual abuse or female circumcision, which are typically assigned to well-meaning if ultimately detached expatriate journalists.

However, women are making slow – if sluggish – gains in the Middle East. The views and aspirations of Arab women are changing thanks largely to the internet and increasing educational opportunities. Within that context, more than 55 per cent of university students in Saudi Arabia are women; and in neighbouring Qatar and the UAE, women outnumber men by three to one. Equally, fertility rates have halved across the Gulf region over the past two decades as women have sought to move beyond a purely traditional role – the decrease has been most dramatic in Oman, with a drop from ten births per woman to fewer than four over that period.

Even politically, women have been able to make some small but notable gains. Last month, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia sacked the conservative head of the Commission of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice – the agency that enforces the wearing of the hijab – and appointed the first woman in his cabinet. In Kuwait, women made history in 2006 by voting and contesting in a local by-election for the first time, after the parliament granted them right to suffrage the previous year.

However, the region remains deeply patriarchal. These modest gains in the political, economic and legal rights of women have been contested at every turn, and there is a very real danger that

further emancipation will be crushed under the weight of male chauvinism. These reactionary elements must not be allowed to obstruct the process of rethinking the role of Arab women, which is now in its second century. This reassessment has its roots in 1899, when the celebrated Egyptian author Qasim Amin published a seminal work that explicitly laid the blame of the region's backwardness to the oppression of women – the very same conclusion reiterated a century later in the Arab Human Development Report.

Amin went on to inspire Hoda Sha'arawi, who in turn continues to provide a shining example to countless Arab feminists. Within that context, it is also important to understand that Sha'arawi removed her hijab in public not as a political statement – the removal of the veil was never on the agenda of the Feminist Union. Rather, it was meant as an uplifting gesture to express the most basic *cri de coeur*: suppressed women the world over crave more freedom, more education and better prospects. Above all, they deserve humane treatment from the society, not just the rights.

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## Women's Education

“Were women to ‘unsex’ themselves by claiming equality with men, they would become the most hateful, heathen and disgusting of beings and would surely perish without male protection.”

One could be forgiven for thinking that these words had been uttered by the Taliban, arguably the most misogynist faction ever conceived. In their bid to end education for women, scores of girls' schools have been destroyed in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the conflict-stricken region of Swat alone, some 122 schools have so far been razed to the ground.

In fact, these words were not even expressed by a man. In 1870, referring to the Women's Rights Movement, Britain's Queen Victoria went on to pronounce that “feminists ought to get a good whipping” – again, with uncomfortable parallels to the treatment of “wayward” women in Taliban-controlled regions.

Fortunately, the world has changed dramatically for western women over the past 140 years, and there is an unequivocal recognition of the role played by education in promoting the quality of human life, as enshrined in the UN Charter.

The process of change began in 1869 – the year before Queen Victoria's vitriolic attack of the Women's Movement – when Cambridge University's Girton College was established as the first residential college for women in England. With clear justification, its first students were known as The Pioneers.

Indeed, for almost a century, it is this pioneering spirit as encapsulated by generations of female students that succeeded in gaining incremental advantages for women. It is almost hard to believe that, until the 1970s, female undergraduates were expected to be “modestly dressed” at all times, needed permission to attend lectures and were not permitted to graduate with degrees in many colleges in the West.

These days, in fact, female undergraduates in the West are not only on par with male counterparts; in many cases, they are faring considerably better. A report published by the UK's Higher Education Policy Institute in June noted that for the first time ever women outperformed men in

almost every area of university education in the UK, including in law and medicine – traditionally male-dominated domains. More than 49 per cent of women now go on to higher education compared to 37.8 per cent of men, which essentially translates into more career prospects for women.

This needs to serve as a clear lesson for women in the Arab region. While Arab women are being educated in ever greater numbers and in an increasing number of countries across the region, professional opportunities for female graduates remain limited. For example, barely 16 per cent of Saudi women are in employment. Of these, most work in education, one of the only professional fields open to them.

Currently, women outnumber men at universities in some Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, where they have started to equal men in all levels of education. While these figures can be partly explained by the fact that men are often encouraged to study abroad, it is also indicative of a drive by women to grab the chance of gaining a tertiary education.

Gradually, opportunities for a broader education are starting to materialise. For instance, the Princess Noura bint Abdulrahman University, a women-only institution, is being established in order to offer courses that are usually off-limits for female students, such as bioscience or information technology. Other prominent initiatives, including Qatar Foundation's Education City, are also set to play a pivotal role in bringing state-of-the-art facilities and world-class educational opportunities to men and women alike.

But as groundbreaking as these initiatives may be, the revolution for women's education will only come about from within, that is if Arab women are able to absorb the pioneering spirit of those early Girtonians.

It is worth remembering that when Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, there wasn't a single college of higher education in the UK that admitted female students; and had she had her way, there wouldn't have been any at the end of her rule either. Moreover, education for both sexes was not deemed an inalienable human right. Before women gained the right and privilege of higher education they were believed to be lower-class citizens, not worthy of voting, owning property or engaging in any meaningful employment.

Today's women are truly indebted to those early Victorian pioneers; and while irreversible gender equality is on the horizon in the West, the struggle remains in many parts of the Middle East. Arab women must therefore have the courage to resist and confront a largely patriarchal and conservative society that often seeks to limit the advancement of women. Only with resolve will Arab women be able to gain access to the full opportunities that are available to men. And only then will they be able to stake their claim to everything that life has to offer.

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