GENDER STUDIES IN THE ARAB REGION: NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS
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INTRODUCTION

I. WHY GENDER?

Today, the field of gender studies faces both global and regional challenges. With the recent rise in right-wing populist movements around the world, women's rights have been under attack and gender studies have been delegitimized and discredited. These movements often consider gender issues and research as the epiphrase of society's perceived ills, using them to strike at national and international agendas as well as actors working toward gender equality. In the Arab region, postcolonial states, under the guise of state feminism, have co-opted gender discourse by championing women's causes through the enactment of personal status and related legislation and the tokenization of women's political participation and public-sector employment. Feminist scholarship argues that state feminism has depoliticized the feminist movement and occluded more fundamental structural reforms toward the eradication of gender inequality.

And yet, these forces and processes have not deterred the continued rise and consolidation of gender rights as an arena of vibrant activism, particularly in the context of the Arab uprisings. Though movements for gender equality in many Arab countries are not recent, over the last decade—particularly following the Arab uprisings—the region has witnessed increased mobilization and grassroots organizing around gender equality, sexuality, and women's rights. With varying levels of success, women's organizations and movements continue to contest the state and create new spaces for discussion of issues that particularly affect women's lives and that have been considered sensitive, such as gender-based violence, inheritance, and personal status laws.

On the academic front, the last few decades have witnessed the slow but steady introduction of gender studies programs in Arab universities.1 Arab feminist scholarship has also flourished, moving away from Eurocentric feminisms and seeking to emphasize regional contexts and women's local experiences. Scholars and activists have kept their eyes on theoretical and conceptual developments in the study of gender, pushing for new paradigms and advocating for a deeper study of intersections between gender and the social, the economic, and the political. Feminist scholars are looking into the past to reinterpret history from women's perspectives, identifying transformative acts and events championed by women that went unnoticed. In so doing, they have adopted methods that help amplify women's voices and reinstate her-story.

II. GENDER STUDIES WITHIN THE ACSS

Gender studies and programming have always been integral to the work and activities of the ACSS. The Council's openness to the field is not coincidental. In its key documents, including mission statement and objectives, the ACSS clearly sees the most intricate of social problems as best tackled by multidisciplinary teams of researchers and individuals who reflect interdisciplinary perspectives and bring in the gender lens as a tool of analysis. Thus, gender has always been mainstreamed in all ACSS activities and programs. The best project proposals selected for funding are those that—among other things—underscore the gender dimensions of the proposed work. For example, under the theme of environmentalism, grantees have paid attention to the impact of environmental degradation on the work of women in agriculture, while others studied the impact of specific occupations (such as sex work) on women's health. Our working groups, such as the Ethnography and Knowledge working group, have been exploring positionalities and gender as they seek to counter dominant regimes of knowledge and attempt to produce a more nuanced ethnographic understanding of the Arab region today. On the other hand, the Critiques of Power working group explored the operations of patriarchy and gender exclusion by studying contemporary Arab critical works and theoretical productions that diagnose modalities of power.

In addition to mainstreaming gender in our programs and across the institution, in the last few years, the ACSS embarked on gender-specific programming. Our New Paradigm Factory program (NPF) has focused in the last three rounds on the theme of Gendered Resistance, teaching young academics how to write for a wide variety of audiences beyond academia. Initially inspired by the abundant literature on weapons used by the weak to confront oppression,2 the theme of Gendered Resistance refuses to look at women through the lens of victimhood—as victims of state and male patriarchy—and believes such an outlook understates reality and does not establish gender justice. The program focuses on the overt and subtle ways women use organizations and movements, both as individuals and collectively, to resist the oppression of the state, institutions, individuals, and culture as well as social norms. In this context, Gendered Resistance highlights women's acts of resistance in daily, routine, and inconspicuous ways that nonetheless challenge state policies and laws and/or destabilize the patriarchal status quo.

The ACSS has also launched a collaborative project with the University of California, Davis Arab Region Consortium entitled Mapping the Production of Knowledge on Women and Gender in the Arab Region, which seeks to chart the state of knowledge production on these topics over the past fifty years. Through a collaboration with the American University of Beirut, the ACSS is participating in a three-year pilot oral history project entitled the Arab Oral History Archive: Gender, Alternative Histories, and the Production of Knowledge (Gender Oral History Archive - GOHA). The project aims to create new collections of oral histories and utilize oral history methodologies and archives in order to develop situated feminist studies and critiques of...
knowledge production in and from the Arab region and create a more inclusive body of subaltern archival repositories about the region.

As we at the ACSS continue to launch gender-related programs, we are attentive to the need to understand and contextualize historical situations and question what we know, what we do not know and still need to know. Participants discussed the history of gender studies in the Arab region, emphasizing that feminist NGOs have always been dynamic spaces that provided training on gender and kept the field alive. In fact, they have played a critical role in training and educating about gender long before universities introduced the field on campus. This conclusion triggered a lively exchange of experience and debate between women academics and activists. It was reiterated over and over again that there is a strong need to break binaries, most notably between research and activism, and to try to instead capture movements between and across these two spaces. We raised questions on how to consolidate knowledge produced by various academic and activist institutions, as well as how to restore respectability to NGO-produced knowledge that is derived from close interaction with and understanding of women's daily lives.

We also discussed the status of gender studies in universities and the need to legitimize its existence and find stable "homes" for the field that can help it grow and flourish. There was an agreement that top-down approaches to establish gender studies in universities are not useful and that we need bottom-up approaches championed mainly by faculty to change attitudes and empower students. There is also a need to promote feminist pedagogy that—again—breaks down binaries between activism and academia, teaching and critical thinking, research and persuasion, research and teaching, and knowledge production and dissemination. Unanimously, participants felt strongly that gender needed to be mainstreamed, introduced in different disciplines (e.g., medicine, engineering, technology) and become mandatory for all newly enrolled students. Universities need to introduce mobility programs that allow students to move between programs to gain different experiences and acquire comparative approaches to the study of gender. Gender knowledge should not be confined to classrooms but should extend into the public sphere. We also need to encourage public writing on current affairs and push for gender equality in universities’ professional and leadership ranks.

The topic and country-specific presentations also uncovered a wealth of insights. Presentations by participants from Iran and Turkey indicated that researchers and activists from the two countries do not connect sufficiently with the Arab region, although they share many common challenges and perhaps also solutions. Particularly in Iran, feminist knowledge production is severely impaired. Like many countries in the Middle East, research pertaining to Iran is happening outside of the country and in the West, where an agenda that is inconsistent with realities on the ground is developing. A presentation on gender and political participation, also focused on Iran, raised the important question of whether women’s participation in politics truly seeks gender equality or is merely a political expediency. How do we as feminists feel about politics that are not necessarily democratic as they play out within authoritarian contexts but still open a space for women’s participation in the polity?

The presentation on health in conflict situations, focusing on the case of Palestine, underscored that women’s reproductive health, whether among women experiencing menopause or women in their reproductive years, is important in both conflict and "stable" situations. However, the particular challenges women face in conflict situations (such as the case of Israeli occupation of Palestine) underscore the need for more research on the systemic violence administered against Palestinians and the restrictions imposed on their mobility, which harm women’s emotional, mental, and physical health. Still focusing on gender and...
occupation, it was emphasized that new theoretical approaches are needed. In order to understand structures and relations of power in the context of settler colonialism in Palestine, more revolutionary and transformative feminist knowledge is essential to provide analytical tools that do not separate the patriarchal structures from the colonial and neoliberal structures of violence within Palestinian society.

The presentations on women and labor force participation focused on various forms and consequences of labor market discrimination, the most obvious of which is that despite their competitive higher educational qualifications, women are paid less than men. The presentations under this topic also addressed the care work overwhelmingly undertaken by women. They demonstrated how the limited allocations by states to public care provisions could not have been sustained without the input of women, who have consistently played the role of the main caregivers within their families. This has inevitably limited women’s presence as active employees and workers in the labor market. In more recent times, as women struggle to maintain employment, they are faced with the intrusion of new technologies that invade their privacy and disturbs the balance between private and work/public life.

IV. THE BOOK: RESEARCH AGENDAS AND THE LOOK FORWARD

At the meeting in Amman, as indicated above, we devoted the second day to examining the relationship between gender studies and other disciplines and areas of work with the aim of revealing research gaps and emerging agendas. The list of potential intersections was long and continued to expand. For example, the discussion on female labor force participation and sectors where women tend to be present was closely related to emerging areas of work where women are still underrepresented, including artificial intelligence and climate change. Women's voices are needed in these areas, both as researchers and actors who advance the field by bringing in women’s perspectives on the one hand, and as individuals and groups impacted by developments in these sectors on the other. Indeed, the discussions in Amman demonstrated that while a modicum of research and work has been taking place in certain areas, there are still gaps in other areas, such as security and urban studies, and the law.

By the end of the meeting, and in conversation with our donors, the International Development Research Centre and Open Society Foundations, we were fully convinced that much work remained to be done, that areas of intersection that were not covered in Amman needed to be addressed, and that some areas already discussed at the workshop merited more in-depth analysis. This publication—a compilation of six papers covering a variety of areas—marks an important step forward. We were particularly interested in advancing the agenda on the different topics and therefore hoped to better understand what kind of knowledge is produced, who produces it, and what the research gaps are. Four of the papers we commissioned served as background papers presenting an overview of the region as a whole while two papers were country-specific case studies of Palestine and Tunisia. One of the four background papers adopts a bird’s eye view to assess women’s economic empowerment in the MENA region as a whole, with a focus on the Arab region. Additionally, five papers were written in English and one was written in Arabic. Although we considered translating the Arabic paper in order to produce a monolingual publication, in the end we decided to keep it in its original language to preserve the intricacies of the discourse and language.

As expected, the six papers uncovered a gamut of research gaps in their fields of interest and charted several areas and directions for further study. In her paper entitled “Women’s and Gender Studies in the Arab Region: An NGO Phenomenon,” Hoda Elsadda suggests that more intensive work—particularly feminist narratives—is needed to document gendered experiences of women and continue to break down the academic/activism binary by building bridges between NGOs and academics in order to make theoretical knowledge more accessible to activists.

In the following article, entitled “Feminist Security Studies: An Introduction,” Dalia Gharem-pushes for a more rigorous review of the concept of security in the Arab region. She encourages academics to seek to understand the dynamics of structural powers in security politics and help women academics and members of civil society organizations explore this area in which they are currently underrepresented. For Gharem, the future research agenda in the region needs to be both thorough and diverse as it focuses on context-specific cases.

In their paper entitled “Research on Gender, Health, and Displacement in the Arab Region: Lessons Learned and Intersectional Possibilities,” Weem and Doaa Hammoudeh underscore the noticeable interest in women’s sexual and reproductive health as well as gender-based violence in the context of conflict, which has been accompanied by steady growth in literature on mental health of both women and men. They note, on the other hand, the clear gap in the literature on non-communicable diseases studied from a gender lens as well as the limited research on gendered experiences of refugees and displaced people who are LGBTQI+, nonbinary, disabled, and/or have mental health issues. They stress the need for an intersectional approach to studying health that addresses structural, political, cultural, and ecological contexts, in addition to the intersection of multiple positionalities and vulnerabilities, as well as more studies on the health of men in the context of displacement.

Serena Canaan and Yara Tarabulsi, in their paper entitled “Women's Economic Empowerment in the MENA Region: Context, Barriers, and Interventions,” call for more attention to underrepresented areas of women's work, in the MENA region generally, and the Arab region especially, such as informal labor, rural work, and care responsibilities as well as support for quantitative research aimed at establishing causal relationships between women's work and other outcomes. In this context, they underline the need for more studies honing in on employers’ positions towards women's work to help us understand the barriers to and determinants of women’s empowerment in the region. The authors draw attention to a critical methodological issue: most of the available data on health, education, and labor-force participation are essentially disaggregated by sex and cannot be considered gender statistics.

The publication ends with two case studies on Palestine and Tunisia. As they trace the role of higher education in the Palestinian national struggle against occupation in their paper entitled “Gender and Higher Education: The Case of Palestine,” Nida Abu Awwad and Lena Meari assert, above all, the need for statistics that reflect the diversity of women and men and capture all aspects of their lives. Like the Hammoudehs, they strongly recommended more intersectional research that highlights the relationship between educational attainment and other socioeconomic characteristics. They focus on the need
for more profound qualitative studies that depict the experiences of female students and academics, and advocate gender-sensitive approaches that become part and parcel of all stages of designing, planning, and implementing data collection.

Finally, in her contribution on the case of Tunisia, entitled "الجندور والقانون: المثال التونسي" ("Gender and Law: The Tunisian Case"), Zahia Jouirou outlines three areas of research that should continue, in concert, to inform the future work on law and gender. First, researchers and activists should continue to expound on the lack of conflict between gender-related legislation such as the personal status law and the intentions (Maqased) of the Islamic Sharia. The second area, which is more sociological, seeks to shine a light on the daily life experiences and struggles of Tunisian women, and suggests using their experiences to inform gender-related policies and legislation. Finally, Jouirou addresses the legal direction that seeks to uncover areas where Tunisian law needs to improve in order to catch up with international standards and conventions.

We hope the reader will find in the following articles some answers to the question of research agendas and ideas for filling in the gaps in our understanding of gender studies in the Arab region.

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Bibliography

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Women’s and Gender Studies in the Arab Region: An NGO Phenomenon

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Arab region, the field of women’s and gender studies (WGS) emerged not through universities, but rather in independent research organizations that arose in the context of a relative political liberalization in many Arab countries. The trajectory of WGS in the region is a direct consequence of political constraints in underdemocratic postcolonial Arab states, as well as the status and histories of national higher education institutions. The field was developed and nurtured by feminist activists who founded independent women’s organizations in the 1980s and 1990s. These activists seized the opportunities facilitated by the confluence of three factors: political transformations in Arab regimes, the internationalization of women’s rights issues on a global scale, and the history of activism and struggle for rights in the context of authoritarian postcolonial states. With this context in mind, I argue that WGS in the Arab region is an NGO phenomenon.

The institutionalization of WGS research and programs globally has followed diverse academic and political trajectories. Different country contexts—academic, political and cultural—impacted how the field developed in various settings. The first programs were established in the 1970s in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand and expanded and spread across the globe in the 1980s and 1990s. These programs responded to the demands of women’s movements in these countries for the production of feminist knowledges to counter hegemonic masculinist histories and epistemologies. In Germany, the first professorship in women’s studies was created in 1980, and the first MA in gender studies was established in 1997 in the Humboldt University in Berlin (Kraft 2014, 109). Kraft (2014, 11) contends that this relative delay in the institutionalization of the field in German academia, despite the existence of a strong feminist movement, was partly due to persistent claims by academic colleagues that gender experts were not scholarly enough, were ideologically driven, and did not exercise intellectual critical objectivity.

In Poland, the advent of WGS took place in the early 1980s with the transition from one-party to democratic rule. It was characterized by a strong pro-Western orientation as scholars in Poland were eager to catch up with Western scholarship, but, subsequently, there was much discussion about “the hegemony of Western, and particularly American, feminist discourse” (Filipowicz 2014, 11). In short, different histories, political systems and academic contexts were instrumental in shaping the nascent field.

The centrality of NGOs to the development of WGS is not unique to the Arab region. In Spain, for instance, where WGS started later than other Western European countries, it “is strongest outside the academy, because of its alliance with groups who resisted the Franco regime” (Routledge 2000, 2063). In Latin America, the 1970s was a period of military regimes inimical to social movements and activist oriented research. Research in women’s studies emerged in the 1980s outside academia and funded by international organizations (Routledge 2000, 2064). Higher education institutions in countries that experienced authoritarian rule in the second half of the twentieth century in general, share similar, yet distinct, trajectories in their response to and acceptance of the new emerging field of knowledge.

The last few decades have witnessed a proliferation of feminist research and knowledge production that has arguably constituted the backbone of recent women’s movements and has made transformative contributions to knowledge. However, while there are now many accredited university programs and established scholars conducting cutting-edge research in the field of WGS, women’s studies in universities remains institutionally precarious and politically vulnerable. Many WGS programs in the region and globally suffer from insufficient funding.

1. In this article, WGS is used to indicate systematic production of knowledge in the field of women’s and gender studies.
2. The notable exception was the Women’s Studies Institute established in 1973 at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, formerly a women’s college.
3. In the UK, the first gender studies MA program was established at the University of Kent in Canterbury in 1980 (Coate 1999, 2).
4. Also see Temkina and Zdravomyslova (2003) for a discussion of the beginnings of gender studies in post-Soviet states in the 1990s.
bureaucratic constraints, lack of autonomy, political pressures, perceptions of marginality in comparison to core disciplines, and resistance from faculty members on the grounds that WGS is too political and does not meet the requirements of objective intellectual research, to name only a few (Stromquist 2001). Additionally, and in the context of the neoliberalization of the university and the focus on education for the job market, enrollment in WSG programs has decreased, as many students worry about their employability after graduation. This paper traces the development of the field of women's and gender studies in the region, from its early origins in Arab women's rights movements to its eventual integration into universities. The aim is threefold: to shed light on the historical context from which WGS programs in civil society institutions—that is, NGOs—emerged prior to the field's institutionalization in universities; to highlight past and present political, conceptual, and social challenges that have constrained the field's development; and to chart some key trends and trajectories in WGS knowledge production in the Arab region. This overview uncovers both obstacles and opportunities for the field, highlighting the importance of bridging academia and activism and sharing experiences and in order to advance the production of WGS knowledge at this historical moment.

II. HISTORIES OF ARAB WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS: BEGINNINGS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN WGS

Women's movements in the Arab region constitute the spark and force behind the growth of research in the field of women’s and gender studies. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the beginnings of feminist consciousness and women’s activism expressed in the publication of treatises and articles by women. In Egypt, the year 1892 marks an important moment in the history of the women’s movement with the publication of Aisha al-Taymurriya's The Woman’s Movement and the publication of Aisha (The Bride), a monthly publication that advocated for women’s rights and became a forum for political discussions for women (Arenfeldt and Golley 2012). In 1909, Mary Ajami founded al-Arus books, treatises, and articles in newspapers and magazines that, when revisited, constitute a wealth of knowledge in the field of WGS.

National liberation movements in the Arab region were key vehicles for women’s struggles for freedom in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, Tunisia, among other colonized Arab countries. The 1919 revolution against the British colonial presence in Egypt, for example, is recognized as a turning point in the history of the women's movement and the participation of women in the political sphere. Egyptian women organized demonstrations, joined resistance movements against colonial rule, advocated equal rights and social and political groups, and began advancing for their rights. In 1923, Hoda Shaarawy founded the Egyptian Feminist Union with a clear political and social mandate (El-Sadda 2019). In Syria, Jam’iyat Qiyas al-Fatah (the Women’s Awakening Club) (Arenfeldt and Golley 2012). In both the Mashreq and the Maghreb of the Arab region, women also demanded their rights to equal citizenship, education, and employment against the backdrop of colonial domination and modernist discourses about the status of women in new nation states (Arenfeldt and Golley 2012). Over the course of the twentieth century, women’s participation in social, political, and religious debates, in addition to their contributions to knowledge from a gender perspective, has included books, treatises, and articles in newspapers and magazines, which, when revisited, constitute a wealth of knowledge in the field of WGS.

Islamic Conference and announced that they would join the ranks of fighters against Zionism and imperialism. In Lebanon, the period between 1920 and 1939 witnessed a marked increase in women’s activism and the establishment of approximately thirty-six independent organizations. One manifestation of that momentum is the establishment of the Women’s Union in Syria and Lebanon, which adopted Arab nationalist politics. The Moroccan women’s union affiliated with the communist party was founded in 1944 and foregrounded the struggle for national independence. In Algeria, when France in 1956, the Popular Democratic Party (Golley and Marrash, 2011) in a public square and chant “Algeria is a part of France,” women wore veils and emphasized national identity and belonging, prioritizing the national struggle over their demands for political and social rights (Arenfeldt and Golley 2012).

While there is no denying that emerging women’s movements in the Arab region benefited from an alliance with national liberation movements, empowered women in the early stages of their struggle and accorded them social status and political legitimacy, national independence did not bring the expected gains for women’s rights. The Algerian example is a stark case. Algerian women put their demands for equal rights on hold as they joined the war for independence, which resulted in enormous sacrifices and loss of life. Yet once the war was won, women did not receive the acknowledgment they deserved as comrades in the struggle, and their demands for equality were disregarded (Arenfeldt and Golley 2012). The same held true in other postcolonial Arab states, though with important variations. In Egypt, women obtained universal suffrage and rights in the public sphere in 1956, but their status in the private sphere, regulated by the Personal Status Law, was left unchanged within the modernization project underway. The discrepancy between women’s rights in the private versus the public spheres was prevalent across all Arab countries, with the exception of Tunisia, which radically changed its family code and provided women with legal and social protections (Arenfeldt and Golley 2012). Since then, activism for women’s rights in Arab countries has largely focused on legal reform of family codes.

However, the key factor shaping women's movements in the Arab region is the form of rule in the new modern nation states. Characterized by authoritarian rule and undemocratic governance, Arab postcolonial states clamped down on dissent and all forms of opposition movements, instituted one-party systems, and nationalized and appropriated social movements, including the women’s movement. Political parties were banned in Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Tunisia, and replaced with one ruling party: the Ba’ath Party in Syria and the National Democratic Party in Egypt, the National Liberation Front in Algeria, and the Constitution Party in Tunisia (Al-Ali 2007; Elsadda 2011, 2019; Arenfeldt and Golley 2012). In Morocco, parties were controlled by King Hassan II, who demanded loyalty to the crown. In the region, the exception was Lebanon, where the sectarian division of power allowed for the existence of plurality. Furthermore, Arab states imposed restrictions on independent civil society organizations and halted the development of rights movements, including the women’s movement (Al-Ali 2007; Elsadda 2011, 2019; Arenfeldt and Golley 2012).

The opening of new political spaces, along with the realization that the new political parties continued to marginalize women’s concerns, spurred the formation of a new generation of women’s NGOs.
Jordan. Economic liberalization went hand-in-hand with political liberalization and the establishment of multiparty systems in some Arab countries. The decline of the state's role in the provision of services created a new sector to grow and engage with global markets and systems, boosting the role of civil society institutions. In Morocco, a new generation of civil society organizations was established in the 1980s. This coincided with the move toward the democratization of political institutions as part of the monarchy’s efforts to consolidate a unified position on the international scene. Morocco’s claims to the Western Sahara (Naciri 1998, 3). Jordan adopted neoliberal policies in 1989 in response to pressure from the World Bank to decrease subsidies and initiate structural adjustment and austerity measures (Bertelsmann Stiftung BTI 2016). The implementation of neoliberal policies was expanded with King Abdullah II’s accession to the throne. The monarchy also allowed for a multiparty system, partly to encourage alternatives to Islamist parties, and partly to shield the king from the responsibility of being the guarantor of citizens’ welfare (Jarrah 2009, 6).

In Egypt, the open-door policy initiated by Anwar Sadat at the end of the 1970s and the adoption of structural adjustment policies resulted in economic liberalization and a move toward a form of political liberalization. The ban on the formation of multiple political parties was lifted, but still contingent on government approval. This policy shift was not an isolated incident. In 1981, Habib Bourguiba lifted the ban on the opposition party in Tunisia and allowed more parties to obtain a legal status, but did not allow the formation of Islamist parties. Across the region, new political spaces opened up, and despite their limited nature, governments encouraged advocates for rights to fill those spaces and establish independent organizations.6

The second development facilitating the spread of a new generation of women’s NGOs is the internationalization of women's rights. The Second World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985 was described by many as marking “the birth of global feminism,” as it situated women’s rights agendas at the center of world politics (Çagatay, Groom, and Santiago 1986). The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women, declared women’s rights as human rights and committed states to specific actions to guarantee their compliance with the agreed resolutions. It also required governments to create national machineries for the monitoring and advancement of women at the highest level of government. It was within the framework of this global directive that national councils for women, or other forms of national organizations, were established in Arab countries (Elsadda 2019). Hence, the legacies of Arab women’s movements, the relative opening of the political sphere, and the global internationalization of women’s rights enabled the formation of women’s NGOs which, I argue, led the production of knowledge on women’s and gender studies.

III. NGOs AS INCUBATORS FOR WGS RESEARCH IN THE 1980s AND 1990s

A second generation of women’s movements arose in the 1980s and 1990s in many Arab countries. Several of the founders of the first women’s rights NGOs were women with a history in political activism or who were members of political parties. Many scholars point out that one reason behind the establishment of independent women’s organizations that are not affiliated with political parties was the old and tenacious leftist and nationalist position that women’s concerns were not a priority in comparison to liberation or nationalist causes. It enabled the formation of women’s NGOs which, I argue, led the production of knowledge on women’s and gender studies.

In Egypt, new women’s organizations were formed during times of radical transformation in the body politic. These included Sadat’s open-door policy and economic liberalization; the easing of restrictions on the formation of political parties; the implementation of the constitutional changes; and the civil code to garner the support of Islamist organizations for the peace treaty with Israel against nationalist, leftist opposition; and the rise of new Islamist movements and new social conservatism. The opening of new political spaces, along with the realization that the new political parties continued to marginalize women’s concerns, spurred the formation of independent women’s NGOs. The Arab Women Solidarity Association was founded by Nawal El Saadawy in 1982; the New Woman Foundation in 1984; Bashayer in 1986; the Alliance for Arab Women and the Association for the Advancement and Development of Women in 1987; Al Nadim for Victims of Torture in 1993; NGOs Forum for Women and Development in 1994; the Centre for Women’s Legal Assistance and the Women and Memory Forum in 1995; Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights in 1996; the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights in 2002; and Nazra for Feminist Studies in 2007 (Elsadda 2019).

Politics in Morocco from the time of independence until the mid-1980s, and which characterized gender claims as a deviation by marginalized women’s groups from central political concerns. In addition, confronting the marginalization of women’s rights by political elites became more urgent due to the rise of Islamist movements and the war between Islamist movements and the state in neighboring Algeria (Naciri 1998, 9). This was the backdrop for the establishment of the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women, the Union for Women’s Action, the Association 95 Maghreb for Equality, and the Moroccan Association for Women’s Rights (Naciri 1998).

Women who straddled the divide between academia and activism stood at the forefront of knowledge production in WGS in the Arab region.

In Egypt, new women’s organizations were formed during times of radical transformation in the body politic. These included Sadat’s open-door policy and economic liberalization; the easing of restrictions on the formation of political parties; the implementation of the constitutional changes; and the civil code to garner the support of Islamist organizations for the peace treaty with Israel against nationalist, leftist opposition; and the rise of new Islamist movements and new social conservatism. The opening of new political spaces, along with the realization that the new political parties continued to marginalize women’s concerns, spurred the formation of independent women’s NGOs. The Arab Women Solidarity Association was founded by Nawal El Saadawy in 1982; the New Woman Foundation in 1984; Bashayer in 1986; the Alliance for Arab Women and the Association for the Advancement and Development of Women in 1987; Al Nadim for Victims of Torture in 1993; NGOs Forum for Women and Development in 1994; the Centre for Women’s Legal Assistance and the Women and Memory Forum in 1995; Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights in 1996; the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights in 2002; and Nazra for Feminist Studies in 2007 (Elsadda 2019).

Adding to the appeal, academics’ involvement in NGOs increased their symbolic capital. Unlike feminists in many Western—particularly Anglo-Saxon—universities, who have had to struggle with the notion that activism conflicts with neutral and objective scholarship, a lack of safeguards for academic freedom, a lack of autonomy of many Arab universities, political intervention and manipulation, and ever-dwindling resources for national universities as governments in the region moved toward a privatized educational model. There is a direct link between the crisis in higher education institutions in the Arab region and the lack of opportunities for academics in search of more independent forums for research inquiry as well as livable incomes.

NGOs in the Arab region created new opportunities for research and training. Many academics either established or joined NGOs to supplement their incomes or to circumvent the many restrictions and limitations imposed by their institutions. Restrictions in academia varied in magnitude and specific contexts, but they all included the absence of safeguards for academic freedom, a lack of autonomy of many Arab universities, political intervention and manipulation, and ever-dwindling resources for national universities as governments in the region moved toward a privatized educational model. There is a direct link between the crisis in higher education institutions in the Arab region and the lack of opportunities for academics in search of more independent forums for research inquiry as well as livable incomes.

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their involvement with NGO agendas and activism. Women who straddled the divide between academia and activism stood at the forefront of knowledge production in WGS in the Arab region. In Morocco, Fatima Mernissi, a renowned sociologist, was an active member of the women’s movement. She is an excellent example of a public intellectual and academic who invested her symbolic capital in enabling feminist activist organizations and disseminating feminist concepts and ideas to a wider public.

NGOs have also enabled a robust interaction between academics and the general public. The new generation of women’s NGOs emerged in tandem with a global feminist movement that promoted international linkages and exchanges. Academics benefited from regional and transnational opportunities that were not available within their universities. NGOs created alternative spaces for academic work and widened researchers’ reach and audiences. Regional and transnational interactions between researchers have also created support mechanisms that have substituted to a large extent for the lack of support they receive from their home institutions. Moreover, NGOs have fostered closer interaction between academics, grassroots activists, and wider communities, prioritizing questions about how to make specialized research accessible and relevant beyond academia. The close links between academics and community activism enriched the experiences of Arab researchers and enabled the production of knowledge that bridged the gap and subverted the binary distinction between academic and activist knowledge.10

IV. CHALLENGES TO NGOs

Even though NGOs allowed for more freedom than academic institutions, they were not necessarily safe havens for research and activism. Like universities, they were often constrained by financial and intellectual challenges and constraints. NGOs in the 1980s and 1990s were established under the same draconian laws passed in the 1950s and 1960s in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan,11 and walked a tightrope on the margins of power. Most women’s organizations, even those that worked directly with poor communities, had minimal grassroots bases and were often founded on internal and international support. This rendered them easy targets for politically motivated smear campaigns and accusations of being vessels for Western imperialism. In addition, their dependence on international funding trapped them in a system where sustainability was an upward struggle. Almost all NGOs lacked solid institutional support and a secure base for funding, which are prerequisites for maintaining autonomy and protecting researchers from falling prey to direct and immediate funding pressures. Rights-based NGOs, including women’s NGOs, worked hard to reach out to wider constituencies, to gain social and political legitimacy, and to ensure their survival. NGOs, even those that worked extensively with marginalized communities, were often widely disseminated, while constantly negotiating with states and international donor organizations and working with, around, and against changing political and global trends.

In addition to the above-mentioned challenges, women researchers/activists who founded or joined NGOs engaged in a form of organizing that implicated the role and conceptualization of “civil society” organizations and “NGOization” as a process that was linked to and promoted by neoliberal ideology.11

10. Anecdote 1: In 1995, a group of academics/activists established the Women’s Movement Forum [Nahda], which is a research organization conceptualized as a feminist intellectual project with an activist agenda. The majority of the group members were academics in national universities who believed that specialized research was the backbone of a strong women’s movement. The project aimed to produce critical knowledge that would engage with the political manipulation of women’s issues in Egypt, and that the integration of WGS in higher education was crucial for the production of knowledge on gender and culture in Arabic for an Arab audience. In a different world, WMF could have been established at Cairo University. However, in the early 1990s, the conditions in national universities in Egypt were not conducive to establishing a specialized research center or program with a feminist agenda. Within academia, I taught gender theories and approaches in courses on modern English poetry and critical theory. The lack of a well-established and independent research group, an NGO, was simply the only possible course of action at the time. The decision came with many challenges but also opportunities.

11. To cite just one example, in Egypt, Law 44 (1963) regulating NGOs was still in force in the 1980s and 1990s, and ensured that all civil society organizations were controlled and supervised by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), with powers to disband, interfere in governance and implement harsh punitive measures for minor administrative errors. The generation of civil society organizations, particularly rights-based organizations, opted for a legal status that in theory allowed them to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the said law and avoid the supervisory role of MoSA. Their relative “freedom” to organize and function was primarily enabled by the transformation in the political system towards economic liberalization which also meant vestiges of political hybridity. The ideological basis of NGOization was anchored in an understanding that their legal status was precarious and their ability to function was contingent on political considerations that were beyond their control. Academics benefited from regional and international support they receive from their home institutions.

In Egypt, three important publications appeared in the 1980s: Bint al-Ard, a feminist magazine coedited by Iman Mersal and Jihan Abu Zeid in Mansoura in Egypt in 1985;15 al-Mar’a al-Gadida, a newsletter published by the New Woman NGO in 1986;16 and Nun, a feminist magazine published by the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association (AWSA) led by Nawal El Saadawy in 1989.17 Nun took a feminist approach that others but they certainly paved the way for the new discipline.

12. For a well-balanced and detailed discussion of the debates around NGOs and NGOization, see Bernal and Grewal (2014).18

13. It is worth noting here that important articles in the field of WGS were published in magazines and newspapers throughout the twentieth century. Some were more specialized in providing academic freedom and challenges to NGOs. Women’s NGOs established in the 1980s and 1990s played a key role in the production of knowledge on WGS in the Arab region.15 A general survey of the trends and themes tackled by NGOs reveals a varied scene: a developmental focus on social and economic challenges to women and the impact of inequality on their lives and families; a cultural focus on identity issues, debates on the role of religion in women’s lives, representations of women from a gender lens; feminist postcolonial critiques of representations of Arab women and Muslim women in Western discourses and media; critiques of modernist discourses on “the woman question” in the region; and revisiting Arab histories from a gender lens and foregrounding the roles of women from earlier centuries, particularly women who contributed to the Arab Nahda and the imagining of modern nation states.14 Women’s NGOs also produced shadow reports on the status of women in Arab countries, backed by research and extensive fieldwork, to counter official reports submitted by states to international monitoring bodies. The opening up of political and cultural spaces also enabled the publication of specialized journals and magazines, as well as the founding of publishing houses dedicated to women’s issues.

V. KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION ON WGS IN ARAB NGO: TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS

Women’s NGOs established in the 1980s and 1990s played a key role in the production of knowledge on WGS in the Arab region.15 A general survey of the trends and themes tackled by NGOs reveals a varied scene: a developmental focus on social and economic challenges to women and the impact of inequality on their lives and families; a cultural focus on identity issues, debates on the role of religion in women’s lives, representations of women from a gender lens; feminist postcolonial critiques of representations of Arab women and Muslim women in Western discourses and media; critiques of modernist discourses on “the woman question” in the region; and revisiting Arab histories from a gender lens and foregrounding the roles of women from earlier centuries, particularly women who contributed to the Arab Nahda and the imagining of modern nation states.14 Women’s NGOs also produced shadow reports on the status of women in Arab countries, backed by research and extensive fieldwork, to counter official reports submitted by states to international monitoring bodies. The opening up of political and cultural spaces also enabled the publication of specialized journals and magazines, as well as the founding of publishing houses dedicated to women’s issues.

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14. This list is based on an overview of publications by key women’s rights organizations mentioned in this essay. For more information, visit their respective websites.

15. It is worth noting that this list is not intended to be exhaustive of all publications and feminist organizations in the Arab region.

16. The New Woman Foundation has continued to publish important contributions on women’s rights and other areas of focus, and has been at the forefront of various other issues. For more information, refer to their website.

17. AWSA was dissolved in 1991 by the Egyptian government for alleged violations of Law 32 of the year 1964, according to the official narrative. In reality, it was on account of Saadawy’s public opposition to the role of Egypt in the Gulf War. The assets
and confrontational approach to taboo issues, such as the role of religious leaders in disseminating discourses that consolidated gender inequalities. It focused on cultural challenges to women’s freedom. Contributors to the Women’s Focus on the East binary and critiqued Western representations of Muslim cultures from a feminist postcolonial perspective. The first issue included a manifesto outlining the ideology and direction of the magazine and organization.19 The founder of AWSA, Nawal El Saadawy, is among the most well-known Arab feminists in the world and is author of many books and articles on literature, politics, and culture.

Knowledge production on WGS increased exponentially in the 1990s. The first issue of Hagar, a feminist journal, appeared in 1992, aimed at promoting research and knowledge production in Arabic. The journal’s aims and direction were critical to sustaining feminist thought and working relations. We are against imitation, we and popular institutions, be they partisan or nonpartisan. This independent organization which cooperates with governmental

In Lebanon, the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University (LAU) first published Al-Ra’idah in 1976. The journal published short essays on topical issues such as women’s education and work, book reviews, short biographies of writers and authors who addressed women’s issues (e.g., Qasem Amin, Zainab Fawwaz, and Amina Said), and drew attention to important areas for research. Al-Ra’idah’s long history lends it a good knowledge production of women scholars who consciously challenge dominant masculinist knowledges that have adverse effects on societies trying to achieve gender equality.20 Islamic feminists in the Arab region have made significant contributions to the field of Islamic studies. They have also joined forces with the global Islamic feminist movement.

VI. THE NEW GENERATION OF WGS IN ARAB UNIVERSITIES

Despite the integration of WGS in higher education that took off in the West and spread around the world, the resultant surge in research and training undertaken by Arab NGOs in the 1980s, WGS was slow to reach Arab universities. WGS programs in Arab universities emerged in response to the focus of international organizations on promoting gender education as a means of women’s empowerment which began in the 1990s and was emphasized in 2000 as one of the key UN Millennium Development Goals. Many of these university programs were conceptually structured within a framework of neoliberal policies in higher education institutions and entrenched in market logic and neoliberal language (cost efficiency, added valued, etc.); for example, the majority of these programs were required to justify their existence by creating job opportunities, issuing policy briefs, and so forth. A number of institutes

18. I have translated the manifesto as follows: “We are a popular independent organization which cooperates with governmental and popular institutions, be they partisan or nonpartisan. This organization stands for democracy, freedom, equality in thought and working relations. We are against imitation, we and popular institutions, be they partisan or nonpartisan. This independent organization which cooperates with governmental institutions in the social sciences, and health. It also published literary texts by women authors. Six issues were published, the last one in 1998. In 1993, the Arab Women Publishing House, Nour, was founded in Cairo in conjunction with the establishment of the Association of Arab Women in Beirut. Nour’s publications

19. 18. I have translated the manifesto as follows: “We are a popular independent organization which cooperates with governmental and popular institutions, be they partisan or nonpartisan. This organization stands for democracy, freedom, equality in thought and working relations. We are against imitation, we and popular institutions, be they partisan or nonpartisan. This independent organization which cooperates with governmental institutions

20. El Nadim’s website is currently inactive as the group is

21. For an analysis and overview of the Nissa and the contribution of ATFF and AFTURD, see Labidi (2007).
were established inside universities at the end of the 1990s: the Institute of Women’s Studies in Birzeit University in 1994 and an MA in the same university in gender and development in 2000; the MA in gender and development at Ahfad University in Baladoun in 1997; the Centre for Women’s Studies in the University of Jordan in 1998 and an MA in women’s studies in 2006.

The institutionalization of these programs was driven by the efforts of determined activists with strong ties with women’s movements who have succeeded in embedding gender programs often against the desire of university leadership. In Yemen, the Gender and Development Research and Studies Centre was established in 1996 by Raufa Hassan, a prominent women’s rights activist who was forced to flee the country after a vilification campaign. The feminist activist and academic Rula Qawass was behind the establishment of the center and the MA at the University of Jordan. In Morocco, the Center for Studies and Research on Women was established in 1998 in the Faculty of Letters Dhar El Mehraz, Fes, and the Center for Women’s Studies in the Faculty of Letters in Rabat (Sadiqi 2008, 464). In Egypt, the Cynthia Nelson Center for Women’s Studies was founded in 2001 at the American University in Cairo University and a few years later offered an MA in gender and women’s studies in the Middle East and North Africa.

A second wave of university programs and institutes appeared in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Like their predecessors, these new programs also had strong activist women behind them. In Tunisia, the first gender studies program was institutionalized in the University of Manouba by Dalende Largueche in 2015 in cooperation with Amel Grami and Raja El Salameh, all feminist researchers with a history of women’s rights activism. In Beirut, an MA in gender in development and humanitarian aid was founded in 2016 at the LAU; an MA in gender and development was established in 2017 in the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University; in the Gulf, an MA in Muslim women’s studies was founded in Zayed University in UAE and an MA in women, society, and development in Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar.24 Tadros and Habib (2015, 7) identify three key orientations of WGS programs in Arab universities: feminist literary and postcolonial studies, which “focus on theorization and problematization of representations of women in the Middle East in particular in Western discourses and paradigms”; a gender and development orientation focusing on “contemporary political, economic and social challenges”; and a family/Muslim orientation with a focus on identity issues. These main orientations build on and complement the accumulation of knowledge produced by women’s NGOs as described in the previous section. This is not surprising given that many of the founders of WGS programs in universities were themselves either members of activist women’s NGOs or had close links with the movement.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the missions of WGS programs in Arab universities mirror those of NGOs. The mandates of some WGS centers in universities published on their websites read like the homepage of an NGO: capacity building, empowerment, training programs, advocacy, producing policy briefs. For example, the mission of the Regional Institute of Gender, Diversity, Peace and Rights at Ahfad University is described as follows: the center is “dedicated to excellence education in peace, gender equality, management of diversity and respect for human rights, as well as capacity development, community outreach activities and advocacy for creating change agents to promote women’s empowerment, leadership and gender justice in societies” (Ahfad University for Women, n.d.). The Institute for Women’s Studies at Birzeit University foregrounds its link to Palestinian women’s activism and its role as “an academic underpinning to activism and debates around women’s rights, gender relations and social policy in the local and regional context” (Birzeit University, n.d.). The institute produces policy-oriented research and has close ties with women’s NGOs in Palestine and the Arab region. Its flagship journal, Review of Women’s Studies, is an important bridge between activist and academic research (Birzeit University, n.d.). The Arab Institute for Women at LAU “advances women’s empowerment and gender equality nationally, regionally and globally through research, education, development programs, and outreach” (Arab Institute for Women, n.d.).

WGS university programs are also supported by grants from international donors who funded, and continue to fund, women’s NGOs established in the 1990s. Because they rely on foreign donor funding, university-based centers and programs worry about sustainability, scarcity of resources, and the pressures of ensuring new funds—similar to the concerns facing NGOs. Feminist academics also draw attention to challenges related to ideological resistance amongst colleagues as well as the risk associated with a change in leadership and consequent loss of support (Tadros and Habib 2015). Another key challenge to MA programs in WGS in Arab universities is the shortage of specialized material published in Arabic in the field.

Furthermore, the integration of WGS in Arab universities did not necessarily provide a safe haven for the field, thinking of it as a border between the home and foreigner. In fact, events in the last two decades highlight the high cost paid by women academics who attempted to push the limits of the sayable. In 2016, after a controversy over a debate with a professor in the Sharia College on the subject of women and Islam, Hatoon El Fassi, a Saudi academic at Qatar University, strong activist women behind the campaign were under surveillance, and then banned from teaching her course (Alsahi 2017). Raufa Hassan was forced to leave Yemen for fear of her life after a vilification campaign. In short, women academics, researchers, and NGO workers in the field of WGS all contend with social and political pressures if they are seen as crossing political or cultural boundaries.

VII. WGS BETWEEN NGOs AND UNIVERSITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Bearing in mind that the field of WGS arose from a social movement that challenged unequal power relations in societies, to what extent will the institutionalization of WGS in Arab universities result in gender sensitization among students and wider audiences and lead to a more just and equitable world? This is a difficult question that scholars of gender struggle with globally. Academics in Western universities, where WGS was institutionalized in the 1970s and 1980s, have expressed concern that the field has lost touch with its activist roots, and that the shift from women’s studies to gender studies has further politicized the field. Feminist scholars have noted that “gender studies” was presented as analytical and political and was welcomed by universities as politically less dangerous (Stromquist 2001, 375). In addition, the assumption that universities are safe havens for research and exploration of contentious and taboo issues is not very realistic, or at least has not been demonstrated given the histories of universities in the Arab region. Moreover, the move toward privatization and the proliferation of neoliberal universities that prioritize profit over public good will only further endanger academic freedom and consolidate political conservatism. In fact, the challenges brought about by the neoliberalization of higher education institutions are global. Feminist scholars have noted that “academic freedom is tenuous for academics who do critical work that challenges systematic racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classicism” (Falcon et al. 2014, 2). The institutionalization of universities, in addition to the compromised track record of Arab universities due to political interventions, will continue to push cutting-edge and critical research in the humanities and social sciences outside university walls and into independent research organizations that succeed in maintaining a degree of autonomy.

The early decades of the twenty-first century, when most WGS programs were established in Arab universities, also marked the emergence of a new generation of young feminist activists. In Arab countries, which were formed against the background of increasing discontent with dysfunctional and oppressive regimes. This new generation flourished and gained visibility during and after the wave of revolutions that swept the Arab region in 2011. The list of young feminist groups in the region is long and their work is impressive and daring. Many of them are informal groups that chose not to opt for official status. The new generation flourished and gained visibility during and after the wave of revolutions that swept the Arab region in 2011. The list of young feminist groups in the region is long and their work is impressive and daring. Many of them are informal groups that chose not to opt for official status. The new generation flourished and gained visibility during and after the wave of revolutions that swept the Arab region in 2011. The list of young feminist groups in the region is long and their work is impressive and daring.
and North Africa, adopting a decolonial approach “to trouble the hegemony of knowledge production, and ensure that our regions and communities play a practical point of view, NGO publications qualify as grey literature—and collect and catalog all publications in WGS in Arabic in one location. To date the library has over 5,000 publications in WGS in Arabic. However, work in the library has been hindered by varied forms of censorship from 2011 onward, and more resources are needed to continue the work.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, unique historical, political, and social factors have shaped the trajectory of women’s and gender studies in the Arab region. Given the current state of WGS, the following questions arise: (1) Will WGS programs in universities have the freedom to engage with changing political and social challenges? (2) How will the general clampdown on independent NGOs in the Arab region and the political upheavals and conflicts that are related to them have created spaces that enable new actors and knowledge producers to disseminate ideas at an unprecedented scale. Women’s rights activists have occupied these spaces and succeeded in producing important interventions in the field of WGS. Independent NGOs, research centers, and alliances of movement and communication enabled by technology and succeeded in addressing issues deemed politically or culturally sensitive. This is certainly true with regards to research on sexuality or gender-based sexual violence. In the twenty-first century challenges that Finke sees as barriers to academic research and activist research are more fluid. Further research should pay close attention to how scholars and activists are traversing and blurring these boundaries.

Second, knowledge production in the field of WGS is subject to an established regime of truth in global higher education, in which the global North dominates the production and circulation of knowledge, and the overriding assumption is that Western producers have data and not theory. Knowledge produced from the periphery is not quoted or cited in international journals, and scholars from the South must publish in international journals in English and cite English texts to gain recognition and status. This state of affairs has resulted in a universalistic approach to gender studies in universities. Critiques of universalistic and Eurocentric understandings and approaches to “the coloniality of gender” have come from decolonial thinkers in Latin American studies, Islamic studies, and African studies, resulting in “a mosaic epistemology… [i.e.] separate knowledge systems that are of and by people in a mosaic, each based on a specific culture, religion, language, historical experience… and none should be taken as universal, as the master narrative for the whole world” (Connell 2014, 522). The binary between universal and culturally specific epistemologies is a persistent challenge to WGS globally.

When it comes to the status of knowledge produced by NGOs in the Arab region, and the possibilities for its integration in course curricula in WGS programs, many issues arise. To begin with, and from a practical point of view, NGO publications qualify as grey literature—publications with limited circulation and access. To date, there is no Arab database (beyond the Arab female gender and women’s rights terrorism, and over the same period as highly political sensitive topics, such as politically controversial events, such as the Arab Spring, the wave of political upheavals and revolutions that opened up in the region is rife with conflict, political upheavals, and wars. Political spaces that opened up in the immediate aftermath of revolutions have slammed shut, and NGOs are experiencing an increase in repressive surveillance and control. University administrations keen on maintaining good relations with ruling elites in the region, have prohibited NGOs in the Arab region from interacting and cooperation with NGOs, particularly activist women’s NGOs. Much also depends on the profile of academics employed, how they perceive their role as academics and the role of universities, and their interest in and ability to, given political restrictions, engage in public debates. Again, there are important differences between countries, but a high level of vigilance is required to safeguard the future of intellectual vitality in WGS in universities.

The three last questions can be addressed with reference to two distinct variables: the impact of the digital revolution on the one hand, and the challenge of the “coloniality of knowledge production” on the other. The digital revolution has created spaces and opportunities for creating and sharing feminist resources “to trouble the hegemony of knowledge production, circulation, and legitimation, what are the prospects for the field of WGS?”

The answers to the first two questions will depend on the degree of autonomy of each university and the level of academic freedom negotiated with authoritarian states, particularly now, as the region is rife with conflict, political upheavals, and wars. Political spaces that opened up in the immediate aftermath of revolutions have slammed shut, and NGOs are experiencing an increase in repressive surveillance and control. University administrations keen on maintaining good relations with ruling elites in the region, have prohibited NGOs in the Arab region from interacting and cooperation with NGOs, particularly activist women’s NGOs. Much also depends on the profile of academics employed, how they perceive their role as academics and the role of universities, and their interest in and ability to, given political restrictions, engage in public debates. Again, there are important differences between countries, but a high level of vigilance is required to safeguard the future of intellectual vitality in WGS in universities.

26. It is beyond the scope of this paper to do justice to the contribution of young feminist groups in the region. For activism post-2011 in Egypt, see Maatouk Hassan (2016). For more on the contribution of selected examples of young feminist groups, see essays published in JMEWS: Nazra (2015); Qandisha (2015); Khalel (2015); Sawt Al-Niswa (2015); Rafidain Women’s Coalition (2015); Thawrt El Banat (2015); Helen (2015); Association Touissart (2015); and Safia (2015).

27. Anecdote 3: In 2014, a group of feminist academics at Cairo University organized and succeeded in issuing the first anti- sexual harassment policy in a national university in Egypt and a code of conduct. The normalization of the policy, and subsequent advocacy activities, were all done in collaboration with feminist NGOs who had already produced relevant research and had legal experience in addressing the gendered complexities of sexual harassment. It was possible in 2014 to host events organized by feminist NGOs inside the campus and distribute their brochures and materials. Gradually, and as more restrictions were imposed on NGOs in Egypt, it became more and more difficult to invite our partners or organize joint events, due to administrative directives and security surveillance.

28. For a good survey of approaches to decolonization of gender, starting from second-wave feminists who foregrounded identity politics, to intersectional feminism, see Traces the beginnings of addressing the “coloniality of gender,” as used by Lugo (2010) with reference to Qiqi (2000) “internationalization of the policy, and subsequent advocacy activities, were all done in collaboration with feminist NGOs who had already produced relevant research and had legal experience in addressing the gendered complexities of sexual harassment. It was possible in 2014 to host events organized by feminist NGOs inside the campus and distribute their brochures and materials. Gradually, and as more restrictions were imposed on NGOs in Egypt, it became more and more difficult to invite our partners or organize joint events, due to administrative directives and security surveillance.

29. Connell (2014) cites Fatma Mernissi as a theorist who
Feminist Security Studies: An Introduction

I. INTRODUCTION

In the social sciences, the field of international relations (IR) and its subfield security studies (SS) are not often a priority in gender analysis and feminist perspectives. This is not because IR and SS are gender-neutral, as many scholars believe. On the contrary, the field is thoroughly masculinized, and hierarchical gender relations are hidden (Tickner 1992). The field assumes a set of binary distinctions that translates in political discourse into an othering process that excludes those who are “outside,” mainly foreigners and women. The latter are depicted as emotional, irrational, and unstable. This construction mirrors a stereotypical understanding of gender as defined by a set of hierarchical binary oppositions—public versus private, reason versus emotion, autonomy versus relatedness, protector versus protected, perpetrator versus victim, objective versus subjective, and culture versus nature—in which the first is associated with masculinity and the second with femininity. The hierarchical construction of these dichotomies perpetuates women’s oppression (Sjoberg 2009; Tickner 1992).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, feminist scholars criticized these dichotomies and called for the integration of gender into mainstream IR and SS theories. Since then, feminist IR/SS scholarship has taken gender as a central category of analysis and paved the way for the emergence of feminist security studies (FSS), which analyzes the way these binary oppositions operate in the field of international relations and in international politics (Tickner 1992, 17). Feminist scholars have shown how these concepts of femininity and masculinity permeate our contemporary global system, in turn limiting the options available to states and policymakers by focusing on men’s experiences and ignoring a large body of human knowledge: that of women.

The field of FSS considers other, nonhegemonic experiences and worldviews; it examines these lived human experiences and their nuances and sheds light on discussions and debates on nontraditional security issues beyond war versus peace, civilian versus military, and victims versus perpetrators. Looking creatively at feminist approaches, we find that FSS brings a unique viewpoint that utilizes a gender perspective to examine the relationships between the material and discursive, while considering both men and women, masculinities and femininities, as well as power relations, positionality, and intersectionality (gender, race, class). As a result, issues such as gendered nationalism, post-conflict reconstruction, trafficking, conflict-related sexual violence, and women’s role in conflict (as peace activists, victims, and perpetrators) have gained new recognition in academia and policy circles (Tickner 2011, 578).

This paper begins with an introduction to FSS, both in general and in the Arab region in particular. In the first section, I survey the state of FSS—its key issues, debates, and theories, in their diversity and multivocality—and examine how thinkers have redefined key concepts and assumptions in international relations and security studies. The second section interrogates mainstream security studies, feminism, and the “Eastern Other,” demonstrating how FSS thinkers have exposed the Western-centric nature of mainstream scholarship on conflict and security. The third section attempts to provide a nuanced understanding of women’s roles in the Arab region in times of peace and war that goes beyond the binary opposition between victims and heroes, exploring women’s struggles for equality in the region, the status of women in the military, and their role as perpetrators of violence. I also provide an analysis of the crucial need to include women in political decision-making positions and the various obstacles and opportunities they face. I conclude by outlining current blind spots and potential future avenues for FSS research that recognizes a diversity of contexts and experiences in order to advance women’s emancipation and empowerment.

It should be noted that there is no true and authentic representation because all representational practices are partial and political (Shepherd 2013, 436). Thus, this paper is not immune from partiality despite my efforts, as there are inevitably axes of exclusion that are impossible to surmount.

II. GENERAL OVERVIEW OF FEMINIST SECURITY STUDIES

This section surveys the conceptual, theoretical, and analytical functions of feminist security...
studies. Since its inception, FSS has succeeded in challenging, enriching, and expanding notions of security by making four crucial “theoretical moves” (Blanchard 2003, 1290). First, FSS challenges women’s supposed absence from and irrelevance to international security politics, which entails recognizing women’s exclusion from decision-making and recovering their experiences. Second, FSS questions conventional notions of security and the state’s role as women’s protector. Third, the field explores women’s exclusion from the male-dominated field of IR and studies different types of masculinity. Fourth, FSS contests gendered divisions of violence that produce crisis and insecurities, in which women become synonymous with peace, passivity, weakness, and victimhood.

In this context, FSS asks for these discourses to be more balanced by acknowledging women as perpetrators and supporters of war-making.

1. Challenging Realism

First, FSS challenges realist and neorealist theories of international relations that take the state as the referent object of “security” and focus on war as the key threat to the state’s security. In realist and neorealist theories, states are perceived as militaristic, violence as endemic, and women as irrelevant in IR and SS’s high politics. FSS rejects the patriarchal discourse that renders women invisible because their “feminine sensibilities” are incompatible with the “harsh realities” of men, the public sphere, and war (Kronsell 2006, 109). It likewise rejects the postulate of a domestic-versus-international or private-versus-public divide, in which men are the sole political actors and citizens while women are relegated to the private sphere. The gendered divide is also grounded in “hegemonic masculinity” and “rational, strong, powerful, and independent, all tactical and political” (Tickner 1992, 193). For Tickner specifically and FSS in general, there should be no separate level of analysis for war and no identification of security with state borders, because violence at all levels (familial, national, and international) is interconnected (Tickner 1992, 193). For example, family violence has to be analyzed in the context of broader power relations because it takes place in a gendered society in which male power dominates all levels.

Two works are essential to mention here because they have provided a necessary blueprint for FSS and its methodological changes. The first is Elizabeth and War (1987), by Elshtain, who challenged the divide between domestic and international. Elshtain explains women’s complex relationships to war and politics based on their war discourses from the Greeks onwards. She examines how war’s “productive destructiveness” inscribes both men’s and women’s identities and the community’s boundaries. For Elshtain, war creates the people, it produces power, both individual and collective (Elshtain 1987, 166–67). The second is Enloe’s *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* (1989). In this work on military bases, Enloe shows the importance of reevaluating gender discourse. She inserts women’s ordinary lives into the international political continuum and shows how the everyday workings of gendered power support practices of international relations. For instance, she demonstrates the importance of diplomats’ wives, who, through the hospitality of the domestic space, create the needed trust and confidence for the international relations of negotiation.

Several works of feminist IR published at the beginning of the 1990s are also worth mentioning. Among these are Women, Militarism, and War (1990) by Elshtain and Tobias and Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era (1994) by Sylvester. FSS looks for gender in spaces where it is supposedly “absent,” such as governments and international institutions that use exclusively masculine methods and theories.

2. Redefining Security

Second, FSS challenges IR’s core concept of security. Among the books that have evaluated the prevalent notions of security from a gender-sensitive perspective is *Gender and International Relations* (1992), in this book, Tickner shows how the explanations of war in IR are incomplete because they are grounded in a biased discourse that foregrounds “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1995, 77). Foreign policy and military affairs are considered masculine, rational, strong, powerful, and independent, all tactical and political. Women, on the other hand, are fragmented into the dichotomy between international and domestic politics that echoes the public-versus-private divide and perpetuates domestic violence. For Tickner specifically and FSS in general, there should be no separate level of analysis for war and no identification of security with state borders, because violence at all levels (familial, national, and international) is interconnected (Tickner 1992, 193). For example, family violence has to be analyzed in the context of broader power relations because it takes place in a gendered society in which male power dominates all levels.

As a result, FSS calls for a new definition of security that incorporates the elimination of all types of violence, including structural violence. Borrowing from peace research (Galtung 1971), Tickner (1992, 69) introduced the economic and environmental insecurities not of war but instead of the domestic and international structures of political and economic oppression. Others, such as Runyan (2018, 86), explained that violence has to be associated with gender, race, and class to expose the linkage between relations of domination and subordination that exist at all levels and create the conditions for structural and direct violence. For FSS, gender division of labor, the dictates of discounting work at home, poverty, and sexual violence contribute to women’s insecurities in the international political economy.

From an FSS perspective, the state talks of human security and the need to protect the most vulnerable citizens (women and children) while putting them at risk. As such, FSS challenges the role of the state as a full protector of women, as it is implicated in oppressing and reducing them to objects of masculinist social control. Ideological constructs such as the cult of motherhood and women’s work justify structural violence against women (i.e., sexual harassment, the gender wage gap, and inadequate health care) and direct violence (rape, battering, incest, and murder) (Peterson 1992, 46). The state assigns women the role of “protected” despite the risks and dangers often posed by their guardians. As rightly put by Stiehm (1983, 373), the oppression of women is the result of the state’s inability to protect them: “[…] because the protector is embarrassed and frustrated by his failure to protect, he restricts his proteector instead.”

3. Redefining Masculinity

Third, to fight the assumption that gendered security practices are only about women, FSS developed a “kaleidoscopic” concept of masculinity to explain security. For instance, Tickner (1992, 137) focuses on Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinities” (1995). She calls for taking inspiration from feminine characteristics instead of seeing them as markers of female moral superiority. Similarly, Murphey (1998) presents six types of masculinities in international politics: the civil peacemaker, the war machine, the civilian strategist, the soldier, the military son, the good comrade, the fashionable pacifist, and the Sisyphean peacemaker. According to Murphey, these types are intrinsically linked to supporting the figure of the “good soldier.”

FSS argues that the technological advances in weapons and logistics marked the rise of particular masculinity: the technical, professional, and rational expert. Originally understood as “feminine” due to its sedentary nature, this type of work took on a new, more powerful meaning for middle-class men, influenced by computer marketing campaigns and violent games (Connell 1995, 55–56). Niva (1998) showed the rise of this type of masculinity during the 1991 Gulf War. At the expense of foot soldiers, the media presented a newly hegemonic masculinity, that of well-educated and well-equipped men such as pilots, computer programmers, and missile technologists. To counterbalance the supposed violent and irrational masculinity represented by Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, media coverage focused on the militarized yet sensitive and compassionate American man (Niva 1998, 119).

The scandal of Abu Ghraib similarly highlighted the gendered relationship between the US and Iraq, which has been framed as a competition between hegemonic masculinities and stories of one another’s emasculation. On the one hand, the American narrative focused on the tough yet tender and technologically advanced Western man fighting the Arab villain from a barbaric civilization. On the other hand, the Iraqi government challenged this soft and delicate masculinity (Niva 1998, 119).

To conclude, FSS offers a revisioning of security issues in which gender is taken seriously. FSS elucidates gendered hierarchies and unveils patriarchal structural violence to achieve common security. As the field expanded, it played a crucial role in contesting realist and neorealist notions of security and violence and highlighting the human subject’s role in security. However, the field was overshadowed by the nation-state’s policy world, as shown by the acceptance of feminist issues and the quick diffusion of “gender mainstream” bureaucracies and gender-sensitive policies across states (True and Mintrom 2001, 29). The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution
In the same vein, Burguieres (1990, 9) identifies three possible feminist approaches to the notion of peace: the first approach accepts the stereotypes about men and women as being bellicose and pacific, respectively; the second rejects gender differences, including women’s supposed nonviolence, focusing instead on women’s rights to an egalitarian position on issues of war and peace; and finally, the third rejects militarism and all gendered stereotypes and argues that “war is rooted in patriarchal, military structures which are supported by the behavior of both men and women.”

III. INTERROGATING MAINSTREAM SECURITY STUDIES, FEMINISM, AND THE “EASTERN OTHER”

Several postcolonial and feminist scholars have incorporated an analytical gender lens along with race as an empirical unit of analysis to expose the Western-centric nature of IR and SS. They also challenge how the function of race has been obscured in global politics and how, for instance, specific events and dates (i.e., World War II, the Holocaust, 9/11) are privileged over others to understand and achieve peace and security (Nayak and Selbin 2010, 125).

Bilgın (2010, 617) explains that while a research agenda in SS deals with “security” in the Southern Hemisphere/developing countries, there is no insight into non-Western insecurities. Bilgın explains that SS knowledge is parochial and peripheral because it mistakes “Western” experiences for the universal (620). As such, treating understudied insecurities as a “blind spot” like Buzan and Hansen (2008) prevents us from fully recognizing how the historical absence of non-Western insecurities has been constitutive both of the discipline and subjects and objects of security in different parts of the world” (Bilgın 2010, 616).

Others, such as Barkawi and Laffey (2006, 333–34), show that Western states overwhelmingly focus on their own interests, which are to understate and misrepresent the global South and the taken-for-granted historical periodization and spatial assumptions. For Barkawi and Laffey, the emergence of “Al-Qaeda, [that] is not a state, nor a great power; [rather] an idea around which resistances or organizations [are] organized globally” (333). This breaks with putative histories of world politics about great power struggles (329). As such, Al-Qaeda’s role in contemporary politics shows the importance of reformulating the old Eurocentric categories that had been used to make sense of past security relations. Al-Qaeda’s 9/11 attack transformed international and domestic politics: wars were started, alliances reconfigured, troops deployed, borders reshaped, and human and civil rights curtailed. For the two authors, Eurocentrism and realism have only focused on the strong. Instead, scholars should study how both the strong and the weak make history jointly. Only then can IR and SS make sense of world politics in general and North-South relations in particular. They call it “the significance of the weak” (344).

The Western-centric constructions of developed/underdeveloped and effective/failed states reproduce dominant gendered and racialized categories of the civilized self versus the barbaric other

Similarly, essential contemporary SS texts, such as the canonical Makers of Modern Strategy (Paret, Gordon, and Gilbert 1986), concentrate on the West’s and Europe’s military history even when considering developments in other parts of the world. In this Eurocentric view, violence in non-Western countries “is attributed to non-western factors such as the absence of modern political, economic and social arrangements, as in discourses of quasi- and failed states and of ‘underdevelopment’ as dangerous’ or to the peculiarities of local ethnic identities, as in the ‘new barbarism’ thesis.” Colonial legacies and postcolonial interactions that play a significant role in shaping the political landscape and economic choices in these regions are rarely called into question or analyzed (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 342–47).

Dominant logic and angles of analysis in this Western-centric field are also based on gendered and racialized dichotomies. As such, “appropriate” masculinity, as expressed in Western views such as development, egalitarianism, and economic rationality, is presented against the “inappropriate” femininity, which holds values including underdevelopment, despotism, and backwardness—all of which characterize the “Eastern other” (Khalid 2018, 40).

As Khalid (2018) explains, both race and gender have played essential roles in shaping the Western understanding of the Middle East, which is seen as the “other” to Western societies. The security narrative has been linked to development discourses and led to military and economic interventions (i.e., structural adjustment plans) that often result in the very violence and insecurities they seek to neutralize (Khalid 2018, 43). After 9/11, security was configured by racialized and gendered representations, and the 2003 US-led war in Iraq was presented as a war against “barbarism” in the Middle East. Iraqis were presented as powerless victims who could not liberate themselves from Saddam Hussein’s despotic rule (44). In armed conflicts between the global North and South, Western powers’ use of force is viewed as legitimate because of their “civilizing mission”: from Afghanistan to Iraq, the assumption is that it is legitimate for the West to bear arms to liberate the “natives” (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 351).

The dichotomies described above are part of the discursive world of colonial modernity. These dichotomies and “historically frozen oriental high respectives” of civilizations” (Barkawi 2006, 313) in the Middle Eastern studies (Wallace 1997, 198). In the formation of globalization and the Middle East eventually appeared. Scholars took interest only when Islamic fundamentalism, violent radicalization, and illegal migration become security concerns for Western societies.

2. “The resolution 1325 (2000) addresses the impact of war on women and the importance of women’s full and equal participation in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. The resolution also calls as special measures to protect women and girls from conflict-related sexual violence and outlines gender-related responsibilities of the United Nations in different political and programmatic areas” (United Nations Security Council 2000).
Moallem (2001) laments “adding” gender in Middle Eastern studies as a category that confines the analysis to the image of victim-producing patriarchy as demarcated by the Islamic religion and the so-called barbarism of oriental societies. She insists that masculinist disciplinary practices should be challenged while the specificity of the region in general and countries and localities in particular should be taken into consideration (2001, 1267).

IV. WOMEN IN THE ARAB REGION

FSS argues that scholars and policymakers must look at all levels—familial, national, and international—as well as how they are linked in order to better understand security, insecurity, and violence. For FSS, security discourse is biased and incomplete, focusing on protecting women’s bodies instead of addressing their needs. As a result, failing to protect them fully restricts women’s freedom (Stehm 1983, 373). This is particularly true in the Arab region, where violence against women is both structural and direct, and the state is openly implicated in it when it is not being its instigator. While it is true that women’s entry into the labor force resulted in significant changes in the patriarchal structures in the Arab region, it also created new forms of patriarchy that are inscribed not within family and kinship but in states, political institutions, military, and corporations (Ortner 2014, 533).

1. Women in the Arab Region: Fully Fledged Citizens?

Women’s struggle for citizenship and equal rights in the Arab region has taken the form of “state feminism,” which is “the state’s active promotion of women’s rights and attempt to change existing gender relations” (Al-Ali 2007, 146). Post-independence Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and Syria offered an explicit commitment to public equality for women and succeeded in bringing about many changes. However, pursuing feminist goals above and through the state has its limitations, forcing women to enter into “patriarchal bargains” (Kandiotti 1988) in which they exchange obedience and propriety for protection and economic support from men. In other words, under such bargains “[…] women choose to accommodate some patriarchal norms in exchange for some form of power that can be wrested from the system, which essentially involves a shift of power from the patriarchy of the father or husband to the patriarchal state” (Browers 2019, 114). Whenever women decide to step out of this “bargain” and assert individual rights, they risk losing the so-called protection and nurturance that male kin provide (Joseph 2000, 121).

Did these bargains disappear after the Arab Spring in 2011, or even after what has been called the “second wave” in 2019? Despite some developments, the answer remains no. Patriarchal norms, structures, and gender social contracts are undamaged (Yacoubi 2016, 260). In reference to Tunisia, which had the most transformative experience in the region, Yacoubi concludes that the law is still intact and is now embedded in a modernizing discourse that “empowers some women and neglects others,” namely women from rural areas, lower socioeconomic classes, and religious communities, who are often excluded or oppressed.

Patriarchy is nested in family and kinship structures in which men, fathers, and brothers are privileged. As such, citizenship is mediated by the family. This patriarchy within the private realm is translated in the public sphere through patrilineality, which is “the key legal mechanism throughout which patriarchy has become inscribed in citizenship rules and practices” (Joseph 1999, 296). While it is true that relations of care/control in the context of the family exist everywhere, it is beyond argument that in the Arab region, these gendered and hierarchical patriarchal relationships are inscribed into law.

While women’s civil rights in the Arab region cannot be covered in a few paragraphs, the following examples are illustrative. For instance, the right to property is one of the few that women firmly retain in the region, probably because it is a right clearly stated in the Quran. The right to freely enter contracts is now protected by law. In several countries in the Arab region, such as Jordan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, married women have to obtain their husbands’ permission to work outside the home. The right to enter and exit a marriage contract does not favor women. It is an agreement between families rather than between two individuals with equal rights and obligations. Women cannot marry without their male guardians (with the exception of Turkey, Tunisia, and Morocco). And while Muslim men can marry Christian or Jewish women, Muslim women do not have the same right (except in Tunisia). While many countries set the minimum age of consent at 17 or 18 (except in Iran, which puts it at 13), children are still being married by their parents with a judge’s consent.

Besides, marital relations in law are prescribed in many countries (except for Morocco3 and Turkey), and as such female obedience is exchanged for male maintenance (Amawi 2000, 171). Things are not different when it comes to divorce, except in Tunisia and Turkey, where men and men have equal rights and responsibilities in divorce and marriage. In the rest of the Arab region, women can seek divorce only under certain conditions (Moghadam 2003, 128). In the case of Egypt, women can divorce but they have to prove that they returned all possessions their husbands gave them during the marriage (Hafez 2014).

Regarding women’s political rights, it should be noted that many governments in the region have made efforts to increase gender equality. However, while it is true that women can now access traditionally male jobs, they do not enter them in a gender-equal or gender-neutral field. Signs of progress, such as women’s entry into parliament, should be taken carefully. In countries such as Egypt and Algeria (which retain the highest levels of political empowerment by World Economic Forum measures), women’s ability to gain seats in parliament has been primarily due to the presence of quotas. How can parliamentary representation alone ensure substantive changes in women’s lives when the parliament has little to no power and when women’s educational and health conditions have been in a poor state for years? Any celebration of women’s political empowerment should be critically reconsidered.

In Tunisia, a gender parity law was introduced in 2014 to ensure equal gender distribution in elected assemblies. However, in September 2022, a new electoral law was introduced, removing the gender parity provisions from the 2014 law (Chellali 2022). Even when gender parity was legally protected and required, women’s equality failed to materialize at the state level and in the public sphere because “gender-sensitive legislation… have been discussed in ideological ways through the state feminist discourses of the previous regimes as well as the governments that rose to power after the Arab Spring” (Khali 2014, 131). Feminists remain constrained by these patriarchal political agendas and are at risk of being instrumentalized to serve the interests of either the elite or the opposition. However, a new generation of activists is aware of these traps and bargains and how identities mediate citizenship (Browers 2019, 118). This new generation understands that transformation needs to happen at the state, family, and habitus level in order to achieve full political equality.

2. Not a “Soldier” but a “Woman Soldier”

Today, women are more visible in political leadership positions worldwide, even if their integration is geographically and culturally uneven. Women are expected to exert power within the political positions traditionally reserved for men, as such in the military. This creates the inaccurate perception of gender equality, a message that is reinforced in public discourse. Examples include the moment when many countries celebrated the so-called gender equality of appointing women in high-ranking military positions (Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia) or when in 2014, the United Arab Emirates deployed Major Mariam Al-Mansouri to fly in a combat mission against the self-proclaimed Islamic State
in Syria. In fact, despite an increase in scope and number, women still typically make up less than 10 percent of state militaries as a whole in the Arab region, with the highest number going to Tunisia (7 percent), followed by Jordan (3 percent). A majority of countries continue to disallow or substantially limit women in combat roles.

While women’s position in Arab armies cannot be covered in a few pages, the Algerian case is enlightening. In “Women in the Men’s House: The Road to Equality in the Algerian Military,” I show that women are neither fully integrated nor totally excluded (Ghanem 2015, 2–3). This situation reinforces their status as “liminal individuals,” meaning “special characters who cannot be assigned neither an identity nor a recognized and valuable position within the institution” (Badaré 2010, 71). In 2006, Algeria appointed several women to the rank of general and declared their equal status with their male counterparts. Rather than representing a substantial shift, however, this act was a public relations move by the military in order to appear modern and forward-thinking. To understand gender relations within the People’s National Army (PNA), I analyzed how discourse about women is constructed within the military, and how these discursive constructions appear in policy and practice. I also examined the status of women within the military’s male roles. Algerian women in the armed forces are portrayed in a contradictory manner. On the one hand, the appointment of women in the military is viewed as the ultimate symbol of gender equality. On the other hand, they are gendered, sexualized, and marginalized so as not to represent a threat. In the PNA’s discursive construction, there is a systematic textual reference to women’s gender roles, but there is no such reference when it comes to men. In its daily application, this kind of reference naturalizes the masculine soldier while highlighting the female soldier’s artificuality (Badaré 2010, 66).

The same can be said about many armies in the region and abroad. Such portrayals of women in the military reinforce gender inequality by feminizing women’s roles and spaces.5 At the same time, however, these discursive constructions reinforce their status as “liminal individuals,” meaning “special characters who cannot be assigned neither an identity nor a recognized and valuable position within the institution” (Badaré 2010, 71).

Nevertheless, a recent report shows a gender division of labor in Arab armies, which affirms that “military jobs remain a ‘sanctuary of hypermasculinity’” (Ghanem 2020, 21). One has to look beyond the images of modernity and supposed equality between men and women that Arab armies (as well as their Western counterparts) want to project. The fact is a majority of women in Arab armies are concentrated in what are seen as “suitable jobs,” meaning communication, health, education, and humanitarian work, rather than those roles that are neither fully incorporated nor fully excluded. Two organizing principles govern this division of labor. First is separation, which assigns different tasks to men and women, and second is hierarchy, meaning a man’s job is worth more than a woman’s (Ghanem 2015). In a nutshell, women’s role in Arab armies is anything but gender-neutral or gender-equal.

These constructs reinforce gender divisions and strengthen the associations between viritlity, masculinity, and war. A militarized woman is tough, but she still needs help and protection from her male counterpart; she can use a gun, but she would rather not engage in armed combat; she is depicted as either not maternal or maternal; she is a woman soldier, but she remains innocent. Once she can achieve the man’s job, she can be part of the “men’s house.” As explained by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007, 86) in a discussion of the US army, “the ideal-type of militarized femininity expects a woman soldier to be as capable as a male soldier, but as vulnerable as a civilian woman.”

Furthermore, women remain excluded from combat positions in many countries, meaning they cannot command military operations and consequently have no access to the same ranks as their male counterparts, namely those above the commander level.6 As a result, they cannot take part in the decision-making process that affects their colleagues’ lives and careers in the institution. As we have seen before, the dichotomies of man versus women and public versus private, and the constructs that perpetuate women’s alleged natural aversion to war, are at the core of their exclusion from combat positions. This supposedly natural inclination to peace makes women “undesirable partners in combat: how can women be trusted on the battleground if they are unwilling to fight and kill […] in this view, men might lose the war by pursuing or protecting women rather than fighting successfully to protect women at home” (Runyan 2019, 90).

As Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) put rightly about the politics of gender, especially gender in military situations, and role expectations, “women are often portrayed as more restricted rather than more integrated in these situations!” In 2019, amidst the war in Syria, several cases of harassment against female soldiers came to light. Female fighters from Brigade 130 complained of sexual harassment, especially from their senior officers, in a video that went viral. There is no information to determine whether the military command has dealt with these claims. In addition, no data is available about the scale of sexual harassment in the Syrian Armed Forces or any other Arab military, and no information is available on the existence of a prevention strategy or the mechanism of protection within militaries in the Arab region. The subject remains taboo.

Integrating women does not only mean including more women; it means “making women’s, as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs throughout all spheres, so that women and men might benefit equally, and inequality would not be perpetuated” (Bakr 2011). In short, to overcome the gap between the discourse and reality of women in the military, the PNA needs to start regarding women as full-fledged soldiers present, while their valor is given within the army’s forces in the region and across the world, it is based on the same old story of women being peaceful, passive, and in need of protection.

3. Not "Beautiful Souls": Women and Violence

Femininity has long been associated with peace and nonviolence. However, as shown above, a new generation of feminist security thinking that has emerged since the 1990s has exposed the tensions over framing security and violence within the field. Authors such as Sjoberg and Gentry (2007), MacKenzie (2000), Porashar (2009), and Aldon (2009) brought the long-neglected women into security research and started studying women who participate in political violence, wars, and conflicts.

These authors recognize “war as an inclusive transhistorical and transcultural institution that shapes and is shaped by gendered subjects and their practices.” While women’s experiences in war are no longer presented as cases of gender deviance or globalization militarization; instead, they are presented as elements of the politics of war and violence. Like their male counterparts, women participated in wars of national liberation and imperialist wars. Like Black Diamond in Liberia, women have been soldiers, militiawomen, jihadists, suicide bombers, and sometimes war leaders.7

In their seminal work on women in international relations, Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics, Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) rather construct the usual cultural exclusion of women as nonviolent and peaceful actors. They explain that “the stereotype of women’s victimization holds fast largely because it is not entirely untrue; the impacts of war are often gender-oppressive. 7. It should be noted that there is another difficult tension within the feminist international field that concerns people and positions that “good” feminists should or should not support. This tension dates back to the 1970s and has a concern that Western feminism was attentive to differences between and within nations, ethnic groups, classes, and gender. As such, many feminists have refrained from indicating cultural practices that they deemed misogynist and from criticizing gender relations in other countries (especially the Arab world) that a majority of women in these cultures might accept. For a good and concise summary of these tensions, see Sylvester (2010, 610–12).
...The ‘answer’ to this problem appears to be very simple. Women have been subordinated in global politics, impacting their social and political options and frames of reference. Still, women, like men, are capable of violence” (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007; 4).

Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) argue that policymakers and the media prefer to portray women suicide bombers in Iraq and Palestine as vengeful mothers, monsters, or whores, rather than as political actors with complex motivations. The mother narratives describe women’s violence as motherhood gone awry. The use of rape as a crime against women was the first to be charged internationally with terrorism in giving birth to insurgent movements, portraying women as “a product of faulty biology or faulty construction. Violent women are not women at all, but singular mistakes and freak accidents” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 13).

Women engage in crime, violent war, and genocidal activities with equal agency, creativity, and elan as their male counterparts. Among the multiple women’s transfers of violence, one case that Sjoberg and Gentry examine are Rwandan Pauline Nyiramasuhko and Serbian Biljana Plavsic. In Rwanda, besides some 3,000 women who were tried for genocidal acts during the 1994 mass killings against Tutsi and moderate Hutus, Nyiramasuhko was the first to be charged internationally with terrorism. The use of rape as a crime against women was the first to be charged internationally with terrorism. The use of rape as a crime against women was the first to be charged internationally with terrorism.

As for Serbian Biljana Plavsic, not only did she call for the systematic rape of Croatian and Bosnian Muslim women, but she also took biopolitics to a fascist level of violence, arguing that Bosnian Muslims were genetically deformed Serbs and that ethnic marriage should be banned in the language describing the story and in the photographs capturing the abuse, is disciplined and reinscribed every step of the way.

Sjoberg and Gentry (2007, 87) reinforce this view, explaining that the Abu Ghraib perpetrators committed a triple transgression: first, the crime that they were accused of; second, the transgression against notions of femininity; and third, the transgression against the new militarized femininity and its role in supporting the existing gendered structure of the US military. As for jihadist violence, while women’s position in these groups cannot be covered in a few paragraphs, several observations can guide us. Women have forced the most conservative organizations to reconsider their value as warriors. Violence designed, planned, and conducted by women is a new phenomenon. Women have been active in logistical missions, combat roles, and suicide bombing attacks in numerous conflicts, from Southern Lebanon against the eighteen-year Israeli occupation, to Palestine, Algeria, and Iraq. The Kurdistan Workers’ Party also used women to attack the central Turkish government.

More recently, with the advent of the Islamic State (IS) organization in June 2013, many reports emerged about women joining the extremist organization. The all-women brigade Al-Khansa was seen as a new, abnormal phenomenon, as if women had never participated in jihadist groups. Similarly, when hundreds of Western women from Austria, France, Britain, Germany, and New Zealand joined their Arab counterparts, they made headlines as if women’s violence was new and unprecedented. As I note in The media discourses resist recognizing women’s violence would also mean recognizing their agency.

Public and policy discourses resist recognizing women’s violence because it would also mean recognizing their agency.

Women who joined the jihadists, for instance, expressed feelings of exclusion and frustration from their societies that would not allow them to practice their religion freely. These women perceived their societies and their policies as hostile and decided to live under the banner of a society in which they would no longer feel socially and culturally excluded and where they could practice and embrace Islam fully and share it with the whole of society (Ghanem 2016). Even when this was expressed and emphasized, as in the case of Um Haritha, a 20-year-old Canadian student who joined IS in Syria in December 2014, media depictions would only focus on the “jihadi bride” motivation. Um Haritha described in several tweets the difficulties she encountered in Canada when she decided to put on a veil: “I would get mocked in public, people should not judge a country and spit on me like I was mentally ill or didn’t understand English.” She continues: “Life was degrading and an embarrassment to me, so I would rather embrace the word of God on Earth,” as well as the desire to live in a “perfect community” where one could practice one’s religion without any constraint, play a vital role in the establishment of the Caliphate and help build a brotherly community. Material incentives included promises of cash payments for families and a life of prosperity and wealth where Sharia rules and where there is social justice and distribution of zakat (almsgiving). The promise of a community free of corruption, inequality, racism, or discrimination also motivated these women to join IS (46). Other factors included trauma as an emotional push and the desire to avenge the loss of a loved one or the entire Muslim community. Personal connections with people engaged in IS can also boost one’s predispositions to join the group. Like men, women are politically conscious individuals who are pushed by a set of motivations to engage in a violent career.

Finally, the assumption that women must be mentally ill to become jihadists is pervasive. In her book Army of Roses, Victor (2003) insisted on pathologizing women who became suicide bombers in Palestine, denying them their agency to make choices about their sociocultural and political situation. The same has been said and written about women suicide bombers in Iraq, denying them their agency to make choices about their sociocultural and political situation. The same has been said and written about women suicide bombers in Iraq, denying them their agency to make choices about their sociocultural and political situation.

The drivers that entice men and women into jihadism are multidimensional, complex, and entangled (Ghanem 2016, 44). Personal grievances alone do not suffice to motivate someone to join a jihadist group. Like men, women have political, social, economic, psychological, and philosophical reasons to join a jihadist group such as IS. For instance, the religious motivations and the desire to “glorify the word of God on Earth,” as well as the desire to live in a “perfect community” where one could practice one’s religion without any constraint, play a vital role in the establishment of the Caliphate and help build a brotherly community. Material incentives included promises of cash payments for families and a life of prosperity and wealth where Sharia rules and where there is social justice and distribution of zakat (almsgiving). The promise of a community free of corruption, inequality, racism, or discrimination also motivated these women to join IS (46). Other factors included trauma as an emotional push and the desire to avenge the loss of a loved one or the entire Muslim community. Personal connections with people engaged in IS can also boost one’s predispositions to join the group. Like men, women are politically conscious individuals who are pushed by a set of motivations to engage in a violent career.

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The state, labor, and society look modern, yet the internal structures remain rooted in patriarchal values and social relations of kinship, clan, and religious and ethnic groups (Ryan and Rizzo 2019, 238). Ultimately, the private patriarchal nuclear family and the neopatriarchal state reinforce each other.

The same logic that undergirds the patriarchal household—where gender norms are naturalized with a protected/woman and a protector/man—also applies to the security state, which legitimizes unequal relationships between men and women as well as between the state and its citizens. States and men who claim a certain type of masculinity and are recognized for it can establish themselves as “strong” within norms of hegemonic masculinity and hence improve their position and boost their credibility both nationally and internationally. This is particularly true in the security realm, where performances that masculinize the state allow it to position itself closer to the hegemonic masculinity and hence be perceived as more effective. In other words, the state relies itself through performances of security, specifically through those that institute it as a masculine and stable protector. By doing so, the state gains international and domestic legitimacy. Protection is in the hands of the man in society, consigning women to the protected status and, hence, the vulnerable, the dependent, and the subordinate. In the same way, the state positions itself as the protector and the citizens as the protected. This logic is brilliantly explained by Young (2003, 2).

An attack perpetrated by a woman attracts eight times more media attention than the same act committed by a man.

With this in mind, several gaps in the mainstream study of security are apparent that should be addressed in future research. First, it is crucial for FSS in general and in the Arab region to undertake a fundamental review of the concept of security. Reconceptualizing “security” in the Arab region is essential to enrich the field and help scholars identify issues not central to feminist studies. For instance, it is crucial for academia to engage with political practices to understand the dynamics of structural powers in security politics and support the work of women civil society organizations and feminist activists in the region. For FSS in the area, it is crucial to have an emancipatory approach from Western studies and be more context-specific, flexible, and aware of each country’s needs in the Arab region. There are several blind spots in the domain in the Arab region where discussion tends to focus on Arab women as victims. Scholars have to identify these blind spots and systematically add gender to Middle Eastern security studies. In addition, location matters, and significant advances in the field will only be possible if the specificity of each country, region, and locality are taken into consideration. This would allow feminist research to be thorough and diverse while working for the same commitment: the emancipation and empowerment of women in the Arab region.

Individual and state forms of masculinity that silence the agency of the “other”—women and citizenry, respectively—create asymmetric interactions and relationships that are unbalanced and unequal because of their links to gender norms.

V. CONCLUSION

As the salience of women’s rights increases, so does the salience of their gender (Enloe 1989). Women are not seen as politicians, generals, soldiers, pilots, criminals, jihadists, or war criminals, but as women politicians, women generals, women soldiers, women pilots, women criminals, women jihadists, and women war criminals. This characterization places women outside the main-/malestream group. Women are separated because they are stepping outside of a prescribed gender role. When they act within what is accepted and expected, this characterization disappears—no one ever hears of women ballerinas, women housekeepers, women flight attendants, or women nurses, for example. Similarly, despite improvements, IR remains heavily implicated in constructing and promoting Anglo-American models of hegemonic masculinity, continuing in connection with globalization (Hooper 2001, 219). While FSS has made important strides in integrating gender into the study of security and challenging traditional gender norms, much work remains to be done to address blind spots and advance the field, especially in the Arab region.

While it is beyond the argument that classical patriarchy and the patriarchal gender contract have been put under pressure in the Arab region, it is also true that neopatriarchy has emerged as its modernized form (Sharabi 1988). The capitalist penetration into the economy undermined the classical and private patriarchy of the family and transferred women’s dependence from the family to the state. Under neopatriarchy, patriarchy is no longer confined to the personal realm but also extends to the public, one where women have experienced incomplete emancipation through education, urbanization, access to birth control, shrinking of the family’s size, increasing income, and increasing autonomy and decision-making with their partial access to the labor force and the political realm. As a result, aspects of the family, the national, and the state come to occupy a subordinate status like that of women in the patriarchal household. We are to accept a more authoritarian and paternalistic state power, which partly supports the unity a threat produces and our gratitude for protection.

An exposition of the gendered logic of the masculine role of protector in relation to women and children illuminates the meaning and effective appeal of a security state that wages war abroad and expects obedience and loyalty at home. In this patriarchal logic, the role of the masculine protector puts those protected, paradigmatically women and children, in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience. To the extent that citizens of a democratic state allow their leaders to adopt a stance of protectors toward them, these citizens come to occupy a subordinate status like that of women in the patriarchal household. We are to accept a more authoritarian and paternalistic state power, which partly supports the unity a threat produces and our gratitude for protection.

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I. INTRODUCTION

War and conflict pose serious threats to health and well-being through both direct consequences like destruction, injury, and death, and indirect consequences such as deteriorating mental health, malnutrition, and increased risk of chronic diseases (Amoudi, Richter, and Salami 2020; Mowafi 2011; Pedersen 2002; Giacaman 2018; Batniji et al. 2009; Miller and Rasmussen 2002; Burgess and Fonseca 2020). In recent years, a growing body of research has pointed to the differential and gendered experience of conflict, which manifests in the types of exposure to physical and structural violence in conflict and post-conflict conditions—including displacement—rendering the consequences of war and conflict on gendered in a way that warrants deeper investigation (WHO 2007; El Jack 2018; Gressmann 2016; Farhood, Fares, and Hamady 2018; Tekin et al. 2016; Amoudi, Richter, and Salami 2020). In general, men are more likely to be directly impacted by violence and have higher mortality and injury rates, while women are more likely to be indirectly impacted and displaced by conflict (Amoudi, Richter, and Salami 2020; Gressmann 2016; Farhood, Fares, and Hamady 2018; Cheung Chung et al. 2018; WHO 2007).

In terms of health, these differential exposures to conflict have important consequences. For example, men are more likely to have to cope with the long-term effects of injury, including temporary or long-term disabilities. Women, on the other hand, face challenges in accessing needed health and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services, are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and gender-based violence, and report greater psychological and psychosomatic symptoms as a result of the distress induced by conflict and displacement (Tekin et al. 2016; Gressmann 2016; Cheung Chung et al. 2018).

In 2017, over 68.5 million people had been forcibly displaced worldwide, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2017). Today, the Arab region is home to the largest concentration of refugees and displaced peoples in the world, with Lebanon and Jordan accounting for the highest rates of refugee to population, and Syria producing 6.3 million refugees now residing in other countries (UNHCR 2017). Yemen, Sudan, and South Sudan also each house about 2 million internally displaced persons within their borders (UNHCR 2017). In addition to the more recent conflicts and subsequent displacements, 51 million Palestinian refugees, largely residing in neighboring Arab states, are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and represent one of the more chronically displaced populations in the region (UNHCR 2017). Despite being home to large-scale displacements, the latest example being the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis and the war on Yemen, there is a paucity of recent published academic research exploring the links between health, conflict, displacement, and gender in the Arab region as a whole.

We begin this paper by investigating the intersections between conflict, gender, and health with a focus on displacement, zeroing in on the Arab region. We then examine the key areas of health research identified in this literature: mental health, gender-based violence (GBV), and sexual and reproductive health (SRH). We also briefly address the literature that focuses in particular on post-conflict reconstruction in relation to health, and investigate the extent to which, if at all, gender is centered in this discourse. This examination allows us to reflect on how gender operationalized and conceptualized in the literature on health, conflict, and displacement in the region and to what extent gender-specific mechanisms are outlined. Given the nature of the concepts discussed, it is important to recognize that the majority of academic research surveyed here appeared in health-specific publications. This is not to negate or avoid taking direction from more critical work in other fields of enquiry—such as criminology, anthropology, and sociology—that also include health and gender dimensions.

1. We highlight, for example, the work of Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian in this direction.
The findings from our comprehensive review of the available literature invite us to rethink the ways in which future research could redress conceptual gaps, bringing the crucial intersections of health, conflict/displacement, and gender together in a more comprehensively rigorous ways that will better inform academic and programmatic interventions.

II. THE INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN CONFLICT AND DISPLACEMENT, HEALTH, AND GENDER IN THE ARAB REGION

Although published more than ten years ago, Mowafi’s (2011) article “Conflict, Displacement and Health in the Middle East” provides a good starting point for thinking about the ways that conflict and displacement affect health in the region. Mowafi reviews the literature on migration and displacement and discusses different regional cases, focusing in particular on the then large-scale displacement of Iraqis in the aftermath of the American occupation beginning in 2003, in order to shed light on the connections between conflict and health.

In addition to the direct physical impacts of violence on health, such as injury and death, conflict and displacement can compromise access to health services, transform living conditions, and impact psychosocial, sexual, and reproductive health through both direct and indirect mechanisms. While earlier literature focuses on the more direct impacts of conflict and displacement on health, more recent literature reflects a broader view of health-related consequences (Giacaman 2018; Burgess and Fonseca 2020). For instance, the destruction of health infrastructure in various settings diminishes the ability of health systems and service providers to meet the needs of the populations they serve (Dewachi et al. 2014; Abbara et al. 2015). In these contexts, regular operations and basic service provision have been discontinued, including SRH and other primary care services such as vaccinations, in addition to the shortages in drugs and supplies due to limitations on movement and destruction of roads (Dewachi et al. 2014; Abbara et al. 2015). In some settings, like Syria, health providers are directly targeted, with adverse effects on the ability of health providers to provide needed care (Fouda et al. 2017; Tappis et al. 2020). The instability and insecurity stemming from conflict further affect service access. In times of such peril, people tend to avoid leaving their homes to seek treatment, which can result in the worsening of health conditions, an increased risk of complications, especially for the chronically ill, and higher mortality rates due to the inability to reach emergency services in time.

Conflict also impacts health through its effects on broader socioeconomic environment, with destruction and the use of weapons causing longer-term environmental degradation. The chemicals released by weapons increase pollution and expose people to toxins that have been linked to higher risk of diseases, including respiratory disorders (Mojabi et al. 2010; Fatthi et al. 2013; Al-Shammar 2016). Remnants of weaponry used in war and conflict, such as undetonated devices, also pose a risk to people’s health through injury, especially in areas that contain minefields. Furthermore, environmental degradation and disruptions to people’s mobility lead to a lack of land cultivation, which, in turn, results in an increase in famines, food shortages, and rates of malnutrition and acute hunger, as has been observed in Syria and Yemen (Rizkalla et al. 2020; Gressmann et al. 2016). Women and girls, on the other hand, are more likely to be exposed to malnourishment during times of conflict given their more limited access to resources and services. Men also remain the most direct victims of acute violence during conflict, and are more likely to experience forced recruitment and arbitrary detention by armed groups (Gressmann et al. 2016). Women, girls, and the family can also lead to higher rates of domestic violence, which disproportionately affects women. These conditions have important implications for health, such as reduced access to services, a need for new services, especially SRH, and higher reports of poor mental health (Rizkalla et al. 2020; Mowafi et al. 2011; Farhood, Fares, and Hamady 2018; Cheung Chung et al. 2018; Tekin et al. 2016). The increased stress of having to provide for family members under worsening economic conditions during times of conflict has also been linked to an increase in substance abuse and violent behavior exhibited by men (Amoudu, Richter, and Salami 2020; Mowafi 2011; Farhood, Fares, and Hamady 2018; Gressmann 2016). Men and boys also remain the most direct victims of acute violence during conflict, and are more likely to experience forced recruitment and arbitrary detention by armed groups (Gressmann et al. 2016). Women, girls, and the other, on the other hand, are more likely to be exposed to malnourishment during times of conflict given their more limited access to resources and services. Women also are more likely to be under the age of 5, and chronically ill persons are specifically disadvantaged by the lack of gender-sensitive health services (Gressmann 2016). In the next section, we focus on the most common dimensions of health linked with gender conflict/displacement in the literature.

III. THE GENDERED HEALTH EFFECTS OF CONFLICT/DISPLACEMENT IN THE ARAB REGION

In the reviewed literature, we found that the main foci of health research at the intersections of conflict and displacement and gender are mental health, gender-based violence—including child or early marriage—and sexual and reproductive health. Although we divide the main health research into these three categories for the sake of clarity, there are important links between these different areas. For example, people exposed to sexual assault and other forms of GBV have also been shown to have worse mental health conditions or show signs of somatization or trauma (Farhood, Fares, and Hamady 2018; Tekin et al. 2016; Rizkalla et al. 2020; Al-Shammar 2016). It is worth noting that much of this literature focuses on women without necessarily pinpointing the mechanisms through which gender impacts the various dimensions of health, and that oftentimes “gender” and “women” as categories are used interchangeably. While we expand on this interchangeable use later in this paper, we note here to clarify that the literature reviewed largely focuses on studies foregrounding the health effects of conflict and displacement on women in the Arab region.

1. Mental Health

There has been a notable increase in the literature on mental health vis-à-vis war and conflict in recent years (Amoudu, Richter, and Saleem 2020; Akseer et al. 2020). This shift has also translated into a greater emphasis on the integration of mental health and psychosocial services into preexisting health and emergency health services provided to conflict-affected populations. Some of the literature focuses on the service needs of refugees and displaced populations, and many studies highlight the mental health consequences of conflict and displacement, including both direct and indirect and long-term exposures. While the need for mental health services in the region has risen as a result of enduring conflict and displacement, most mental health systems in host countries are ill-prepared and lack the necessary infrastructure to provide needed services to refugees and displaced persons (Mowafi 2011). And despite increased attention to the issue, research indicates that current services are still unable to meet the mental health needs of refugees and displaced persons in the region (WHO 2007; Mowafi 2011; Arnaout et al. 2016; El Arnaout et al. 2019). A recent study assessing the health needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and neighboring countries points to mental health care as one of the most commonly reported health...
Conflict and displacement can compromise access to health services, transform living conditions, and impact psychosocial, sexual, and reproductive health. Recently, an increasing number of studies dealing with the mental health consequences of conflict and displacement have highlighted the role of gender, with research pointing to effects of trauma, such as PTSD and depressive disorders, as well as psychosocial areas of mental health like well-being (Pedersen 2002; Miller and Rasmussen 2010; Kienzler 2008; Rizkalla et al. 2020; Cheung Chung et al. 2018). Some of this research has highlighted variations in the nature of somatization, symptomatology, and the incidence of mental health disorders based on gender (Rizkalla et al. 2020; Tekin et al. 2016; Farhood, Fares, and Hamady 2018) found that women were more likely to score above the PTSD threshold than men, even though there were no statistically significant differences in the traumas they experienced. They also identified differences in symptom clusters, which are sets of two or more symptoms that occur together. For example, women were more likely to report “avoiding thoughts or feelings associated with the traumatic or hurtful experience,” whereas men were more likely to report irritability or outbursts of anger, while women were more likely to report “feeling jumpy [and] easily startled” (Farhood, Fares, and Hamady 2018). The differences pointed out in the literature, both in terms of the occurrence of mental health disorders and the manifestation of symptoms and forms of somatization, warrant further study in order to understand how broader eco-social and other conditions may shape gendered responses to conflict/displacement exposures. The need for more tailored research, and the finding of less understanding of conflict response has been echoed by Farhood, Fares, and Hamady (2018) and Rizkalla et al. (2020). However, despite the consistent differences between women and men in mental health outcomes and symptomatology, few studies actually interrogate the gendered mechanisms or pathways that may explain these differences, especially among more trauma-focused mental health research.

A growing set of literature highlights the ways conflict affects mental health beyond direct trauma through increased exposure to stressors like poverty, displacement, and isolation from social networks and support (Miller and Rasmussen 2010; Burgess and Fonseca 2020; Giacaman 2018). A few studies outline how these consequences also intersect with gender. For instance, in the region, points to gender as a predictor of risk for mental health disorder in some contexts (Scharpf et al. 2021). Some studies highlight that the nature of experienced mental health problems can be dictated by gender. For instance, a 2015 study on Palestinian refugee adolescents in Jordan shows that girls are more likely to exhibit internalizing behaviors compared with boys (Ahmad, Smetana, and Klimstra 2015).

In a study focused on PTSD and gender among a population of women and men exposed to war in South Lebanon, Farhood, Fares, and Hamady (2018) found that women were more likely to score above the PTSD threshold than men, even though there were no statistically significant differences in the traumas they experienced. They also identified differences in symptom clusters, which are sets of two or more symptoms that occur together. For example, women were more likely to report “avoiding thoughts or feelings associated with the traumatic or hurtful experience,” whereas men were more likely to report irritability or outbursts of anger, while women were more likely to report “feeling jumpy [and] easily startled” (Farhood, Fares, and Hamady 2018). The differences pointed out in the literature, both in terms of the occurrence of mental health disorders and the manifestation of symptoms and forms of somatization, warrant further study in order to understand how broader eco-social and other conditions may shape gendered responses to conflict/displacement exposures. The need for more tailored research, and the finding of less understanding of conflict response has been echoed by Farhood, Fares, and Hamady (2018) and Rizkalla et al. (2020). However, despite the consistent differences between women and men in mental health outcomes and symptomatology, few studies actually interrogate the gendered mechanisms or pathways that may explain these differences, especially among more trauma-focused mental health research.

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In contexts where people are cut off from their social support networks, the ramifications on mental health are expected to be worse. For instance, due to the high rates of unemployment among displaced populations, women are increasingly having to seek work, oftentimes under poor or abusive conditions, in order to help meet their families’ needs. The added pressures and strains on women resulting from increased responsibilities outside of the household on top of their domestic responsibilities have been shown to be detrimental to their mental health (Gressmann 2016; El Arnaout et al. 2019; CARE Jordan 2019). This is more pronounced among households where the spouse is dead or has been separated from the family. For example, Syrian refugee women heading households and having to take on additional roles within the family, including managing household expenses and caring for their children, reported exacerbated psychological stress that compromised their health and well-being (CARE Jordan 2019). For girls, the most-reported reasons for psychological distress are feelings of helplessness caused by their inability to change their situation, displacement, being forced to work, and being denied access to education (Mouratda, Schlecht, and Delong 2017; CARE Jordan 2019; Delong et al. 2017). There is therefore an acknowledged gendered dimension to how economic insecurity and psychological stress disproportionately affect refugee populations.

2. Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence has been established as a serious consequence of conflict and displacement. As of late, NGOs have increasingly highlighted the incidence and ramifications of GBV in their research and reporting, increasing programming directed toward its impacts (Roupetz et al. 2020; CARE Jordan 2019; El Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al. 2019; Johnston and Asfour 2018). While most organizations focus on GBV’s impact on women and girls, there is some—albeit much more limited—research on its impact on boys and men. Many point to the differential impact of GBV and conflict, where women and girls are more likely victims and men and boys more likely the perpetrators (CARE Jordan 2019). Others have discussed the broader implications of war, including the negative impact on the psychosocial well-being of populations, which affects their social fabric. Other consequences that are often mentioned are increased GBV and early marriage, both of which can be observed in Yemen and Syria, especially among displaced refugees (El Ayoubi, Abdulrahim, and Sieverding 2021; Al-Ammar, Patchett, and Shamsan 2019; Cheung Chung et al. 2018; UNFPA 2018; 2021).

Focusing on Yemen in particular, a 2016 interagency report commissioned by Oxfam, CARE, and GenCap on the intersection between gender and conflict highlights the ways in which conflict and displacement amplify existing social, cultural, and economic inequalities and affect men, women, boys, and girls differently due to their respective societal roles (Gressmann 2016). In addition to bearing the brunt of running households under duress and conflict, women are also often exposed to GBV and become more vulnerable as basic services of an already-stretched health system are severely compromised. In Yemen specifically, the psychological stress men endure due to the loss of income, compromised mobility, and their need to partake in what are traditionally considered “women-specific roles” have led to increased levels of domestic violence against women (Gressmann 2016). Additionally, the Yemeni war has increased the already significant exposure to GBV faced by girls and women, who are more susceptible to forms of violence including forced marriage, early marriage, exchange marriage, sexual exploitation, and other needs, which remain largely unmet (El Arnaout et al. 2019; WHO 2007; Mowafi 2011). Studies that focus on mental health service needs generally do not discuss these needs vis-à-vis gender, though some point out that women and men experiencing GBV and other forms of violence are more likely to need mental health care. In a recent study on the experiences of Syrian refugee women and narratives of conflict and displacement, Rizkalla et al. (2020) argue that better access to broader trauma-focused services for refugees is needed, and that these services should be better attuned to cultural and gender dynamics.

Increased stress during times of conflict has been linked to an increase in substance abuse and violent behavior exhibited by men.

3. Exchange marriage is common in certain parts of Yemen. It
Women and girls are more likely to be exposed to malnourishment during times of conflict.

Precarious sex work, and sexual harassment—with some reports suggesting that 90 percent of women have faced sexual harassment on the street (Gressmann 2016). This finding is consistent with studies conducted in Sanaa City showing an increase in GBV as well as child marriage during the war in Yemen (Al-Ammar, Patchett, and Shamsan 2019; Al-Jeddawy 2022).

One commonly documented form of GBV is early marriage, other wise known as child marriage, which in certain areas has been used to secure dowry for their future children's marriage (Chynoweth, Freccero, and Touquet 2017). Without proper and timely care, the sexual violence men and boys are exposed to during times of conflict can have a lasting impact on their mental health (Chynoweth, Freccero, and Touquet 2017). It is therefore important to draw attention to this often-neglected gendered dimension of sexual violence, within and beyond the Arab region.

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is a form of marital agreement that occurs between two families, where each family marries off a daughter (oftentimes without their consent) to a man from the other family without having to pay dowry (Noman 2014).

Women and girls are more likely to be exposed to malnourishment during times of conflict.

Gender-based violence against boys and men is far less documented. In conflict areas where the topic has been explored, evidence suggests that sexual violence against boys and men is pervasive, especially in cases of forced displacement (Chynoweth, Freccero, and Touquet 2017; Al-Ammar, Patchett, and Shamsan 2019).

Examples have been documented in conflict-affected territories of the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sudan, the former Yugoslavia, and Yemen, as well as among refugee populations in Lebanon (Chynoweth, Freccero, and Touquet 2017; Al-Jeddawy 2022; Al-Ammar, Patchett, and Shamsan 2019). There has also been more recognition lately of Syrian refugee boys’ risk of sexual exploitation in Jordan, with evidences of older adolescent boys exploiting younger boys as well (Presler-Marshall, Gercama, and Jones 2017; Johnston and Asfour 2018). Other justifications for early marriage include the “girl’s protection,” or sutra (Delong et al. 2017; Knox 2017; Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong 2017; Al-Ammar, Patchett, and Shamsan 2019). Although GBV-related studies focusing on sub-Saharan Africa tend to draw attention to sex trafficking and female genital mutilation (Amodu, Richter, and Salami 2020), studies from the Arab tend to highlight the impact of early marriage. In this context, it is important to note that early or child marriage is a social practice embedded in the context of conflict and displacement, both in academic literature as well as nongovernmental organization reporting (Knox 2017; CARE Jordan 2019; Johnston and Asfour 2018; Delong et al. 2017; Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong 2017; Gressmann 2016; المراة والأسرة et al. 2016). Early marriage has been identified as a common risk for girls in contexts of conflict, displacement, and post-conflict reconstruction in particular. The negative consequences of early marriage are well-established and include a high likelihood of early child-bearing, increased risks of maternal and infant mortality, and low educational achievement, which prevents personal and professional growth and compromises the quality of life. Some studies explore the negative repercussions of early marriage on children, and especially young girls, while others seek to understand the reasons for early marriage among refugee populations in the Arab region (Knox 2017; Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong 2017; Gausman et al. 2020; El Ayoubi, Abdulrahim, and Sieverding 2021; Knox 2017; maa al, et al. 2016; Al-Ammar, Patchett, and Shamsan 2019).

As noted earlier, while early marriage was prevalent in Yemen prior to the conflict, with 52 percent of girls married before the age of 18 (including 14 percent before the age of 15), war and displacement have exacerbated the issue, leaving many young girls extremely vulnerable (Gressmann 2016). Similarly, among Syrian refugees, many studies indicate that child marriage has been rising as a result of conflict and displacement (Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong 2017; Knox 2017). Some studies have sought to understand why this phenomenon has become prevalent in contexts of conflict in the region. Potential reasons discussed include safety concerns, feelings of insecurity, deteriorating economic conditions, and disruption in adolescent girls’ education (Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong 2017). Research suggests that early marriage has increased in Yemen as families use it as a coping mechanism during conflict and as a means to access dowry (Gressmann 2016). Furthermore, some studies have delved deeper into refugee girls’ own perceptions surrounding the decision-making dynamics and processes which lead to early marriage. In her research on Palestinian refugee populations in Lebanon, Knox (2017), for instance, examines the range of factors resulting from conflict—including economic hardship, insecurity, and loneliness—that influence decisions to enter an early marriage. Importantly, Knox notes that these decisions are neither unilateral nor imposed, and that more accurate reflections of cultural practices are needed. The study points to the need for more nuance in the design and development of interventions to address this issue as a difficult choice made in difficult circumstances (Mourtada, Schlecht, and DeJong 2017). While early marriage is often considered to be a form of GBV, some of these explorations complicate the picture, especially where the motivation for early marriage is to an attempt to protect girls from sexual violence and assault.

3. Sexual and Reproductive Health

Sexual and reproductive health is another main theme in the literature at the intersections of conflict and displacement, health, and gender. In a seminal review of the reproductive health of war-affected populations, McGinn (2000) notes that attention to sexual and reproductive health in conflict and displacement settings increased in the aftermath of the 1994 Cairo International Conference on Population and Development and news of the sexual violence committed in conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The main findings of the review, which included some countries in the Arab region, point to the challenges and added dangers refugee women encounter in pregnancy and childbirth, the mixed effects of conflict on fertility patterns, and the lack of access to family planning services such as emergency contraception. While various studies note that refugee and internally displaced women, especially those who are victims of sexual violence, may be at greater risk of sexually transmitted infections and diseases (STIs and STDs), there is a dearth of studies that investigate the prevalence of STIs and STDs among refugee populations (McGinn 2000). Since this review, many of the key areas, especially those related to access to SRH services, continue to receive attention in both NGO and academic literature. Furthermore, there appears to be consistent recognition of the importance of paying attention to sexual violence and GBV among refugee and internally displaced populations, as well as an understanding that these exposures increase the need for SRH services.

For instance, the United Nations Population Fund’s regional report, authored by Delong and Bashour (2016), focusing on SRH states that conflict is a contextual factor in the region that merits special attention. It notes that all countries reported inequalities in the provision of sexual and reproductive health services based on geographic area, including a rural and urban divide. The report also notes that the substantial levels of displacement in countries such as Syria have created new vulnerabilities, straining regional health systems’ capacity to cope and creating new SRH issues.
Early marriage has been identified as a common risk for girls in contexts of conflict, displacement, and post-conflict reconstruction

Additional studies identified gaps in access to SRH services and reproductive health care for women and girls, particularly in contexts of conflict and displacement. For example, women and girls in Jordan, who are often at risk of GBV, may not have access to SRH services due to violence or other forms of displacement. This can exacerbate their reproductive health needs and the reproductive health needs of their children. Additionally, many women and girls in these contexts may experience poverty, limited access to education, and limited access to economic opportunities, which can further impact their ability to access SRH services.

4. Gender and Health in Post-Conflict Contexts

Although some of the literature cited above includes conflict and post-conflict contexts, it is important to mention post-conflict reconstruction between violence, stress, and the reproductive health needs of women and the necessity of services that integrate reproductive health and psychosocial needs. Other studies in the occupied Palestinian territories (Palestinian territories) have found that violence and reproductive health care for women and girls is a significant issue in these contexts. For example, in contexts of conflict and displacement, women and girls may experience limited access to SRH services, impact women's choice of health care provider, lead to an increase in home birth, and influence decisions about inducing birth due to violence. These findings elucidate the impacts of conflict and displacement on SRH, especially in relation to childbirth and reproductive health services. Shalhoub-Kevorkian expands on these points in her work focusing specifically on the health care of women in the Arab region. She notes that violence can exacerbate the lack of health care professionals and poor health conditions. She points to mobility as a key mechanism by which conflict impacts women's reproductive health, particularly in terms of access to care and support systems. Based on her study, she finds that women who were restricted to their own movement due to the threats of violence, limited access to reproductive health care, and other women reported miscarriages due to lack of care. Another key dimension of the political violence enacted against Palestinian women is their movement and rights. The restrictions on residency rights impinge women's ability to access support networks and seek services where they prefer, potentially impacting decisions about who to marry and whether to have children.

5. Conclusion

Through this review of the literature, we summarized the main findings that help us understand conflicts and gender interact to influence health in the Arab region. We also sought to identify the key health themes that dominate this literature. As noted above, there is growing attention to the importance of examining gender and health in conflict and displacement settings, which is evident in the expanding body of research. This literature focuses on “gender” and “women” are used interchangeably. In some contexts, sexuality and non-normative gender identity are rarely explored despite the focus on gender. More generally, there is a dearth of studies that employ a gender perspective to examine men’s health in these contexts. This was noted over a decade ago in a WHO report (2007) recognizing that gender and its implications for health have been inadequately addressed in health surveys and calling for more integrated frameworks to ensure that the health of men and women is examined in light of the targeting of women as vessels of reproduction. This leads us to our final point, which has been echoed to some degree by various scholars (Kaya 2018; Yasmine and Moughalian 2016; Aslaba and Kapilashrami 2016), and that is the need to engage
in more intersectional analyses that address structural, political-economic, and ecological contexts. As Dejong and Heidari (2017) note, there has not been enough attention to context in the study of health. This is evident in both the academic and grey literature, dominated by humanitarian agencies, which has resulted in the downplaying, albeit unintentionally, of the institutional and legal factors that create gendered vulnerabilities. In exploring conflict in Iraq, Kaya (2018) argues that this operates through a simplistic understanding of the causes of gendered vulnerabilities in conflict, focusing on essentializing "cultural norms" as the key source, and therefore not adequately accounting for institutional practices and regulations that contribute to creating and harnessing these vulnerabilities. She argues that humanitarian policies need to better situate and understand the effects of economic, political, and societal factors that are operational and render differential vulnerabilities on displaced men and women. As Yasmine and Moughalian (2016) also note, focusing solely on the intrapersonal level ignores the multilevel factors that influence health and supervises the individual realm of health behavior. Alsaba and Kapilashrami (2016) also call for a multilevel analysis of women's experiences of violence that is better attuned to the impact of the political economy of the region, highlighting the ways "in which the state, market and military structures are implicated in creating new forms of marginalization and exclusion and in reinforcing gender inequalities." Various works by Shalhoub-Kevorkian elucidate the ways in which colonial violence operates on various levels and intersects with socio-societal governance, resulting in deleterious impacts on women's and girls' well-being (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015; Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Abdulrahim 2021). More work of this nature is needed to elucidate the mechanisms by which various forms of political violence are enacted against women to impact health in contexts of war, conflict, and displacement.

We contend that adopting an intersectional lens would open up new and important possibilities for research on the intersections between gender, health, and conflict and displacement. This approach would push us to interrogate the intersection of multiple positionalities and vulnerabilities, like class, gender subjectivity, economics, religion, ethnicity, and culture, among others. It would also open up the discussion to the roles of varied actors that operate on multiple levels to influence the ultimate determinants of health, especially among the region’s most vulnerable populations.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The topic of women and work in the Middle East and North Africa has garnered much attention since the late 1980s (Papps 1992). Much of this research attends to the so-called MENA paradox: the region's low rate of female labor force participation despite recent gains in education and health outcomes. Scholars, research centers, and organizations from local to international have published studies and reports on the economic position of women in the region and have devised action plans to support women in their economic endeavors and mitigate the challenges they face in the labor market. Several national, regional, and international agencies, such as the European Commission, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the World Bank, have dedicated funds to the issue of women's economic empowerment while producing rigorous documentation on the status of women in the MENA labor force.

A key consideration for the purposes of this paper is the definition of women's economic empowerment. While the term is rarely defined in works on the subject, a review of the literature suggests that various authors have defined women's economic empowerment similarly: as a strengthening of women's participation in the labor force that comes about by targeting challenges to their freedom of choice and social mobility. While this is important, for our purposes, it is not a sufficient approach to achieve equality in the labor market. We follow Barker and Feiner's (2004) call to extend our views of economic activities beyond the formal market into the household and to consider that these have parallels and repercussions in the market. As such, it is no longer accurate to claim that women do not make a significant contribution to the economy in the MENA region, nor is it enough to argue that women's economic empowerment is simply an opportunity to harness an "untapped resource" for economic growth (Chamlou, Muzi, and Ahmed 2016; IMF 2018; McKinsey & Co. 2020). Women do critical work both in and outside of the home, the implications of which we will discuss below. Women's economic empowerment, moreover, should be considered as an end in and of itself (Krayem 2020, personal communication).

We also recognize that taking "women" as an analytical category should not obscure dynamics that pertain to other social identifications and positionalities, such as class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and nationality. We understand that women's significant economic contributions are often overshadowed by injustices, from abuse to devaluation that renders their work invisible when it is unpaid and enables exploitation when it is paid. Patriarchy is responsible for the neglect of care work and the precarity of women's work in the informal sector, which is the largest employer of women worldwide (Bonnet et al. 2019).

We consider economic empowerment to be a process that gives women access to a fair system for participation in economic activities and creates a reality where these activities improve quality of life and economic security for both women and their families over time (El Saddy 2020, personal communication). Moreover, we see this process as involving the larger economic landscape, which must provide meaningful opportunities for work. This requires a focus not only on individual women, their households, and their communities, but on broader political, economic, and social contexts (Chaaban 2020; Krayem 2020, personal communication). We engage in a critical analysis that takes into account the MENA region's heterogeneity and acknowledges that social formations are dynamic and contingent on larger structural and political mechanisms. We also seek to avoid essentialisms and cultural and religious stereotypes that have dominated some of the literature on women's economic empowerment. We aspire instead to historicize these elements and recognize the multiplicity, internal differences, and debates within them (Moghadam 1993; Joseph 1996; Abu-Lughod 2009). Finally, we recognize that women are not passively enduring these conditions but rather are active agents in mobilizing and demanding their rights. Although they face challenges along the way, MENA women find creative ways to subvert and confront these obstacles.
Given this wealth of recent literature, this paper aims to review the discourse on and interventions into women’s economic empowerment in the MENA region, identifying critical gaps and offering promising alternatives for the intersection of women, work, and economic status in the region. In section 1, we begin by reviewing some of the main insights provided by the literature, as well as outlining the main knowledge gaps and oversights in the research. We find that existing research overlooks several topics that are crucial to understanding women’s economic activities in the region, including care work, participation in the informal labor market, and migrant labor, among other gaps. In section 2, we review and discuss the literature on the main barriers that women face and the drivers of female empowerment in the MENA region. These include supply-side barriers such as education, household division of labor, and social norms. We also highlight a key demand-side barrier—the role of employers in reducing women’s participation in the labor force. Section 3 identifies key national and international interventions, programs, or policies that have been successful or that have the potential to improve women’s outcomes. Finally, in section 4, we provide a synthesis of our conclusions, as well as recommendations and future avenues for research.

II. SCOPING THE LITERATURE: INSIGHTS AND GAPS

The most striking pattern found within the literature on women’s economic empowerment is its almost exclusive focus on female labor force participation (FLFP). Scholars have spent a considerable amount of time justifying the low rate of FLFP worldwide by emphasizing its links to economic growth, financial stability, and individual and community well-being, among other benefits (Adnane 2015; Arezki, Belhaj, and Shah 2019; IMF 2018; Karshenas and Chamlou 2016; Morrison and Sabarwal 2008; Salehi-Isfahani 2006). In this context, the MENA region has the lowest rate of FLFP, hovering around 20 percent, compared to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) global average of 51 percent (World Bank 2019). In past decades, this was often attributed to low literacy and high fertility rates among MENA women. Yet over the last twenty years, the gap in education has nearly closed, while fertility rates have dropped considerably, leading us to question what most analysts have termed “the MENA paradox”: a persistently low rate of FLFP and political participation despite major improvements in women’s education and health (OECD 2017).

Taking women as an analytical category should not obscure dynamics such as class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and nationality.

Using aggregate data from sources such as national statistics bureaus and the World Development Indicators, as well as sociological texts and political documents, numerous studies have made quantitative, econometric, and qualitative attempts to understand the paradox. Some of this literature asserts that Islam is responsible for the region’s exceptionally low rate of FLFP (Psacharopoulos and Tzannatos 1989; Inglehart and Norris 2003). Others have claimed that, given that Islam is the dominant religion in many other regions where the paradox does not apply, it must be a distinct “culture” or “tradition” of the MENA that is at fault, with some going further to single out tribal and rural kinship structures as the culprit (Chamlou, Moghadam, and Karshenas 2016; Solati 2017). Still others have claimed that the oil economies of the Middle East that depend on rents do not create incentives for labor in general (Ross 2008), ignoring that a sizable number of MENA countries showing the same demographic and employment data are not oil producers. Ultimately, what most of these studies have in common is that they are primarily focused on women’s entry into the labor force, ignoring the evaluation and invisibilization of women’s labor and the working conditions for women once they are within the labor force.

While assessing women’s employment opportunities and encouraging labor force participation is certainly important, using this criterion to define women’s economic empowerment is not sufficient for our purposes. As mentioned above, our definition of women’s economic empowerment, stemming from an intersectional feminist approach, takes into account larger political and economic dynamics of work and employment. Our feminist framework draws us to acknowledge that several meaningful and productive activities that women engage in daily are not considered “work” and are thus not officially counted, considered, or supported by institutions. As such, rates of female labor force participation not only neglect the massive amount of informal and care work that women perform, which constitutes a crucial contribution to the economy, but also obscure the conditions under which this work is done and how it impedes other forms of economic participation, thus overlooking any possible support that could be offered in these areas (Moghadam 1993). Achieving economic equality, which is what we mean by “women’s economic empowerment,” is a process of inclusion, valorization, and representation.

III. WOMEN AND WORK IN THE MENA REGION: AN OVERVIEW

The literature on women’s work in the MENA region is focused on FLFP, particularly formal labor, and its low rate of around 20 percent (World Bank 2019). Of women employed in the labor market, 67 percent work in services, followed by agriculture at 20 percent, and finally industry at 13 percent (World Bank 2019). This division, however, varies significantly across countries—which we will explore below—so it does not capture the massive contributions of women in the informal economy, especially in the agricultural sector. Data on the latter is scarce, making it difficult to present an accurate picture.3 Women in the MENA region have high literacy rates, with their education in some cases even surpassing men’s, despite a persistent dropout rate and notable inequality between countries (OECD 2017).

MENA women suffer from the highest unemployment rates in the world, at 18 percent of the labor force (World Bank 2019). The number reaches 39 percent for young MENA women and is particularly high for women with a tertiary education (World Bank 2019). Women at the same employment level as men are more likely to have a higher level of educational attainment, and wage gaps are significant, especially in the private sector (OECD 2017; Daoud and Shanti 2017). In Egypt, for example, women’s wages are 30 percent lower than those of men just above the age of 30, unlike in most countries where this stage usually represents the peak of FLFP. Moreover, few women in the region hold senior or managerial positions (Hamdan et al. 2016; Mahdi 2016; OECD 2017; McKinsey & Co. 2020). Working women are concentrated in agriculture and manufacturing, and, in the majority of cases, the informal sector, which we will return to later (Bonnet et al. 2019; ILO and IFAD 2017). It is also noteworthy that women are much more likely to be in precarious employment than men (Bonnet et al. 2019; ILO and IFAD 2017).

Currently, women are also overrepresented in stereotypically “feminine” occupations such as nursing, teaching, retail, and other service-sector jobs in the informal economy (Yassin 2020, personal communication), though exact numbers and proportions are difficult to determine, due to the challenge of measuring participation in the informal sector (Salman et al. 2019). Women predominate in agriculture, and over the past decade, the proportion of women working in agriculture has increased (Abdelali-Martini 2011; Mohamadieh 2011). At the same time, labor conditions in that sector, which remains largely informal, have deteriorated due to inadequate investment in rural infrastructure and unequal access to land (Abdelali-Martini 2011; Mohamadieh 2011). At the same time, women have been disproportionately pushed into the textile and food processing sectors, once jobs that were reserved for men, and industrial labor was also feminized, while large gender wage gaps exist in all sectors.

There is evidence that women also work in small businesses more than men, but gain in such enterprises with fewer resources and less capital. As such, they face increased challenges in terms of mobility, which is affected by regulatory and legal frameworks (European Union 2017; OECD 2017; Smith and Cardinal 2019). Rural women have even fewer work opportunities. When they do work, it is under worse conditions than women in cities. More
Inheritance laws have major implications for countries such as Jordan and Egypt, making women's position in society, as inherited money and assets are a way to accumulate critical resources that can be invested in education and business. Religious personal status laws in most MENA countries are known to discriminate against women, though progress has been made from a political and legal standpoint in order to overcome the challenges facing women's economic activities.

Most states in the Middle East derive their personal status laws—which regulate issues such as divorce, marriage, inheritance, and custody—from religious laws, or family laws, which are known to discriminate based on gender. These personal status laws, or family laws, are known to discriminate against women, though progress has been made in terms of labor legislation, states including Tunisia, and Libya, have responded by avoiding hiring women for formal positions altogether (OECD 2017). Some MENA governments bar night work for women, deeming it "inappropriate" (OECD 2017). These restrictions do not deter women from seeking this type of work, but instead relegate them to informal sectors, where exploitation and abuse are more rampant, and where laws governing guardianship and inheritance create challenges for women in the job market, which undermine their ability to accumulate resources. Many MENA women are under the guardianship of their fathers until adulthood, and some countries, such as Jordan and Libya, extend this until marriage (Nazir and Tomppert 2005). In general, these personal status codes, or family laws, are known to discriminate against women, though progress has been made in terms of labor legislation, states including Tunisia, and Libya, have responded by avoiding hiring women for formal positions altogether (OECD 2017). Some MENA governments bar night work for women, deeming it "inappropriate" (OECD 2017). These restrictions do not deter women from seeking this type of work, but instead relegate them to informal sectors, where exploitation and abuse are more rampant, and where laws governing guardianship and inheritance create challenges for women in the job market, which undermine their ability to accumulate resources. Many MENA women are under the guardianship of their fathers until adulthood, and some countries, such as Jordan and Libya, extend this until marriage (Nazir and Tomppert 2005; OECD 2017). Other consequential policies are those concerning the formation of well-organized ultraconservative parties, which became central to their discourse on authenticity, delegitimized what became perceived as "Western-style" economic and political regimes, sparking the resurgence of Islamist political movements, economic policies that resulted from these economic shifts included job guarantees in certain countries, were arranged to better attract foreign direct investment flows, and free-trade zones emerged in several countries as nations began export-oriented industrialization, focusing on sectors such as food production and textiles (Hanieh 2013). Government borrowing began to rise, and the social services mentioned above, including job guarantees in certain countries, were progressively cut back. The shrinking of the public sector that resulted from these economic shifts meant that women lost their most attractive option in the labor market. Public-sector employment, which was deemed more secure, safe, and flexible than the private sector, became increasingly less accessible and lost many of its previous privileges (Mohamadieh 1993; Mohamadieh 2011).

These dynamics were accompanied by a sharp rise in unemployment and informal work, which was sometimes exacerbated by wartime hardship and conflicts. The feminization of poverty triggered by similar phenomena globally is well-documented in regions such as South Asia and Latin America (Boserup 1970; Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983; Ward 1984). However, in the MENA region, the crises triggered by these economic transformations delegitimized what became perceived as "Western-style" economic and political regimes, sparking the resurgence of Islamist political movements, economic policies that resulted from these economic shifts included job guarantees in certain countries, were arranged to better attract foreign direct investment flows, and free-trade zones emerged in several countries as nations began export-oriented industrialization, focusing on sectors such as food production and textiles (Hanieh 2013). Government borrowing began to rise, and the social services mentioned above, including job guarantees in certain countries, were progressively cut back. The shrinking of the public sector that resulted from these economic shifts meant that women lost their most attractive option in the labor market. Public-sector employment, which was deemed more secure, safe, and flexible than the private sector, became increasingly less accessible and lost many of its previous privileges (Mohamadieh 1993; Mohamadieh 2011).

The landscape has not improved since the Arab uprisings. While there were some new policies on quotas for women's political participation, as well as some initiatives by international organizations in collaboration with governments or the private sector in training and economic and political capacity-building (European Union 2017; GIZ, n.d.; OECD 2017), women still have little opportunity to participate in politics, and their economic status has not changed based on reports pre-and post-uprisings (Plan International 2020; World Bank 2009).

2. Economic Transformations

The past decades have proven difficult for many MENA countries, including the Arab region, and the impact on women and youth has been especially severe. The poverty, unemployment, and inequality that culminated in the wake of the Arab revolts of the last decade are some of the manifestations of the destitution and hardship people have had to endure in the region. But what the uprisings essentially demonstrated is a major disconnect between economic growth and the needs of people (Hanieh 2013). Substantial economic investments in the region prior to 2011 did not translate into improved freedom or better living conditions for the general population (Mohamadieh 2011). Moreover, the adversity faced by many had gendered consequences. While some attention has been paid to the living and working conditions of particularly vulnerable groups, such as economic and political shifts, there has hardly been any research on how changing economic and political structures have affected women's labor. The economic growth that took place in recent years had only a minor effect on formal FLFP. In fact, women in the MENA region observed an increase in dispossession, disenfranchisement, unemployment, and proletarianization, with many women resorting to working in poor conditions in the growing informal economy (Hanieh 2013).

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communication; OECD 2017; Plan International 2020). There is a dearth of both research and data on the gendered implications of economic shifts and crises.

3. Informality and Informal Labor

Debates on women's economic empowerment in the MENA region have tended to neglect the importance of the informal job market as an employer of women (Elsadda 2020, personal communication). While rigorous studies have dissected the structure and functioning of work in the formal job market (whether the public or private sector), as well as the incentives and impediments of entry into formal work, no such attention has been paid to the informal market, which employs around 62 percent of the female labor force in the MENA region (Bonnet et al. 2019). Work conditions within the informal economy are notoriously insecure and vulnerable to exploitation and violence, whether in the form of wage exploitation or harassment, yet the demands of women in the informal economy have been largely ignored.

While analyzing informality, it is important to remember that most of women's labor goes uncounted or unscored, which is likely to produce underestimations of its scale and of women's participation within it. At times, researchers have equated informality with paid work done uniquely from within the household, and at others unpaid work done by household members supporting the enterprises of the head of the family (Miles Doan 1992). In many of these studies, informality is equated with production for a smaller community market, such as knitting sweaters for one's neighbors, or unpaid household labor for the family business (Miles Doan 1992). While the International Labour Organization (ILO) defines informality as untaught and unregistered or unregulated work, even those criteria for measuring informality fail to capture its scale and complexity, counting any firms with over a certain number of workers as formal businesses and any worker that contributes to social security as formally employed (ILOSTAT, n.d.). In fact, the informal economy comprises far more organized production than these examples would suggest, and it includes an entire factory assembly line, linking it more directly to larger national, regional, and even global economic flows (Balakrishnan 2002; Portes and Sassen-Kooob 1987). This indicates that even the most robust and exhaustive statistics on informal labor must be used with caution (Miles Doan 1992). With all these limitations, it is estimated that MENA has one of the largest informal sectors in the world, behind only South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Bonnet et al. 2019).

Since informal economic activities operate outside of the purview of the state, employers are not required to abide by labor laws or contribute to social security schemes. As such, informal workers are more vulnerable to exploitation and wage theft, and are less likely to receive a wage that is sufficient to support a household and ensure decent standards of living (Aita 2016). Women in particular face additional forms of exploitation and devaluation. Patriarchal values that interpret their labor as “secondary” result in lower wages, and views on propriety and modest behavior result in harassment and abuse of working women, who are seen as less respectable (Kabeer, Deshpande, and Assad 2019). Exploring these conditions would provide a more comprehensive insight into the needs of women in economic activities.

4. Care Work

Care work consists, broadly, of activities involving the care and maintenance of both people and objects, often within the domestic sphere. Care work is conventionally seen as women's work, according to traditional and patriarchal divisions of labor which relegate women to the private sphere and men to the public one (Federici 1976). Such views hold that women are to take care of domestic affairs—rearing children, performing household upkeep, and cooking meals—for no pay. Men, on the other hand, work outside the home for a wage and provide financially for the household. These gender roles must be contextualized within the capitalist modes of production in which they operate (Federici 1976; Mies 1986). Marxist feminists and historians have presented detailed accounts of the ways in which capitalism necessitated such a division within the household throughout history (Federici 1975; Mies 1986). Their writings follow Marx's claims that workers under capitalist production are exploited by not being paid for the full value of their labor. Within the next working day, Wages, as such, do not stand for the amount of labor time, but rather simply for the cost of subsistence. Thus, unpaid domestic labor was necessary to the worker's subsistence, as well as to the reproduction of new workers (Federici 1975; Mies 1986). Domestic laborers—women—must thus both rear children and serve their exploited working husbands once the latter return to the household. In this way, women are separated from their means of production—their own bodies—which become their husbands' property. The product of this domestic labor is also separated from the domestic laborers, as their husbands and later their children go off to join the capitalists' labor force. Capitalists, on the other hand, avoid having to bear the cost of this labor and enjoy an endless supply of laborers (Mies 1986). Such exploitation and subordination of women is concealed through discourses that naturalize care work for women, portraying it as an inherent attribute and punishing those who deviate from it (Mills 2003).

Perpetuating the patriarchal and exploitative assumptions that render care work invisible, studies and initiatives focused on women's economic empowerment fail to take into account the importance of such work and its impact on the economy in the MENA region, where the volume of care work done by women is considerable (Alaa Habib 2019; Elsadda 2020, personal communication; Wallace 2018). Care-work responsibilities factor into women's decisions to take up paid work as well. As many scholars have observed, the distinction between the private and public spheres is problematic in the MENA region, as the family unit often constitutes the basic relationship to the state (Joseph 1996). This means that in many Arab countries, there are provisions that reinforce a conservative model of the household, supporting women in their capacity as homemakers—such as through an extension of the husband's insurance to the wife—but not in their paid economic activities or their unpaid domestic responsibilities. As such, women do not have adequate support for their care-work responsibilities and men are not incentivized by patriarchal public policy to alleviate women's care burden. This type of work must be appreciated and studied in order to devise policies that support women (Kongar et al. 2014; Olmsted 2005). Studies and development programs must consider household economies, family structure, and roles and responsibilities within the household. In fact, patriarchal legal frameworks codify women's inferior status and reinforce women's responsibility for unpaid care labor and men's dominance in formal paid employment. Only men can extend insurance to their partners and not vice versa. Such policies, which allow social security to only one type of family, the male-headed household, reaffirm traditional gender roles and do not offer support directly for care work. Moreover, facilities and opportunities for care workers, which might be limited for women, such as onsite nurseries and paid maternity leave, are inadequate and hard to access (Barry and Davis 2015), and enterprises avoid hiring women formally to bypass the requirements for paid maternal leave and child-care facilities. Ideologies of care work extend into the job market, as women often hold occupations that involve caretaking labor (OECD 2017), such as front-line workers in the health sector (nurses, nurse aids, cleaning staff, etc.), teachers, and community workers, as well as employees in low-level service and clerical jobs. Due to the devaluation of care work, these occupations are often associated with low wages, low status, and limited opportunities for progression, in addition to vulnerability to exploitation and sexual harassment (Plan International 2020).

5. Migration and Citizenship

Migration, both inter- and intraregional, has substantially shaped MENA economies and affected labor in the region, particularly for women. Up until the 1980s, migration from North Africa and the Levant to the GCC was extensive, and remittances were a major source of revenue for labor-sending countries. This created a large number of female-headed households in these countries, driving women to join the labor force in large numbers. Meanwhile, receiving countries used this relatively cheap labor to execute large construction and other projects in the context of the oil boom. After the oil crises of the mid-1970s and 1980s, and facing powerful labor mobilization among migrants demanding more humane working conditions, the GCC began to limit labor migration. Women in the MENA region and instead turned to the South Asian labor pool, which was even cheaper, resulting in a severe limiting of remittance revenues for those formerly labor-sending countries (Hanleich 2013). While the (mostly male) migrants from North Africa and the Levant who returned faced more difficulty

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finding work in their home countries, which were now undergoing economic crises, women faced an even larger burden of working in informal and exploitative conditions, a tendency that would endure through the structural and economic reforms of the 1980s onward (Mukhopadhyay 2020; personal communication).

That said, intraregional migration persists, especially among highly skilled and educated workers from countries such as Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, who are concentrated in fields such as education, contracting, real estate, management, and information technology (Hanifeh 2013). Citizens in the countries of the GCC make up between 12 percent and 60 percent at most of the total population (World Bank 2015). Most of the highly cited statistical data on FLFP in the GCC does not indicate the citizenship of workers (Butto et al. 2018). This has several consequences. The first is that we have little information about the rate of women nationals in the labor force in these countries, and the types of employment that they are concentrated in. Recently, GCC countries have sought to nationalize their labor forces through policies that privilege citizens over noncitizens. The effects of these policies on women’s labor, the quality and meaningfulness of their employment, and their remuneration are as of yet unclear and need further research.

Migrant domestic workers, who constitute a large part of the female labor force in many MENA countries, face specific challenges related to the nature of their work and citizenship status. While this is a very specific example, it serves as an illustration of the symbiotic relationship between formal and informal markets, as well as of how labor policies, economic dynamics, and social pressures can affect women’s options in the job market and the amount of satisfaction these opportunities can give them.

War and conflict have also given rise to a significant refugee population within the MENA region, which has quickly become part of the labor force in countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Refugees are also often excluded from social benefits, trade union representation, and other forms of labor organization due to citizenship requirements (UNHCR 2020). Most refugee households live below the poverty line, and they are some of the most vulnerable communities across the region (UNHCR 2020). The gendered qualities of refugee women’s entry into the labor force, as well as its implications for host communities, must be examined further as part of the debate on women’s economic empowerment and the search for more inclusive and gender-sensitive policies.

6. Women’s Movements and Economic Justice

One of the largest and most baffling oversights in the vast literature on women’s economic empowerment in the Middle East is the neglect of the conditions that enable or impede women’s organizing around and demands for rights, particularly economic rights and justice. While recently some attention has been paid to women’s organizations and activism in the context of the Arab uprisings, women’s participation in social movements long precedes the 2010s. Women have been active in demanding rights and justice in various forms since at least the nineteenth-century public debates on independence and nationalism. Since then, women’s associations have been involved in a variety of historical mobilizations, such as labor strikes and anti-authoritarian revolutions, throughout the region. It is thus a great error if any work purporting to support women’s economic empowerment fails to recognize these movements’ efforts to further women’s rights in their respective countries (Al-Ali 2012; 2013). Thus, efforts to improve women’s conditions in the job market must also support the movements that publicly express women’s demands and ambitions as well as the challenges they face in everyday life, and investigate the factors that inhibit women’s organizations in demanding more just economic conditions.

Labor policies have generally been gender-blind, ignoring the specific challenges women face in the workplace

Women’s movements in the Middle East and North Africa face various challenges that are specific to the historical and political developments of the region. These movements are generally met with suspicion by political agents and publics. This is due to many factors; first, the Arab nationalist regimes that prevailed during the mid-twentieth century sponsored many women’s groups as part of their vision of modernization. As a result of the regimes’ co-optation of women’s movements, certain women’s organizations and women’s rights groups became synonymous with these governments, which fell out of favor in the eyes of many (Al-Ali 2002). Moreover, the authoritarian and liberalizing regimes that succeeded them also instrumentalized women’s charitable organizations in order to further consolidate their power and present a friendlier face, while criminalizing popular feminist or women’s movements (Al-Ali 2002). This practice endures today, as various regimes try to project a more progressive appearance to the international community by proclaiming their support for women’s empowerment initiatives (Al-Ali 2002; Eum 2019).

Islamist movements have denounced women’s movements as “inauthentic” and a “Western imposition” that seeks to displace true Islamic and cultural values. These Islamist movements, which have proved skilled at organizing, mobilizing, and gaining political power, have emerged in the context of disillusionment with the poverty, unemployment, and exploitation ushered in by the previous liberalizing regimes (Al-Ali 2002). Islamic movements rose to prominence by providing a viable alternative to what they deemed a decline in civilization due to an estrangement from a certain “authentic moral order” (Dahlgren 2008; Moghadam 1993). Women hold a central position in this discourse, and this rhetorical “cultural authenticity” sees them playing their part in a patriarchal division of labor, and thus being caregivers without access to the public sphere. Although Muslim feminist movements debate these movements’ interpretations of the role of women in Islamic thought, women’s groups have still had to contend with accusations of inauthenticity and the curtailment of their activities. As such, some advancements in women’s rights have been reversed, including with regards to personal status laws and laws against physical and sexual abuse, which have complicated women’s economic empowerment. Moreover, as women are expected to be caregivers and homemakers in these ideologies, the many women who do work outside the household, be it out of need or for other reasons, lack legal protection in cases of abuse or exploitation.

Most trade unions in the MENA region are led by men (ILO 2012). Examples from Lebanon have demonstrated that women do not feel that their needs or priorities are taken into account in unions’ organizing efforts (ILO and FES 2016). Trade unions rarely push for agendas that promote women’s economic empowerment or even inculcate female labor force participation through addressing systemic challenges to women’s entry in the job market or through strengthening their recruitment, retention, and promotion (ILO 2012). There are instances where trade unions have indeed played an important role in bringing about democracy, such as the case of the Tunisia (Adouni and Ben Sedrine 2018). In Lebanon, on the other hand, trade unions have often been hijacked to promote the interests of the ruling elite rather than workers. Tellingly, trade unions took no part in the October 17th protests, which demanded, among other things, the improvement of the conditions of all workers (Maucour and Atallah 2020). A women university teacher was behind the creation of the first alternative union of professionals, in an effort 5 Policies during the height of the Islamic revival illustrate these changes: Egypt’s 1979 decree liberalizing family laws was rescinded in 1985 due to conservative backlash and was eventually rescinded in 1987; in Algeria’s first family code deprived women of the right to divorce (Moghadam 1993).
to create a space where people's interests would be voiced. This initiative was a springboard for the creation of other alternative specialized trade unions and syndicates, which included women in their leadership as well as among their founders.

7. Faith-Based Organizations

Faith-based organizations, for their part, have mostly followed a charity model, where women are seen as beneficiaries of services rather than as actors and decision makers. Most initiatives have focused on encouraging, facilitating, and investing in income-generating activities that are based on women's traditional role as caretakers. Such initiatives include, for instance, individual arts and crafts production, individual or collective agro-processing small businesses, training, and job placement for low-skill employment (Tadros 2010). In this context, women are encouraged to earn income to assist their families rather than to develop the knowledge and political agency necessary to challenge their conditions.

IV. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Across Arab countries, identifying barriers to women's empowerment is essential to guide policy intervention. Given the broad scope of this review, we focus on academic studies that use rigorous empirical methods and allow for the identification of causal effects. While our focus is on the MENA region, we also include literature from other developing or developed countries that could provide valuable insights for the region.

Causal studies on this topic are abundant, and most of the evidence on the MENA region comes from two educational reforms. The first is a 1997 reform of the Turkish educational system, which increased compulsory school attendance from five to eight years (i.e., from primary school to middle school). The reform meant that individuals born after January 1987 had to complete eight years of schooling, while those born before that date could leave school after only five years. This allows researchers to use a regression discontinuity design that essentially compares individuals born before and after this date-of-birth cutoff, and hence identify the causal effects of increasing years of education on a range of outcomes. The Turkish reform was successful at raising women's years of education and middle school completion—especially for women from rural areas who had limited access to education prior to the reform. This in turn caused a significant increase in women's employment, likelihood of working in the nonagricultural sector, and income (Jackson, 2010; Clark and Del Bono, 2016; Beuermann and Jackson, 2018). Similarly, going to high-quality colleges increases earnings and improves the quality of women's options for marriage, in terms of potential spouses' educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses (Hoekstra 2009; Kauffman et al. 2021; Canaan and Mouganie 2018). A second strand of literature further documents that pursuing certain fields of study—which is more likely for men (Jackson, 2010; Clark and Del Bono, 2016; Beuermann and Jackson, 2018). Similarly, the main reason why marriage and children negatively affect women's labor outcomes is because the gendered intrahousehold division of labor. Economic theory predicts that intrahousehold specialization—that is, one spouse devoting their time to market work and the other to home production—occurs when one spouse has a comparative advantage in home production and the other has a comparative advantage in market work. This is because intrahousehold specialization is not a fixed characteristic of individuals but rather is endogenously determined by the relative returns to home and market work. The main reason why marriage and children negatively affect women's labor outcomes is because the gendered intrahousehold division of labor. Economic theory predicts that intrahousehold specialization—that is, one spouse devoting their time to market work and the other to home production—occurs when one spouse has a comparative advantage in home production and the other has a comparative advantage in market work. This is because intrahousehold specialization is not a fixed characteristic of individuals but rather is endogenously determined by the relative returns to home and market work.

Debates on women's economic empowerment in the MENA region have tended to neglect the importance of the informal job market as an employer of women.

1. Education

A. Quantity of Education

Increasing women's access to schooling and raising their years of education has positive impacts on a range of social and economic outcomes. This is particularly important in rural areas, where women have limited access to education. The MENA region is characterized by rising female educational attainment but stagnant labor force participation rates, suggesting that a lack of education may not be the main barrier to women's empowerment. However, both international and regional evidence indicates that women realize large labor market returns from increasing their education levels.

B. Quality of Education

As previously discussed, studies in the MENA region have focused on understanding the relationship between women's years of education and their empowerment. However, the question of For women who have access to education, improving the quality of schooling and their access to majors in high-earning fields can strengthen their economic and social empowerment. Studies from outside of the MENA region have shown that high-quality education yields large pecuniary and nonpecuniary benefits for both women and men. Attending high-quality schools has been shown to increase women's income and lower fertility rates in both developed and developing countries, and the economic returns may be larger for women than for men (Jackson, 2010; Clark and Del Bono, 2016; Beuermann and Jackson, 2018). Similarly, the main reason why marriage and children negatively affect women's labor outcomes is because the gendered intrahousehold division of labor. Economic theory predicts that intrahousehold specialization—that is, one spouse devoting their time to market work and the other to home production—occurs when one spouse has a comparative advantage in home production and the other has a comparative advantage in market work. This is because intrahousehold specialization is not a fixed characteristic of individuals but rather is endogenously determined by the relative returns to home and market work.

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2. Marriage, Fertility, and Intra-household Division of Labor

Marriage and fertility are major constraints for female labor force participation in the MENA region. In a recent study, Assaad et al. (2017) use data from Jordan, Egypt, and Tunisia along with an instrumental variables method to examine how marrying by the median age of marriage impacts women's labor outcomes. The authors find that marrying by the median age strongly decreases women's likelihood of being employed, particularly in the private sector. Other studies point to a strong negative association between fertility and women's labor outcomes in several MENA countries, such as Iran (Esfahani and Shahriari 2012; Majbouri 2019), Morocco (Assaad and Zouari 2003), Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia (Selwaness and Kraft 2018).

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6. For example, suppose that a researcher is interested in understanding whether increasing years of education raises women's employment. The ideal experiment to estimate this effect would be to work with a group of women who are on average similar; the only difference between the two groups should be that one has more years of education than the other (i.e., an apples-to-apples comparison). However, in most settings, a simple comparison of the average outcomes of two groups of people with different years of education will likely lead to erroneous conclusions about the relationship between education and employment. This is because individuals who choose to pursue different educational levels will not be on average similar along many dimensions. For instance, they could differ in terms of their socio-economic background or motivations. Therefore, a simple comparison of their average outcomes would capture the impact of education on employment, but also any other differences that exist between these two groups. To make an “all else equal” comparison, researchers typically rely on experimental and quasi-experimental methods. Hence, we will focus our discussion on studies that use these methods and allow for the identification of causal effects.

7. The evidence from Iran, however, is mixed, since another study conducted in Iran did not find a significant relationship between fertility and female labor force participation (Azimi 2015).
the other in the labor market (Becker 1981). Since women on average have lower wages than men, they are more likely to leave the labor force in order to invest their time in housework and childcare, while men increase their labor force attachment. Recent studies report descriptive statistics on this type of within-household specialization after marriage in several MENA countries. Hendy (2015) reports that, after marriage, Egyptian women spend on average eight hours less per week on market work and increase their time in home production by thirty hours. Assaad et al. (2018) also document that married women in Egypt and Tunisia spend a larger amount of time on domestic work compared to unmarried women.

3. Social Norms and Traditional Views about Gender Roles

Social norms are some of the most important barriers to women’s labor force participation in the region. For example, in some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, women must obtain approval from their male guardians in order to work. Furthermore, women in various parts of the MENA region that value female “purity”—a concept with religious origins—cannot freely interact with men outside of their families (Jayavardhan 2015). This is likely to limit women’s ability to participate in the labor force or engage in successful business opportunities, as most workplaces are not gender segregated. Such societal beliefs and perceptions hinder women’s empowerment. A small nascent literature has focused on MENA societies’ perceptions and attitudes toward traditional gender roles, and how these in turn affect women’s empowerment. Alan et al. (2018) show that Turkish elementary school teachers who hold traditional views about gender roles negatively affect girls’ achievement. Specifically, traditional teachers transfer their views about gender roles to girls, which in turn negatively impacts female students’ academic performance. A key strength of this study is that the authors examine a setting where students are randomly assigned to their teachers, which allows for the identification of causal effects.

While traditional views about gender hinder women’s empowerment, a study from Saudi Arabia uncovers another important cultural constraint to FLFP: misperceptions about social norms. Burszyn et al. (2018) document that men in Saudi Arabia privately support their wives’ participation in the labor force, but underestimate how much other men approve of FLFP. The perception that other men do not support FLFP decreases the likelihood that husbands will give their wives permission to look for a job. González (2013) documents a similar effect in Kuwait. She finds that male college students also support women’s labor market participation but believe that the religious community disapproves of it.

4. Religion

Researchers have also studied religion’s potential role in propagating social norms that impede women’s economic empowerment. Since Islam is the dominant religion in the MENA region, we summarize the evidence on the link between Islam and women’s empowerment. Traditional religious institutions can place limitations on women’s behavior by influencing society’s attitudes about gender. For example, Akyol and Ökten (2019) document that Turkish women who are Alevi Muslims are more likely to participate in the labor force than Sunni Muslims. The authors attribute this difference to the fact that Alevi Muslims have more gender-equal views than Sunnis. A concern is that countries that have Islamic parties in power, such as in Turkey and Egypt, may have poorer women’s rights than other areas (Meyerson 2014). On the other hand, Islamic institutions might support women’s education and economic opportunities.

A longstanding literature explores the relationship between Islam and economic performance. However, causal studies on the role of Islam in women’s empowerment in the MENA region are scarce. Part of the literature focuses on the relationship between Islam and gender attitudes, but the evidence is mixed. For example, Asadullah and Chaudhury (2010) show that graduates of the traditional madrasas (i.e., Islamic schools) in Bangladesh have less gender-equal views compared to graduates of modernized Islamic schools. Hajj and Panizza (2009) compare the gender education gap between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon. They find that, for both religions, women pursue more education than men, suggesting that Muslims in Lebanon are not more likely to discriminate against women than Christians. In another study, Clingingsmith et al. (2009) use data on applicants to a Pakistani lottery that awards visas to attend the Hajj. The authors compare the attitudes of the lottery’s winners and losers, which allows them to identify causal effects. They find that Hajj participation increases pilgrims’ religiosity but also raises their support for women’s education and FLFP. Although the study cannot pinpoint the exact factors that change pilgrims’ perceptions of women’s entry into the labor force, the researchers found evidence suggesting that pilgrimage increased belief in equality due to the participants’ exposure to and interaction with Muslims from different cultures during Hajj.

Other literature focuses on the role of Islamic rule and institutions in women’s empowerment. In his seminal study, Meyerson (2014) uses a regression discontinuity design that compares Turkish municipalities where an Islamic party barely won an election to municipalities where the party barely lost. He finds that having an Islamic party win the election increases women’s high school completion, and this effect is strongest in poor and conservative areas. An explanation for this result is that Islamic rule raised the number of educational institutions that are sponsored by Islamic charities, making people less hesitant about sending their daughters to school.

5. Employers

Employers may restrict women’s labor market options through gender discrimination in their hiring and promotion decisions. Employers may prefer hiring and promoting men because women may be perceived as less productive, since they typically invest a large amount of time in housework and childcare. Additionally, in most MENA countries, employers have to provide parental leave for new mothers but not for fathers. This makes hiring women more costly than hiring men and potentially exacerbates gender discrimination. This topic has received a great deal of attention in the international academic literature, but evidence on the role of employers in the MENA region is scarce. In a recent study on Turkey, Balkan and Cilasun (2018) conducted an experiment in which they sent fictitious job applications—which differed in terms of the applicant’s gender—but were otherwise—to Turkish employers. The aim of this study was to see whether employers are more likely to choose men over women. Surprisingly, the authors found no evidence that Turkish employers are more likely to discriminate against women in their hiring decisions.

6. Microfinance

In 2018, more than 175 million people worldwide were receiving microcredits (Credit Summit 2018), which are small loans given to poor individuals in developing countries in order to help them grow their businesses. Microfinance institutions typically offer loans with low interest rates and target individuals with little access to the formal financial sector. In addition to decreasing poverty rates, microfinance programs targeted at women may promote gender equality and economic empowerment. A large body of work evaluates the effectiveness of microcredit programs. In most settings, these programs increase households’ access to credit, business creation, and business expansions (Banerjee 2013).

An example from the MENA region are microcredits provided by Al Amana, the largest microfinance institution in Morocco. Crépon et al. (2015) focus on how the opening of Al Amana branches in rural areas impacts self-employment and women’s economic empowerment, as some studies show that it increases women’s exposure to domestic violence (Banerjee 2013) and that only a small number of women in conservative and rural areas use microfinance (Crépon et al. 2015).

8. For more information, see Kuran 2018.

9. It should be remembered that more work is needed to understand the contribution of microfinance to women’s economic empowerment, as some studies show that it increases women’s exposure to domestic violence (Banerjee 2013) and that only a small number of women in conservative and rural areas use microfinance (Crépon et al. 2015).
empowerment. They find that these branches increased households’ access to credit and led to an expansion of existing businesses.

B. Skill-Training Programs

In addition to restricted access to credit, women often lack the entrepreneurship skills necessary to start successful businesses. Several business, vocational, and skill-training programs have recently been implemented in the MENA region. Elsayed and Roushdy (2017) evaluate a large-scale intervention in Egypt, Neqdar Nesharek, which provided women with mentoring as well as business, vocational, and life-skills training. Implemented in thirty rural villages in Upper Egypt, the program was found to increase women’s income-generating activities and self-employment. However, the program had no effect on measures of female social empowerment, such as attitudes toward gender equality and intrahousehold decision making (Elsayed and Roushdy 2017). Another intervention, Jordan NOW, provided young women who recently graduated from community college with soft skills training. Participants received an intensive forty-five hours of training on topics such as communication, teamwork, CV writing, and interview skills. Despite its intensity, the program did not increase women’s employment (Groh et al. 2016).10

2. Interventions that Target Cultural Barriers

While programs directly aimed at engaging women in the labor force can be effective, their success is often limited by cultural barriers. For example, when women have no decision-making power within the household, giving them access to microcredits might have no effect on their labor outcomes, as the money may be seized by their husbands. Breaking down social norms and cultural barriers, as well as changing traditional gender attitudes and biases, can bolster the success of employment programs and, importantly, improve women’s outcomes in general. Interventions that both increase women’s exposure to strong female role models and change social norms and attitudes about gender equality are particularly effective at boosting women’s empowerment.

Several recent studies from the MENA region show that women benefit substantially from interacting with successful female role models. Using data from a selective private university in Lebanon, Canaan and Mouganie (2020) demonstrate that being assigned to female academic advisors who are scientists improves women’s likelihood of enrolling and graduating from college in five years, where women are typically underrepresented. This is because female scientists can be role models for young women, inspiring them to pursue careers in the sciences. In Egypt, researchers incentivized individuals to watch a reality television competition show where contestants were tested on their entrepreneurial skills (Barsoum et al. 2018). The researchers hoped to use role models to change social norms and attitudes toward women’s entrepreneurship. Female contestants were particularly successful throughout the show. The authors found that exposure to the show’s female role models changed individuals’ gender-related attitudes around self-employment, but did not increase aspirations for self-employment. Bargain et al. (2018) find that Egyptian women’s active participation in demonstrations during the Arab Spring broke down gender stereotypes and empowered women. Specifically, exposure to female protesters increased other women’s decision-making power within their households and reduced their acceptance of domestic violence. Interventions that change men’s attitudes about social norms may be particularly beneficial in boosting women’s employment. As previously discussed, Bursztyn et al. (2018) report that men in Saudi Arabia support FLFP but think that other men do not. The authors ran a randomized controlled trial where they corrected men’s beliefs about other men’s support for FLFP. The experiment was successful at increasing their wives’ likelihood of applying and interviewing for jobs.

Finally, programs that are sensitive to social norms, instead of trying to break them down, are also effective. Carvalho (2016) shows that the more women’s roles are traditionalized, the more women in traditional regions in order to increase their labor force participation. This is because women in traditional areas use veiling as a way to reduce societal disapproval of working in gender desegregated workplaces. Other interventions change or inform women about gender-related workplace attributes. Subramanian (2020) shows that Pakistani women are more unlikely to apply for jobs when they are given information about the gender of their potential coworkers and employers—especially if the employer is female. Providing women with free, gender-segregated transportation to work can be an effective but costly way to improve their participation in the labor force (Jayachandran 2019). Sievering and Elbadawy (2016) study the Israhiq program, which provides Egyptian female adolescents with gender-segregated small programs in which spaces for out-of-school classes and homes the opportunity to interact with other girls and mentors. The program had positive effects on women’s knowledge of reproductive health and literacy, but failed to improve their mothers’ and brothers’ attitudes and beliefs about gender issues.

3. Redistributing Women’s Housework and Childcare

Women in the MENA region take on the vast majority of housework and childcare. They also tend to work in the public sector, as it provides more flexible work arrangements than private firms. This suggests that policies or programs that ease women’s childcare and housework responsibilities and allow them to balance their work and family lives could improve their labor force participation. Unfortunately, there is no causal evidence on the consequences of these types of programs in the MENA region. However, evidence from outside of the MENA indicates that access to maternity leave and childcare can play a key role in improving women’s labor market attachment.

Maternity leave policies typically provide women with time off from work after the birth of their child. One of the goals of leave periods is to facilitate working women’s transition into motherhood and their job continuity after childbirth. A large literature in economics evaluates the consequences of these leave periods on women’s labor market outcomes and provides insight into optimal policy design. The effectiveness of maternity leave depends on three factors. First, it is important to offer cash benefits that replace a large part of mothers’ lost income due to taking leave. Second, leaves are typically job-protected, as they guarantee women’s right to return to work after their leave ends. Third, the length of the leave period matters. Evidence suggests that paid and job-protected leaves that are less than one year in length increase women’s likelihood of returning to work and their employment rates (Rossin-Slater 2018). However, longer leaves can have detrimental effects on a range of women and family outcomes (Canaan 2019).

MENA countries provide women with maternity leave, but some reforms are still needed. Most Middle Eastern countries—with available data—provide seven to ten weeks of maternity leave.11 Increasing the length of leave to at least twelve weeks could benefit both women and their children. Both the private and public sectors are required to cover at least 100 percent of their employees’ salaries while on maternity leave,12 which play a cause employers to discriminate against women when hiring, as they might be perceived as more costly than men.

Providing MENA women with childcare arrangements could also increase their labor market participation. Indeed, women in the region disproportionately take on childcare responsibilities, and having access to other childcare arrangements can free up some of their time and allow them to invest in market work. Literature on childcare programs outside the MENA region generally finds that increasing the availability and reducing the costs of childcare arrangements—through subsidies or the provision of free childcare—significantly increase mothers’ labor force participation (Morrissey 2017).

4. National Policies and Programs

Over the past few years, several MENA countries have focused on increasing gender equality and promoting women’s empowerment. Indeed, the World Bank reports that Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Jordan, and Tunisia are among the ten countries that exhibited the largest improvements in terms of introducing reforms aimed at empowering women. In 2019, Saudi Arabia enacted several laws that facilitate women’s labor force participation and job continuity. Specifically, the country promoted women’s access to employment and entrepreneurship by introducing laws prohibiting gender-based discrimination in job advertising, hiring, and access to financial services. They also introduced laws that guarantee maternity leave, and their retirement age was extended to 60. Bahrain recently enacted laws that criminalize sexual harassment in the workplace and launched the National Plan for the Advancement of Bahraini Women for 2013–2022, which supports women’s employment, entrepreneurship, and

10. The international evidence on the role of microfinance and skill training programs in boosting women’s empowerment is mixed (Banerje 2013).

11. As of 2014, the length of leave by country was as follows: United Arab Emirates at six weeks; Lebanon, Qatar, Oman at seven weeks; Bahrain, Iraq, Yemen at nine weeks; Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Palestine at ten weeks; and Syria at seventeen weeks (Aldai et al. 2014).

12. The only exception is Jordan, which relies on social security to pay for maternity leave benefits in all cases.
protection from domestic violence. Jordan also made significant progress in facilitating women's economic participation by removing laws that forbid them from working at night and introducing “the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value” (World Bank 2020).

Several countries have also implemented programs aimed at supporting women’s entrepreneurship and economic empowerment. Over the last few years, Morocco put in place a variety of skills and business training programs, as well as microfinance programs that target women. Examples include the Min Ajliki program, which provides women with training for business creation, and the Ilayki program, which offers small loans to women-led businesses. Morocco also launched projects aimed at helping women living in rural areas. For example, since 2011, several centers were created to provide suitable workplaces for women working in the handicraft industry (Morocco Ministry of Family, Solidarity, Equality and Social Development 2017). In 2017, the Central Bank of Egypt signed a protocol with the National Council of Women aimed at providing microfinance loans to women entrepreneurs. In 2015, the Takafol and Karama cash transfer program was launched with the support of the World Bank to help the poorest families. Ninety percent of participants were women (World Bank 2018).

5. International Organizations

Several international organizations are currently working on the topic of empowering women in the MENA region. This section summarizes the work of the main international actors in the region.

Recognizing the MENA region’s serious need for rigorous quantitative evidence, the World Bank launched the Middle East and North Africa Gender Innovation Lab. A particularly important feature of the lab is its focus on investing in “high-quality experimental research (primarily through impact evaluations and randomized controlled trials) to find the most effective evidence-based interventions” (World Bank 2019).

UN Women and the International Labour Organization recently launched a cross-country program to promote women’s empowerment in Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine. The program aims to collaborate with the public and private sectors, as well as with civil society organizations, in order to advocate for gender-equal labor laws and policies, encourage private employers to hire and retain female workers, and change traditional gender attitudes regarding women’s housework and unpaid care work. In 2017, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched the MENA-OECD Women’s Economic Empowerment Forum “to build a regional network where government and non-government representatives from OECD and MENA economies can exchange best practices and find solutions for enhancing women’s economic empowerment” (OECD 2017). Given the lack of data in the region, the focus is on collecting data on gender and on advocating for legal reforms concerning women’s rights and empowerment.

A couple of initiatives were also recently created by academic institutions. J-PAL’s Middle East and North Africa Initiative, a collaboration between the American University of Cairo and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, promotes evidence-based policymaking by conducting and helping researchers develop randomized controlled trials. While J-PAL does not exclusively focus on women’s economic empowerment, it does help conduct research on this topic. The Harvard Kennedy School Evidence for Policy Design, which also focuses on rigorous quantitative research and the promotion of evidence-based policy, has set up a joint collaboration with Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Labor and Social Development and the Human Development Fund. The collaboration’s goal is to promote research on several key issues in the country, with one focus being “Women in the Labor Market.”

VI. CONCLUSION

Women’s economic empowerment in the MENA region has become a popular topic of research and policy intervention in recent years, especially given that the MENA’s rate of female participation in the labor force is the lowest in the world. Various actors, from international agencies to local grassroots organizations, have devised plans and made demands to increase women’s economic participation and improve conditions in the labor force.

While these efforts are important in positioning women’s economic empowerment as a critical issue, we have identified several shortcomings in the ways that the topic has been approached in research and policy. First and foremost is the vague and narrow definition of women’s economic empowerment: few sources actually define the term, and its use suggests that it is limited to women’s participation in the labor force, rather than also encompassing working conditions and the impact that labor has on women’s lives in general. Moreover, sources have tended to ignore the historical, political, and economic developments that have shaped the context and opportunities for women’s work in the MENA region. This has resulted in vague appeals to cultural or social explanations that fail to capture the variety of structural arrangements driving women’s low labor force participation. In addition, these works tend to underestimate women’s willingness to engage in the labor force, as well as the conditions which presently impede them doing so; mainly, these relate to their care burden and the lack of care provisions and flexible arrangements in the workplace. Women’s willingness to work is also reflected in their large representation in the informal labor force. Analysis of this precarious sector is critical in order to evaluate women workers’ needs and propose gender-sensitive responses. Finally, any discussion on women and work in the MENA region must consider the large migrant worker labor force, which is frequently neglected in these debates despite these workers’ higher vulnerability to exploitation and violence.

We also reviewed the literature and presented a synthesis of commonly identified barriers to women’s economic empowerment in the MENA region. This review perturbed some common assumptions about the obstacles to women’s participation in the labor force, especially with regards to education levels, social norms, and religiosity. We also called attention to the often-neglected role of employers in hindering women’s labor-force participation. In light of this analysis, we highlighted the principal initiatives and programs targeting women’s economic empowerment and evaluated their impacts according to the factors detailed above.

A central conclusion of this paper is that, when considering the economic opportunities offered to women, both research and policy interventions must take class difference into account, particularly as it relates to educational attainment, as well as the alleviation of the care-work burden and the additional obstacles faced by migrants. In order to incorporate these dynamics, future research must scrutinize the definitions and indicators that are usually deployed and seek alternative sources and forms of data. Analysis and initiatives must take on a transformative approach in order to address structural injustice and patriarchal attitudes at the communal, economic, and political levels. Women’s economic empowerment is a complex undertaking that must incorporate the needs and circumstances identified by women themselves.


I. INTRODUCTION

Established in the 1970s, pioneering Palestinian higher education institutions (HEIs) were shaped by the liberation struggle, which left its imprint on their role and political culture. Since their inception, Palestinian HEIs have played a critical role in fortifying the national identity and constituting a space for knowledge and liberatory national student and union activism. While the main goal of Zionist settler colonization is to dispossess Palestinians of their land, the colonial policies and practices also aim at controlling the Palestinian people’s material and cultural domains. Colonial policies that directly target Palestinian higher education (HE) include military assaults and damage to universities, such as the damage of fourteen higher education institutions during the 2014 war on Gaza; restrictions on movement through a complex system of checkpoints, barriers, and a separation wall that limit Palestinian’s access to education; arrest, imprisonment, and administrative detention of Palestinian university students and staff; refusal to grant work permits or student visas to foreign passport holders to teach or study at Palestinian universities; and military raids of university campuses.¹ In such a context, HE for Palestinians carries significant political implications and liberatory potential. Realizing that potential, however, will require a dedication to advancing social and gender justice in Palestinian higher education.

Despite the continuation of colonial expansion and domination, the Palestinian liberation project was transformed following the Oslo agreements and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) on parts of the 1967 occupied territories. The PA’s adoption of a donor-driven neoliberal agenda had significant ramifications for HEIs. This neoliberalization of higher education in Palestine has gendered consequences, as reflected in the disparities apparent in the available data on women and men in HEIs.

This paper examines the role of gender in Palestinian higher education, focusing on HEIs under the PA in the post-Oslo era.² We begin with a brief overview of the history of Palestine’s higher education system, from the late nineteenth century until today. In the second section, we provide an in-depth analysis of the available data on gender and Palestinian HE, which mainly consists of statistical sex-disaggregated data pertaining to students, graduates, administrative staff, and academics in existing Palestinian HEIs. Next, adopting a critical-gender approach to analyzing HE, we examine the gender implications of the PA’s current neoliberal policies and practices and the ways in which these policies and practices, embedded within the colonial context, affect Palestinian HE and gender, and how gender is represented in the PA’s formal documents related to HE. We then survey the existing literature on gender and Palestinian HE. In addition to highlighting gaps in the data, we examine how issues of gender are discussed in HE, the components of the research agenda on gender in Palestinian HE, the knowledge producers at work on the subject, and the topics addressed. Our findings suggest that women’s and gender studies programs and institutes at Palestinian HEIs are the key producers of gendered knowledge and explores the donors who support HE in general, along with gender and HE in particular, further exploring the issues, discourses, and objectives they address. The remaining sections present a detailed picture of available data on gender and Palestinian HE, including women’s representation in different HEI types, degree programs, student-representative bodies, and administrative and faculty positions. We find that, despite women’s increased enrollment in HEIs, disparities remain in terms of their representation in the labor force, higher-earning specializations, and decision-making roles, among others. The existing statistics, however, composed primarily of sex-disaggregated data, can only provide us with a partial picture of the intersection of gender and higher education in Palestine. A more complete understanding will require a critical-gender analysis of the available data.

¹ On Palestinian education under occupation, see https://fobzu.org/education-in-palestine/

² In a baseline study in 2019, the Applied Research Institute Jerusalem (ARIJ) identified gaps in our knowledge of Palestinian HE and provided a comprehensive mapping of HE and research in Palestine, including governance and reform, status of scientific research, research infrastructure international cooperation, research output in Palestine, and PAH training. The current paper, commissioned by ACSS, is a follow-up study that aims to address gaps in our knowledge on gender and Palestinian HE.
require greater attention to how gender intersects with broader social, economic, and political factors to shape women's and men's experiences, including how the broader neoliberal and colonial context shapes HE policies and practices.

II. HISTORICAL AND CURRENT CONTEXT OF PALESTINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The HE system in the contemporary Arab world emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as modern Arab states began to take shape after independence. Arab universities were mostly developed under the responsibility of the Ottoman Empire, Britain legitimated its 1917 mandate with constant interference from the Israeli occupation authorities.

1. Higher Education in the Palestinian Colonial Context

In 1948, with the destruction and uprooting of 530 Palestinian towns and villages by Zionist military groups, the Palestinian people scattered across the region and the globe. Some Palestinians remained on their land under Israeli colonial rule, others were detained in the West Bank under Jordanian rule, and still others were in the Gaza strip under Egyptian administration. The remaining Palestinians became refugees in adjacent Arab countries as well as other parts of the world. As a result of the Palestinian loss of land, education became a particularly important asset (Mar’i 1976). Yet until the mid-1970s, there were no Palestinian HEIs; Palestinians mainly studied at Arab and Western universities. A comprehensive survey conducted in 1979 revealed a relatively high ratio of Palestinian university students to the overall population, equal to 15,000, a proportion comparable to that of Lebanon, and higher than all other Arab states and most Third World countries at the time (Abu-Lughod 2000).

A university education provided Palestinian students with training and skills needed to contribute to the development of Arab states, specifically in the Gulf region (Abu-Lughod 2000, 83). In addition, universities constituted a great political activism. This activism formed the nucleus of one of the earliest Palestinian general unions, the General Union of Palestinian Students, established in 1959, which became one of many representative popular organizations comprising the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), founded in 1964 (Meari and Abu Duhou 2020, 139–40).

In 1967, the Zionist colonial project expanded with the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, as well as other Arab lands. During the 1970s, amid the brutal Israeli military occupation, the first Arab Palestinian HEIs were established. In 1972, Birzeit College was transformed into a university becoming the first Palestinian institution to award a bachelor’s degree. In 1973, Bethlehem University was established, followed by An-Najah National College, which transformed into a university in 1977, and the Islamic University of Gaza in 1978. These first universities, followed by others, constituted spaces both for education and for student organizing in the liberation struggle. Faculty, staff, and students worked under harsh conditions with constant interference from the Israeli occupation authorities.

The early Palestinian HEIs were mainly private, nongovernmental, nonprofit universities controlled and guided by boards of trustees. Their establishment in the occupied 1967 Palestinian territories was shaped by the Israeli colonial context and policies. These policies included restrictions on movement in and out of the occupied Palestinian territories for university students, who were not permitted to travel to their universities or return to the homeland, as well as the mass political arrest of students, which was a constant threat under Israeli occupation (Mohammad and Batta 2019). The occupation’s policies of repression and control also included the arrest of staff and academics; the prevention of academic books and equipment from reaching Palestinian universities; and recurrent invasions and closures of universities (Saleh 1982). During the first Intifada, for instance, Birzeit University was closed from January 1988 until April 1992 (Birzeit University, n.d.). In the face of Israeli military closure orders, Palestinian universities resorted to holding classes at alternative sites.

In 1977, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) was established as a coordinating body for the newly established Palestinian HEIs. During the 1980s, the PLO provided financial support to HEIs. During that period, students contributed only 10 percent of the actual student cost in fees (Mohammad and Batta 2019), enabling students from popular classes, including women, to attain advanced degrees.

Since their inception, Palestinian HEIs have adopted the general structure of the Western modern model—including features such as the two-semester school year, sequential requirements, and the credit-hour system as the basis for course loads—with only minor modifications. Universities also implemented a curriculum designed to impart general skills in preparation for some kind of professional training. Thus, knowledge and courses are organized within departments that are housed within certain colleges...Interdisciplinary work is minimal and is not particularly valued...Palestinian university students are educated by Palestinian professors...the weakest part of the system is that of research, especially in the basic social and physical sciences and advanced technology (Abu-Lughod 2000, 83).

2. Higher Education in the Post-Oslo Era

Following the Oslo agreements, the responsibility of overseeing education was transferred to the PA and, in 1994, the first Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) was established. In 1996, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR) was established as a stand-alone ministry and was legislated through Law on Higher Education No. 11 of 1998. In 2002, MOHESR was integrated with MOEHE, becoming one ministry. One year later, the CHE was reactivated, and the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission was established in 2002 as an autonomous body under the Ministry of Higher Education by Ministerial Decree No. 2. This decree entrusted the commission with all the ministry’s powers and privileges as granted by the Law on Higher Education No. 11 of 1998, regarding the quality of Palestinian HEIs and their academic programs (AQAC, n.d.). In 2012, the Ministry of Higher Education was re-separated from the Ministry of Education, then reintegrated one year later, only to be separated again in 2019. It remains a separate entity today.

3. Palestinian Authority’s Educational Policies and Practices

In the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1990, Arab financial support to the PLO was severed, negatively affecting the financing of Palestinian HEIs. Following the Oslo Accords in 1993, which handed responsibility for the education system to the PA, the European Union (EU) provided financial support for the operational costs of Palestinian HEIs for five years. The EU fund was based on the assumption that these institutions would increase their self-sufficiency and aim to develop local financial resources by raising student fees and other means. At the end of the five years, and with the decrease in the PA’s financial support for HEIs, these institutions began to raise student fees to cover about two-thirds of the actual student cost. The post-Oslo era, which came with a dependence

3. The European/Western modern system is distinct from the traditional higher education system in the Arab region established in the sixteenth century.

4. The Law on Higher Education No. 11 of 1998 stipulates that every citizen has the right to higher education (Article 2), and provides the legal framework for the organization and management of HEIs (UNESCO 2011).
on foreign financial support and its conditionalities, witnessed a gradual transformation in the philosophy, institutional structure, and role of higher education institutions, which shifted from a tool for political patronage and service institution subject to market rules (Muhammad and Batt 2019; Salameh 2011). This commodification of education also had negative gender implications (Abu Awwad 2014).

The adoption of neoliberal policies in the Arab world began in the early 1990s and resulted in significant increases in poverty and unemployment rates in most countries that implemented these policies. The PA’s neoliberal shift should be understood in the context of the United States’ overt efforts to reconstruct the region and its economies, in an attempt to integrate the Israeli state within the region and create a controlled and dependent Palestinian leadership (Khalidi and Sammour 2011).

Globally, neoliberalism has reshaped the public’s understanding of the purposes of public institutions and apparatuses, including universities. Neoliberal policies and practices related to education included cutting public expenditure on education; privatizing educational services; setting up markets (or quasi-markets) in education; an increase in the number of part-time workers; cuts in student numbers; constraints on the budget; and an erosion of the public sector (Muhammad and Batt 2019; Salameh 2011). Neoliberal policies affected the organization of Palestinian HEIs, their vision and mission, and their political aims, resulting in the commodification of education and the obstruction of its liberatory potential. HEIs shifted away from engaging with critical knowledge production for liberation and social change and prioritized producing a labor force for existing market conditions, constrained by a dependent and distorted economy that serves the interests of the Israeli occupation. This process was driven and funded mainly by the World Bank and the EU. The PA, working through the MOEHE, implemented the Tertiary Education Project in 2005 with the support of the World Bank and the EU.

The most prominent example of how neoliberalism is reflected in PA policies is the cutting public expenditure on education. For instance, the education sector received around 12 percent of the general budget in 2008, and the share of HE out of the total amount of the budget did not exceed 5 percent, one of the lowest ratios in the world (MOEHE 2010, 9). At the same time, to address budget deficits, several HEIs resorted to accepting students under the umbrella of “Parallel Education.” These students pay higher fees compared with students enrolled via regular admission. HEIs also sought an “artificial” reduction of the per-student cost by refraining from increasing the number of faculty members to meet the rising number of students. Moreover, faculty teaching loads and the number of part-time workers increased, while expenditures on student capacity with the PA and market competition between different “providers,” including universities, for (high-potential) students; and cutting labor costs. For this, a deregulated labor market is essential—especially for (high-potential) students; and cutting labor costs. Moreover, faculty teaching loads and the number of part-time workers increased, while expenditures on student capacity with the PA and market competition between different “providers,” including universities, for (high-potential) students; and cutting labor costs.

In general, the MOEHE’s strategies have been gender neutral. Nevertheless, in all other ministries, MOHESR has a gender unit, which is one of the ten thematic units that have been established in PA’s ministry and security institutions to support and guide their work in mainstreaming gender and women’s empowerment, in accordance with international organizations’ policies and agendas. The 702 policy interventions, only 93 were fully or partially implemented. It also noted that policies had a limited impact on the status of women (Gender Policy Institute 2019). The findings from the reviews of gender policies illustrate that education, in general and higher education in particular were not a priority. Further, they demonstrate that the PA’s adoption of gender policies is not organic; rather, these policies are driven by funding agencies’ agendas and were partially implemented or not implemented at all.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW ON GENDER AND PALESTINIAN HE

There is a diverse body of literature on gender and HE globally. The literature considers gender discrepancies in different aspects of the higher education system such as access to HE, college experiences, and post-collegiate outcomes, their rate of labor force participation, and their rate of labor force participation, and their rate of labor force participation, and their rate of labor force participation, and their rate of labor force participation.

In 2011, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA), with support from UN Women, developed the Cross-Sectoral National Gender Strategy 2011–2013, the first Palestinian strategy on gender equality and women’s empowerment. UN Women supported the Ministry in its review of this strategy in 2013, paving the way for the development of a new Cross-Sectoral Strategy for the period of 2014–2016, and then for 2016–2020, aligning with Palestinian government’s priorities. The 2011–2013 review focused on improving Palestinian educational services, qualitatively and quantitatively. Out of twelve policy interventions, only four were partially implemented. The review showed that the limited implementation of policy interventions was directly related to difficulties streamlining the gender strategy in parallel with the Ministry of Education’s plans and programs, the absence of follow-up capacity at the MoWA, and the lack of funding for targeted interventions. The review process found that the above policy interventions remain valid for the coming development plan (UN Women, n.d.).

In December 2017, UNESCO and MoWA began mapping gender policies that had been endorsed by the Palestinian government between 2011 and 2017. This phase involved collecting, documenting, and reviewing gender policies and interventions, and then assessing the extent of implementation (full, partial, or none). The analysis found that, of the 720 policy interventions, only 93 were fully or partially implemented.

In this literature review, we consider indicators of gender gaps in higher education, focusing on access to HE and their limited access to academic positions. Support and empower all institutions of higher education and scientific research to adopt distinction and creativity, especially in the fields of scientific research based on creative and analytical thinking and problem solving. This is to adapt to the rapid changes in social, political, and economic conditions of this era, to ensure education for all, and to provide a balanced and sound environment that qualifies students to defend national rights.
Most available data on gender in HE is quantitative data collected by the MOHESR and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). In its annual higher education statistical yearbook, the Directorate General of Development and Scientific Research at the MOHESR provides sex-disaggregated data pertaining to university students and staff. While these sex-disaggregated figures constitute an important resource for researchers, the data lacks other disaggregated dimensions, such as how income groups intersect with gender. The available data is also limited to sex-disaggregated statistics, as opposed to the broader concept of gender statistics. Sex-disaggregated statistics are simply data collected and tabulated separately for women and men. Sex-disaggregated data constitutes one characteristic of gender statistics, which includes the following four other characteristics:

First, gender statistics have to reflect gender issues, that is, questions, problems and concerns related to all aspects of women’s and men’s lives, including their specific needs, opportunities and contributions to society. Producing gender statistics entails disaggregating data by sex and other characteristics to reveal those differences or inequalities and collecting data on specific issues that affect one sex more than the other or relate to gender relations between women and men. Second, gender statistics should adequately reflect differences and inequalities in the situation of women and men. In other words, concepts and definitions used in data collection must be developed in such a way as to ensure that the diversity of various groups of women and men and their specific activities and challenges are captured. In addition, data collection methods that induce gender bias in data collection, such as underrepresenting women’s economic activity, underreporting of violence against women and undercutting of girls’ births and their deaths should be avoided (United Nations 2016).

There are also very few qualitative studies that offer deep analysis of different gendered aspects of Palestinian HE and the quality of experience of the students and staff necessary for gender analysis and gender planning. Abu Nahleh (1996, iii) examined vocational education and technical training (VETT) in Palestine from the perspective of gender planning and gender integration in an attempt “to find out how the VETT system in VETT is to its potential beneficiaries with a focus on its role in shaping gender perceptions and perpetuating or changing existing gender roles and patterns.” Among her findings was a confirmation that VETT is gender insensitive and perpetuates gender bias (1996, iii).

Another pertinent issue that research on gender and Palestinian HE touches upon is political participation among HE students in general, and women in particular, and the integration of gender issues into the programs of different factions of the student movement (Kuttab 2000; Khawaja 2014). Miftah conducted a field survey in partnership with the PCBS that included students at Palestinian universities and colleges in the West Bank and Gaza Strip focusing on the perception of political participation among youth in general and young women in particular (Khawaja 2014). The survey measured the efficiency and effectiveness of young people’s political participation inside universities and student councils, aiming to establish statistical rates that accurately represented the reality of the young Palestinian women’s political participation (Khawaja 2014, 5). The study revealed a gender gap in political knowledge and in student council participation. In this context, Kuttab (2000) considers the social and gendered dimensions within the student movement’s structure, programs, and statements. She points to the absence of these dimensions from the student movement’s agenda and attributes it to the separation between the national and the reflected in the curriculum through the national liberation movement. Even the leftist student movements were preoccupied with the national liberation and social transformation failed to practically implement these elements of their discourse (Kuttab 2000, 140).

In 2014, the Institute of Women’s Studies (IWS) at Birzeit University conducted a gender audit study that provides a basis for developing more gender-sensitive policies at Palestinian universities. The audit explored gender disparities and highlighted the marginalization of women at the university (ILO 2016). The study found that, in late 2014, vertical and horizontal gender gaps were still prominent, due to a set of barriers that impeded poor representation of women in the main decision-making bodies, the adoption of merit-based rewards favoring men, and interruptions to women’s careers due to reproductive and domestic responsibilities—all factors that explain why women academics are less likely to apply for promotion. They are also less likely to obtain a doctoral degree, which is costly and requires travel abroad. Additionally, the study found that research priorities tend to favor male-dominated majors. Women who were promoted to higher ranks (associate professor and professorship ranks) at the university were mostly faculty members at the institutes such as the IWS and the Institute of Community and Public Health Affairs. These institutions were fortunate to enable faculty members to reduce their teaching loads in order to conduct research, which has proven to be a major factor in enabling female faculty members to conduct research, publish, and be promoted. As for the university’s Promotion and Confirmation Committee, its membership was most often comprised of academics at the rank of associate and full professors. Despite the gender balance in the membership of the committee, the number of women’s academic promotions remained low. The qualitative examination illustrated that one of the main factors hindering female academics’ promotion was the division of gender roles in the family, primarily over child-rearing duties and reproductive roles, and interruptions to women’s careers due to a set of interwoven factors that included the scarcity of research funds, women academics have limited opportunities.

The bylaws at Birzeit University provide female workers with a three-month maternity leave, as well as a daily breastfeeding hour for one year, bypassing the Palestinian labor law.9 The university also allows weeks of paid maternity leave (seventy days), of which six are postnatal.

9. According to the Palestinian Labor Law No. 7 of 2000, women workers in the Palestinian territory are entitled to ten weeks of paid maternity leave (seventy days), of which six are postnatal.
Development Research Centre (IDRC). OSF includes higher education, particularly in the Arab region, as one of its ten priority themes. For instance, OSF funds the Al Quds Bard College in East Jerusalem, with a particular focus on the master of arts program in teaching and critical thinking. It also supports Birzeit University’s doctoral program in the social sciences and other institutes, such as IWS. In 2018, IDRC resumed its work in the region. It is currently funding a project entitled “Empowering Palestinian GI’s Through Digital Learning Innovations in STEM” with the Center for Continuing Education at Birzeit University, and a project on the reproductive health needs of Palestinian adolescent girls from refugee camps with the Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University. These agencies, however, adopt liberal approaches that often conflict with Palestinian communities’ needs and interests.

In this context, it is important to note that faculty members and researchers at women’s and gender studies centers in Palestinian HEIs are main actors in knowledge production on gender issues, including the issues of gender and HE. Women’s and gender studies programs are interdisciplinary by nature and have broad research interests. Below are women’s and gender studies institutes in Palestinian HEIs.

1. The Institute of Women’s Studies at Birzeit University

IWS was founded in 1994 as an interdisciplinary women’s studies program at Birzeit University. In 1998, it began to offer master’s degrees in gender, law, and development studies, which shifted in 2006 to gender and development studies. The graduate program aims to expand and deepen students’ knowledge of theories and concepts related to gender and development at the local, regional, and international levels. In addition, the program develops students’ analytical and critical skills and encourages them to examine gender as a crosscutting issue in development, in addition to successfully conducting gender planning in their own work. The program also aims to develop students’ abilities to conduct research that identifies the needs of women and HE in the Palestinian sector and to integrate gender into development by understanding and addressing obstacles to gender equality in the Palestinian colonial context. Since 2014, IWS has offered an undergraduate minor program in women’s studies. IWS members have produced knowledge on a variety of gender issues, including gender and education. The IWS’s contribution to the topic of gender and HE specifically is reflected in the gender audit it conducted in 2014 at Birzeit University. Following the gender audit, the IWS launched a gender and social justice monitor at the university. Other contributions include a graduate course on gender and HE and a 2013 conference on education for liberation and social justice. In its effort to integrate gender studies at the university level, IWS offers an undergraduate introductory women’s studies course as one of the requisite courses to all Faculty of Arts students, and as a free elective for students of all disciplines (ILP 2016). In addition, the university’s programs in gender and development studies at IWS coordinates with other master’s programs to offer cross-listed courses. One of the main challenges for IWS, as noted in its annual evaluation reports, is the scarcity of unconditional research funds.

2. Insan Center for Gender Studies at Al-Quds University

Insan Center was founded in 1998 in the Faculty of Arts at Al-Quds University. It offers educational and research programs in the field of gender and aims to establish gender and feminist studies as a major interdisciplinary academic field. Among its goals are conducting gender-related studies and research that support policy and strategy formulation in Palestinian society, improving societal awareness of gender, and promoting the establishment of active policies that would contribute to building a democratic society where individuals enjoy equity and equality. As part of its academic program, the center offers a course entitled “Women and Men in Humanitarian Societies,” which is one of the university’s prerequisite courses. A gender and development minor was offered until 2008, when it was discontinued due to program accreditation problems. Another minor in gender studies is currently offered by the center. It aims to introduce students to the theoretical concepts relevant to gender and reinforcing the importance of equality for students in all disciplines, in addition to providing them with the research skills required to work in fields related to gender, the humanities, and the social sciences.

3. Women’s Studies Program at An-Najah National University

The Women’s Studies Program at An-Najah National University, housed in the Faculty of Graduate Studies, is a master’s program that seeks to provide an academic and professional environment for the pursuit of work in the fields of gender and women’s studies. It has a focus on gender relations in everyday life and addresses fundamental questions about whether we are born, or become, women and men in a variety of social and cultural contexts, particularly within the Arab world. It also explores how we think about gender differences and the extent to which gender divisions continue to shape social, political, and cultural practices and beliefs within and beyond institutions. The program moreover provides an understanding of the ways in which gender is shaped historically through various forms of cultural representation. It draws on material from sociology, anthropology, education, media, psychology, law, Islamic studies, literature, and health sciences.

4. Women’s Studies Center at the Islamic University of Gaza

At the Islamic University of Gaza, the Women’s Studies Center was founded in 2018 in the Faculty of Education, through a project funded by the Austrian Partnership Programme in Higher Education and Research for Development titled Strengthening
Higher Education Capacities in Palestine for Gender Equality. The Women's Studies Center aims to provide specialized academic instruction and to conduct academic research on women's issues with the aim of attaining justice and a better life for women and men in accordance with the cultural system in Palestine and the Islamic Sharia. In March 2020, the center organized a conference titled "Women and Higher Education."

To conclude, gender and women's studies centers in Palestinian HEIs engage in teaching and research on gender issues and attempt to integrate a gender perspective at the institutional level by offering introductory courses as electives for students from all disciplines, such as the introductory course on women's studies offered by IWS. Nevertheless, there is a need to shift from gender studies to gender in studies by moving from gender as a topic of study toward mainstreaming gender within curricula across all disciplines. While attention has been given to gender biases in primary and secondary-school textbooks, gender biases in HE curricula have been ignored (Grunberg 2011).

v. GENDER ANALYSIS OF AVAILABLE DATA

In the following section, we analyze statistical data provided by MOHESR’s yearbook and the PCBS reports on students and staff at HEIs. A gender analysis of current status and trends for Palestinian students in HEIs addresses the feminization of HE in terms of the growing rate of women students in HE; the gender distribution across specializations, which constitutes a main site for gender differences; and the relationship between education and employment. The analysis also addresses the numbers, specializations, ranks, and other aspects pertinent to women employed in Palestinian HEIs, while recognizing that gender dynamics cannot be understood in isolation from the colonial context or the neoliberal policies of the Palestinian Authority and its patriarchal character.

1. Educational Attainment in Palestine

Educational attainment levels have risen rapidly in Palestinian society in general. The illiteracy rate has decreased in the past two decades, and the number of literate Palestinians has increased. PCBS (2018a) data indicates relatively high levels of educational attainment among Palestinians ages 10 and older: 2.5 percent of the population in the aforementioned age group are illiterate, 10.5 percent are literate without any formal education, 19 percent have finished secondary education, 28.6 percent have finished preparatory education, 19.6 percent have finished secondary education, 4.9 percent have obtained intermediate diplomas, 13.2 percent have obtained bachelor's degrees, 0.2 percent have obtained higher diplomas, 0.9 percent have obtained master's degrees, and 0.2 percent have obtained doctoral degrees. The data on education in Palestinian society confirms the persistence of a gender gap, although it varies according to the level of educational attainment. Figure 1 shows that the number of illiterate women ages 10 and older in Palestinian society (72,133) is significantly higher than that of men in the same age group (26,321), and that illiteracy is more prevalent among older women (PCBS 2018a). However, the overall number of women is growing more rapidly than that of men, with an increase in the former’s level of school-based education. Twenty-one percent of women 10 years and older have a secondary-school education, compared to 18 percent of men in the same age group. The statistics in the Ministry of Education report (2019) revealed that the number of women in secondary-level education (191,258) exceeds the number of men (106,763), suggesting a significant growth in all secondary-school students. This indicates high levels of male dropout for both structural and subjective reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper. University education is also an extension of secondary education, as trends in the latter affect the composition of student bodies in HE. More women than men have earned bachelor’s degrees, a gap that is reversed at the graduate level, where only 1,013 women hold doctoral degrees, compared to 1,353 men. This is because the number of women employed in HEIs, particularly at decision-making levels (See Figure 1).

2. The Relationship between HEI Type and Women's Enrollment

During the past two decades, higher education in Palestine expanded significantly in terms of the increasing number of HEIs, enrolled students, and employed faculty members and administrative and academic support staff. In this context, university type has a clear effect on an institution's ability to attract students. Open universities and traditional universities are the most attractive for students, with a disparity between men and women as indicated in Table 1. This applies to all student categories, whether new students, enrolled students, or graduates. Traditional universities and open universities, which have no to minimal entry requirements, attract more women than university colleges and community colleges, while the opposite is true for men. According to 2018–2019 statistics, women made up 63.5 percent of all new students, 65.6 percent of the total number of new students, 66.5 percent of the enrolled students, and 73.0 percent of the total graduates at open universities. The percentage of women was slightly lower in traditional universities, yet it exceeded 60 percent of total enrolled students and graduates. Meanwhile, the percentage of women was much lower in HEIs at the graduate level. Meanwhile, the percentage of women who hold doctoral degrees is reversed at the graduate level, where only 1,013 women hold doctoral degrees, compared to 1,353 men. This disparity has consequences for the composition of student bodies in HE. More women than men have earned bachelor’s degrees, a gap that is reversed at the graduate level, where only 1,013 women hold doctoral degrees, compared to 1,353 men. This is because the number of women employed in HEIs, particularly at decision-making levels (See Figure 1). The flexibility of lectures, as well as the lower costs and fees compared to other universities, could explain the high percentage of women in open universities. The availability of traditional specializations, which prepare women to work in education, the service sector, or other jobs that are a fit for their expected future reproductive roles and domestic responsibilities, is another possible reason for women's higher enrollment rate in traditional and open universities. Men are more likely to enroll in traditional universities, which offer community colleges that provide specializations classified as traditionally masculine majors, which qualify them to quickly enter the labor market. This is especially the case with community colleges that require fewer years of study and provide intermediate diplomas.

HE expansion has not benefited students from different socioeconomic backgrounds and genders equally (Jacobs 1996; Richardson 2020). In fact, gender and class are complicated issues, and their roles in higher education are difficult to understand given the available data. The enrollment in private institutions could be an indicator of this relationship, but data have not yet been provided in the statistical reports, whether by MOHESR or the PCBS. It is assumed that women will make up a smaller percentage within these private educational institutions with higher costs, in contrast to public and governmental institutions. In a quick review of the websites of Palestinian educational institutions, it is clear that there is no unified system for university tuition fees. In determining the cost of an academic hour, only public universities are subject to the Ministry of Higher Education. University fees vary from one institution to another, and from one specialization to another within the same institution. The cost of an academic hour in Palestinian HEIs can range from 10 to 175 Jordanian dinars. Therefore, more investigation is needed in order to examine, among other things, the participation of women in HEIs, and how gender affects student enrollment and success.

13. The traditional education system allows students to enroll in an institution and attend lectures directly and regularly. Meanwhile, open education provides learning opportunities for students regardless of their age, their time available for study, or their ability to attend lectures. Learning materials are provided through computerized, radio, television, and telephone services and media, with a set percentage of discussion panels and face-to-face meetings, according to the conditions and requirements specified by a regulation issued by the Council of Ministers and in line with international standards (Palestinian Gazette 2018, No. 142). https://www.mohesr.ps/pa/mohe/ministerialsystemsandregulations

14. Traditional universities have at least three colleges and offer the following: intermediate diploma programs through separate community colleges, with the award of an intermediate diploma; undergraduates and graduate programs that end with the award of a bachelor’s degree, and postgraduate programs that end in the award of a higher diploma, master’s, or doctorate. On the other hand, open universities offer academic, professional, or technical educational programs, which end with the award of a bachelor’s degree, and two- to three-year professional or technical programs, which end with the award of an intermediate diploma. Community colleges offer professional or technical programs in which the study period is at least three academic years, ending with the award of an intermediate, or a professional or technical diploma (Palestinian Gazette 2015, No. 142).

15. Four different types of HEIs are recognized in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in terms of governance, management, and funding. These are formal governmental universities, public universities, private institutions, and open universities. Governmental universities (12) mostly consist of university colleges and offer two-year technical educational programs, which end with the award of an intermediate diploma (14). Meanwhile, the number of accredited open universities is the lowest (3); these include Al-Quds Open University, with its twenty-two branches distributed between the West Bank (17) and the Gaza Strip (5).
other indicators, the standard of living of students, the cost of fees, and their impact on both men's and women's choices, as well as the percentage of women in parallel education tracks.

VI. PALESTINIAN STUDENTS IN THE HEIs: CURRENT STATUS AND TRENDS

1. Feminization of Higher Education: Student Enrollment

A high percentage of Palestinians are enrolled in HEIs; the number of students has grown in the past decade from 180,013 in 2008–2009 to 218,126 in 2018–2019. This increase is consistent with global trends, but in the Palestinian context it signals a natural response to the growth of the Palestinian population. Palestinians resort to higher education in order to change their social and economic conditions, in light of a lack of alternatives, due to the Zionist settler-colonial structural domination (See Table 2).

Until the late 1990s, there was, on average, a greater number of male than female students in the Palestinian educational system, especially in universities, and women were disadvantaged by unequal access to HE. As shown in Table 3, the gender parity index was in favor of men. It was 0.90 in the year 2001–2002 and continued in favor of men until 2003–2004. However, this trend recently reversed: Palestinian statistics on HE indicate a continued rise in the number of women enrolled in HEIs compared to men, particularly among undergraduate students. Furthermore, the data shows that women's enrollment has increased at a much higher rate than that of men. The number of women enrolled in HEIs increased by 33,607 over the past decade, while the increase in the number of enrolled men during the same period did not exceed 4,506. The women-men ratio increased from 1.25 to 1.581 in favor of women (See Table 2).

The feminization of HE in terms of the high percentages and numbers of enrolled women students, in comparison to enrolled men students, has become a stable trend. According to the latest man and woman statistics report (PCBS 2020b, 54), there are several possible explanations for this trend, including women's better performance in high school and their desire to increase their chances of obtaining jobs that suit the gender roles expected from them. On the other hand, the decline in men's enrollment in HE might be explained by their involvement in the labor market, while still school-aged, in order to support their families, after the recession deterred in the nature of economic conditions in Palestine. It can also be assumed that parents have become more aware of the importance of educating their daughters as a strategy for future protection, in light of the uncertainty imposed by the colonial context. At the same time, education is no longer a priority for men, in light of the decline in education as a requirement for employment, in addition to the decline in some of their fields, which is not associated with some professions, such as education, which is considered insufficient to secure life's necessities.

On the other hand, according to the PCBS report, the number of Palestinian men enrolled in HEIs abroad is higher than the number of women enrolled in these institutions, due to the societal perceptions around the latter traveling alone. In view of the high costs of studying abroad, parents tend to view educating their sons abroad as a future investment. In general, however, the opportunities for students, whether men or women, to study abroad are shaped by their class background, since education abroad is costly and scholarships are limited.

Based on our own analysis, cultural and social factors are not the only determinants of women's entry into HE. Structural economic factors within the colonial context also play a significant role. The systematic settler colonial destruction of the basic Palestinian productive sectors—agriculture and industry—has led to a massive decline in job opportunities available in these sectors, especially for women, and has at the same time contributed to the rapid growth of the service sector. As a result, women's entrance into the Palestinian labor market requires even higher education levels, especially in the areas of teaching, health, and governmental Jobs.

2. Gender and Specializations in HEIs

Guided by neoliberal education policies, the PA began to develop new educational strategies under the pretext of increasing its competitiveness as it moved toward the so-called knowledge economy. It began to favor more science and technology education, by increasing the number of community and university colleges that specialized in these fields and doubling their number of students (Abu Awwad 2014). The "Strategic Plan for the Education Sector 2017-2022" aims to harmonize the outputs of HE with the needs of the local, regional, and international market. However, given the fragility and dependency of the Palestinian economy, including the technology sector, and limited job opportunities deterred them in the nature of scientific research. Computer majors turned into cheap labor in the Israeli high-tech market, where education, like other fields, is subject to global stratification and division. On one hand, the shift toward these majors has come at the expense of developing the social and human sciences majors that deal with the concerns of society and contribute to building a local economy independent of the Israeli economy. For example, the PA's educational policies marginalize agricultural education, which is supposed to occupy a central role in the liberation struggle and decolonization. Data from MOHESR (2020) indicates that there are only six faculties of agriculture and veterinary medicine total in Palestinian universities (Abu Awwad 2014).

Within a patriarchal society, men are prioritized for employment, since they are defined traditionally as the breadwinners. Academic specialization constitutes one of the major areas of gender disparity in HE. According to the PCBS (2020), students' selection of specialization and, consequently, profession, is partially shaped by the branch they choose to join during secondary education and is also dependent on the score achieved in national exams (tawjih). A high percentage of women gravitate toward the arts and social sciences branches, while a high percentage of men opt for science and math branches, which allows the latter to choose any major in HE. Recent data shows that women dominated the science and arts branches in secondary education, while they represented lower percentages in technology and vocational education (PCBS 2020b).

Social and cultural factors continue to motivate more men to choose engineering, manufacturing, and technical and technological careers, while more women are choosing teaching, social work, and health. The data presented in Table 4 indicates that in the past decade, between 2008–2009 and 2018–2019, women increasingly enrolled in traditional disciplines, including education (the women-to-men ratio increased from 2.485 to 3.618), arts and humanities (1.883 to 2.965), natural sciences and mathematics (1.966 to 2.654), and health and welfare (1.281 to 2.163). However, the data shows that in male-dominated specializations such as business, administration, and law (0.615 to 1.142); information and communication technology (0.634 to 0.763); engineering, manufacturing, and construction (0.452 to 0.595); agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and veterinary (0.229 to 0.587); and services (0.35 to 0.407). The concentration of women in a smaller number of specializations negatively affects their job opportunities, creating intense competition for a limited number of jobs. On the other hand, men generally have more employment opportunities due to the diversity of their specializations, specifically in technical and professional fields such as engineering, manufacturing, and communication and information technology, which are characterized by higher pay (PCBS 2020b) (See Table 4).

3. Gender and Degrees in HEIs

Education in Palestine has been dominated by the awarding of diplomas and bachelor's degrees. However, a new trend has appeared recently in the Palestinian context, as some traditional universities have begun granting master's and doctoral degrees, while the Open University only awards master's degrees. As noted in Table 5, students working toward their bachelor's degree compose the majority of higher education students, whether among new students (40,892 students out of 60,092 total), registered students (178,195 out of 218,126), or graduates (34,939 out of 45,722).

Table 5 also shows that degrees constitute another component of the gender gap in HE. Women are generally awarded bachelor's degrees in specific fields, such as teaching and educational fields, in teacher-qualification programs (1,274 out of 1,415 students). The situation is slightly different for doctoral students. Men remain the majority, although women are catching up, and parity has almost been achieved. Among eighty-seven new
4. Student Councils and Clubs

Women's representation in academic clubs, student councils, and leadership positions in student movements is another indicator of the gender gap in the HE environment. The larger number of female students than male students in HEIs, as we have already mentioned, has not translated into active participation in student representative bodies in Palestinian universities.

PCBS's report (2018b) indicates that in 2015 only 23.2 percent of student council members in the West Bank were women, rising to 30.9 percent in 2017 and 32 percent in 2019 (see table 6). There are no student councils in Gaza Strip universities, except for at the Islamic University, where there are two councils: one for men and another for women. Women's representation in student councils has improved over the past several years, but the gender gap persists. The available data does not provide us with information about women's representation in other student-representative bodies or activities, such as in student committees and college clubs. There is also no data on how actively they participate in these councils, or in the differences in roles, perceptions, responsibilities, and expected behaviors of men and women.

According to a report by the PCBS and Ministry of Women's Affairs (2020b), 24, a number of factors limit women's participation in student councils, including families' concerns vis-à-vis the consequences of their daughters' participation in student activism, parents' traditional perception of women's participation in labor and politics, and their general concern that political activism will affect their children's academic achievements. In addition to the supposed gap in qualification and training between female and male students. However, the report does not explain what kind of training women lack.

There is a need to understand how the broader Palestinian context affects the student movement in order to assess the discrepancy between men and women and their representation. The student movement, including student councils, has grown and expanded in the midst of the liberation struggle against Israeli settler-colonialism, and students have been subject to prosecution and arrest. This has created a fear among parents concerning their children's involvement in student activities, especially girls.

5. Gender and the Education-Employment Paradox

There is a growing interest in the relationship between educational attainment and employment in the Palestinian context. This has contributed to the understanding of how educational systems work and how they relate to employment opportunities after schooling from a gender perspective. According to the PCBS report (2020b), Palestinian women have higher educational attainment levels but lower employment rates compared to Palestinian men, and also compared to most other women in the Arab world.16 As mentioned earlier, the structural transformations in the economy and the Palestinian labor market during the past decades, under the weight of colonial domination and neoliberal policies, resulted in the deterioration of the productive sectors, specifically agriculture and industry—the traditional employers of women—in favor of the service sector. Work trends related to employment opportunities have limited occupational opportunities and economic activities have contributed to maximizing educational requirements for entrance into the labor market. Figure 2 shows that women with thirteen or more years of schooling are the most involved in the labor market, as 42.7 percent of women in this category are participants in the labor force. This percentage drops sharply (to below 10 percent) for women from the rest of the educational groups, the lowest rate being among illiterate women (3.3 percent). According to the PCBS data (2020b), women who hold an intermediate diploma or higher degree constitute about 80 percent of all working women (See Figure 2).

Figure 3 illustrates that women with thirteen or more years of schooling have the highest rate of unemployment, 47.2 percent, while illiterate women have the lowest. By contrast, for men, education protects against unemployment. In fact, illiterate men have a higher unemployment rate (28.7 percent) than men with thirteen or more years of schooling (18.9 percent).

Unemployment among female graduates is higher (54.7 percent) than that of male graduates (19.7 percent). Women's unemployment rates exceed men's in all disciplines, even in specializations that are in high demand, such as education and teacher training, where it reaches 58.6 percent among women, compared to 203 percent among male students. This reflects clear gender discrimination in the labor market in all fields without exception (table 7). Within a patriarchal society, men are prioritized for employment, since they are defined traditionally as the breadwinners.

The situation appears to be worse in certain disciplines, with some variations between men's and women's employment rates. Table 7 shows that the unemployment rate among media students is 31.3 percent for male students in the major and 71.7 percent for female students, which is the highest among all majors. For women, it was followed by those who majored in computer sciences (63.6 percent), business and administration (59.3 percent), and education science and teaching (58.6 percent). In contrast, the highest unemployment rates for men were in mass media and information (31.3 percent), mathematics and statistics (24.5 percent), engineering and engineering professions (22.2 percent), health (31.6 percent), and agriculture and industry (22.2 percent). The lowest unemployment rates for women were in law (28 percent of all graduates of the major) as they were for men (12.5 percent of all graduates of the major). This may be due to the fact that working with a law degree depends on self-employment, as the lawyer can have a private office without the need to wait for employment in the public or private sectors. Furthermore, with the establishment of the PA and the formation of the Palestinian judicial system, employment policies took a new turn, toward employing women in the judiciary and public prosecution, including the Sharia courts. On the other hand, women's unemployment rates in health (37.6 percent) and mathematics and statistics (39.2 percent) were relatively low compared to other specializations. As for men, unemployment rates in the humanities (141 percent) and natural sciences (14.4 percent) were also among the lowest compared to other specializations.

It can be said that the weakness of the Palestinian economy's ability to generate new job opportunities and the concentration of women in a limited number of educational specializations have created competition among female graduates for a limited number of jobs. Structural barriers to female employment and the difficulties women face accessing the labor market in general can be linked to patriarchal structures. It is worth mentioning that the lowest-ranking jobs in the public sector were granted to women, depriving them of the privileges of high-ranking jobs. Female domination over political parties, especially the mainstream parties that control the economy, leads to their domination over high-ranking jobs in the public sector and in the economy in general.

6. General Summary of Gender Gaps Concerning Students

To summarize, the gender gap in favor of female students among enrolled and registered students, or what we call the feminization of education, has become a stable trend in Palestinian HEIs. Yet, male students are overrepresented in specializations that provide the most job opportunities. Female students continue to choose specializations that are convenient to their reproductive roles and daily lives instead of specializations that might grant them better job opportunities, which has negative implications for their future careers and raises their unemployment rates.

Nevertheless, we have witnessed a gradual change in the enrollment of female students in specializations that were perceived as traditionally for men, such as engineering and agriculture. On the other hand, the percentage of women in bachelor's degree programs is higher than their percentage in master's programs, due to high tuition fees. The percentage of female students at the doctoral level is also significantly lower than the percentage of males. Additionally, the high number of women in universities has not translated into their representation in decision-making positions in student councils and other student committees, which prevents them from voicing their opinions on policies and decisions related to social and academic life.

The quantitative data provides a general picture concerning the numbers of students, their majors, and their certificates, divided by gender; however, the available data does not enable us to examine other disparities among students, such as student scholarships and financial aid, changing majors, and the relationship between educational attainment and socioeconomic factors, such as place of residence (urban, rural, or refugee camp) and household income. In addition to the gaps in quantitative data, there is a need for qualitative studies that examine issues
related to the experiences of female students from different social backgrounds, such as how they adapt to university life, their experiences of living in student dormitories, and their exposure to sexual harassment.

VII. CURRENT STATUS AND TRENDS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE AND ACADEMIC STAFF IN PALESTINIAN HE: PERSISTENT GENDER DIFFERENCES

One paradox of gender and HE is the fact that the increasing number of Palestinian women graduates has not resulted in similar increases in women in academic positions, whether as faculty members or high-level administrators. In the Palestinian context, the underrepresentation of women in academic and administrative positions persists, especially across specific subject areas and senior positions. As shown in figure 4, in 2019, women accounted for only 28 percent of HEIs’ total staff in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Although this percentage is still much higher than that of women’s participation in the Palestinian labor market in general (which never exceeded 21 percent), it is much lower than what might be expected given the high percentage of women gaining advanced degrees.

Gender segregation in HEIs is an obvious feature in administrative, academic, and research jobs. There are 6,918 teaching academics, of whom 1,647 are women, comprising around 23 percent of the total number. Women’s representation among administrative academics is much lower, at 14 percent. There are 102 women of a total of 708 administrative academics, and only 91, of 1,078 administrative staff, of whom one was a female president. Women among 22 research academics, 605 women among 1,704 administrative staff, 812 women of 1,813 office staff, 749 women of 1,597 teaching and research staff, 218 women among 916 vocational specialists, 129 women among 695 technicians, and 230 women among 2,043 unskilled workers.

1. Staff Certification

Women with a bachelor’s degree make up the largest number of female university employees, and they mostly work within the administrative staff. Figure 5 indicates that the number of female doctorate holders remains lower than the number of men with the same degree attainment, probably because obtaining a doctoral degree requires travel and residence abroad, as well as a long study period, which implies the presence of women far from parental control and conflicts with society’s expectation that women marry and form a family by a certain age. The high cost of studying abroad is another factor, since it is a strategic investment that families generally prefer making in men, who are usually perceived as the future breadwinners (See Figure 5).

2. Gender Distribution in Different Academic Ranks and Decision-Making Positions

Women are underrepresented in the higher ranks across all HEIs’ types: however, representation was particularly low in community colleges and open education institutions. MOHESR’s statistics for 2018–2019 show that female academic staff constitute a minority (1,755 out of a total 7,648), and that they were concentrated at the lower end of the hierarchy, while men dominated the higher ranks. Women were also underrepresented as full and associate professors; there were only 17 women out of 433 full professors, less than 5 percent of the total.

Further, there were 47 women out of 608 associate professors, which is less than 10, while the number of women and their representation tends to rise as we move toward the lower ranks of the hierarchy, where they compose 349 out of 2,373 assistant professors (about 17 percent), 445 out of 1,846 lecturers (about 24 percent), and 891 out of 2,378 instructors (about 37 percent). Employees in lower ranks have very limited prospects for promotion and are denied the benefits and privileges granted to higher ranks (See Table 8).

Evidence from the gender audit conducted by IWS in 2014 found that academic ranking determines status and privileges, whereby higher-ranking members enjoy professional stability and other perks, such as a one-year paid sabbatical. The audit also reveals the slow mobility and promotion of female faculty members, as well as their underrepresentation in strategic committees at the university, in particular the “Promotion and Tenure Committee” (14 percent in 2013–2014, rising to 43 percent in 2014–2015), and “Appointment (Cadre) Committee” (16 percent of committee members) (ILO 2016).

The increase in the number of educated women, including those with higher degrees (PhDs and master’s) did not translate into greater representation in decision-making positions. Men dominate all senior positions in HEIs; among the seventeen universities, there are no women presidents, and women represent only 10.7 percent of the total membership of the boards of directors or the boards of trustees of Palestinian universities. There are eight universities that do not have any women appointed to their boards of directors, including Al-Quds Open University. The board at Birzeit University had the highest percentage of women, 33.3 percent. Women held the presidency at six (17 percent) out of thirty-four community colleges. This means that the representation rate of women tends to be higher in community colleges compared to universities. However, there is no evidence that women’s representation in decision-making positions at community colleges or universities guarantees a shift toward more policies supporting social and gender justice.

3. General Summary of Gender Gaps Concerning Administrative and Academic Staff

Gender analysis of available statistical data showed that the increased number of Palestinian women graduates has not resulted in a similar increase in women’s representation in academic positions, whether as faculty members or high-level administrators. The gender gaps continue to favor men, especially in higher ranks and decision-making positions; however, women’s representation in HEIs in general has improved in recent years, especially when compared to their counterparts in the wider Palestinian labor market. Gender segregation in HEIs persists within administrative, academic, and research positions. A smaller percentage of women hold advanced degrees than men, especially the PhD, and to a lesser extent the master’s degree. The problem is not simply one of educational qualification, but more related to higher academic and political stigmas, class, and political affiliation. The social stigma, class, and political affiliation, the lack of transparency in employee evaluation procedures, the failure to discuss evaluations with female employees, and the centralization of decisions regarding promotion were perceived by female administrative employees as devaluing their work and impeding their promotion. The IWS gender audit also revealed that there are no gender-sensitive policies aiming at increasing women’s representation in committees, their participation in decision-making, their promotions, or rewards and incentives (ILO 2016).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Our review of the available research and data on gender and higher education in Palestine shows numerous disparities in terms of women’s representation in HE. It also points to several limitations in the existing literature that should be addressed in further research on the topic. As noted above, most of the available information on gender and HE is produced by MOHESR and PCBS and is composed of sex-disaggregated data rather than gender statistics. Gender statistics should be collected and compiled by sex at the institution level, and should be based on concepts and definitions that adequately reflect the diversity of women and men, capturing all aspects of their lives. Such data would enable researchers to examine how gender intersects with other categories and how it is affected by structural conditions. Existing sex-disaggregated data on the Palestinian HE does not allow for the analysis of gender dynamics as part of broader structures. Data collection methods should take into account political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that may introduce gender bias into the data. A comprehensive critical gender perspective should be integrated at all stages of designing, planning, and implementing the data collection methods to improve quality of data.

While gender statistics constitute a vital resource for gender analysis of HEIs, they do not provide a deep understanding of the experiences of female students, staff, and academics in HEIs and the challenges that hinder them from benefiting from HE opportunities. Gender disparity in academic ranks constitutes a persistent trend, as illustrated by sex-disaggregated statistics. Uncovering its causes and dynamics necessitates in-depth gender-sensitive qualitative research. The IWS
gender audit, for instance, revealed that women academics’ reproductive and domestic roles hinder their opportunities to conduct research. It also revealed the importance of securing unconditional funding in order to allow faculty members to reduce their teaching load and engage in research activities, and of liberating institutions from the political commitment to mainstream discourse and analysis of international organizations (ILO 2016). Participatory gender research is needed to bridge the gaps in our understanding of gender and HE in the Palestinian context. The gender audit at Birzeit University offers a model of such research to be developed, updated, and performed in all HEIs.

One of the critical, neglected domains in understanding gender and HE is gender knowledge production. It is important to deeply examine the forms of gender knowledge produced, what knowledge is produced through gender research as reflected in graduate theses and PhD dissertations, and what frameworks are employed in gender research. Examining the research questions that emerge from higher education in the Palestinian colonial context is another essential issue.

Research in general, and gender research in particular, is dependent on foreign funding and agendas. Consequently, research priorities are not reflective of Palestinian realities and social needs. In order to attain a deep understanding of the life experiences of women in different sectors, research agendas should be determined based on local priorities and contexts. Research on gender and HE should focus on hitherto unexamined issues, such as the deteriorating working conditions in HEIs as well as female participation in union activities, as quality education requires quality working conditions. It is also crucial to conduct research on how gender is reflected in the curricula across all departments in higher education, since curricula in general and HE curricula in particular are not neutral and generally serve as means of social control, legitimizing existing social and gender relations and determining what constitutes important and legitimate knowledge (Grunberg 2011). Furthermore, research should assist us in developing curricula rooted in the Palestinian community’s needs and must be politically and culturally relevant to the promotion of values that are liberatory and just.

Higher education in the Palestinian context is immensely affected by the colonial and neoliberal conditions that structure HEIs. Ultimately, politically liberated and socially just HEIs that are able to produce beneficial knowledge won’t be fully attainable without transforming the colonial and capitalist structures that condition and constrain these institutions. Nevertheless, HE constitutes a potential means for Palestinians to challenge these colonial and neoliberal conditions, through decolonial, liberatory forms of knowledge production that prioritize community developmental needs and adopt collective social and gender justice values that serve their resilience and sumud—that is, their steadfast perseverance.

Figures

**Figure (1):** Palestinian Population (10 years and over) by Sex and Educational Attainment, 2017

**Source:** PCBS (2018a).

**Figure (2):** Labor Force Participation Rate (15 years and above) by Sex and Years of Education in Palestine, 2019

**Source:** MOHESR (2019).

**Figure (3):** Unemployment Rate (15 years and above) by Sex and Years of Education in Palestine, 2019

**Source:** MOHESR (2019).
Table 1: Distribution of Students in Different Categories of HEIs Based on Gender for 2018–2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEI Type</th>
<th>New Students 2018–2019</th>
<th>Registered Students 2018–2019</th>
<th>2018 Graduates</th>
<th>Total % of Women</th>
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</thead>
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<td></td>
<td>No. of Women</td>
<td>No. of Men</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>% of Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Universities</td>
<td>20,607</td>
<td>13,152</td>
<td>33,759</td>
<td>61.0</td>
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<td>6,687</td>
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<td>2,484</td>
<td>5,068</td>
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<td>Open University</td>
<td>9,258</td>
<td>5,320</td>
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<tr>
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<td>35,910</td>
<td>24,182</td>
<td>60,092</td>
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</table>

Source: Data from MOHESR (2019).

Table 2: Number of Students Enrolled in Palestinian Higher Education Institutions by Gender in Years 2008–2009 and 2018–2019 (in thousands)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Women/men ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008/2009</td>
<td>80,007</td>
<td>100,006</td>
<td>180,013</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>84,513</td>
<td>133,613</td>
<td>218,126</td>
<td>1.581</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Taken data from PCBS (2020b, table 12).

Table 3: Students in Higher Education in Palestine by Gender, for Selected Years (in thousands)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Community Colleges</th>
<th>Universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GPI</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001–2002</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002–2003</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003–2004</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004–2005</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005–2006</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006–2007</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Universities data include students of intermediate diploma, bachelor and higher education in traditional universities, open education and university colleges.
GPI= No. of enrolled women/No. of enrolled men
If GPI < 1, the number of enrolled men is higher than that of women. If GPI > 1, the number of enrolled women is higher than that of men. If GPI = 1, there is no gap.
Table 4: Distribution of New Students by Program (ISCED Classification) and Gender in the Years 2008–2009 and 2018–2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>18,493</td>
<td>45,956</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>5,694</td>
<td>10,719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences and Journalism</td>
<td>8,640</td>
<td>8,788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, Administration &amp; Law</td>
<td>23,483</td>
<td>14,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences, Mathematics &amp; Statistics</td>
<td>1,632</td>
<td>3,209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information &amp; Communication Technology</td>
<td>5,015</td>
<td>3,267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering, Manufacturing &amp; Construction</td>
<td>8,064</td>
<td>3,692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries &amp; Veterinary</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Welfare</td>
<td>6,399</td>
<td>8,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1,236</td>
<td>1,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80,007</td>
<td>100,006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PCBS (2020b).

Table 5: Distribution of Higher Education Students According to Degree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>1,666</td>
<td>1,379</td>
<td>3,045</td>
<td>5,158</td>
<td>4,113</td>
<td>9,271</td>
<td>1,478</td>
<td>1,224</td>
<td>2,702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Diploma</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1,257</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>26,012</td>
<td>14,880</td>
<td>40,892</td>
<td>113,071</td>
<td>65,124</td>
<td>178,195</td>
<td>22,782</td>
<td>12,157</td>
<td>34,939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>5,494</td>
<td>6,274</td>
<td>11,768</td>
<td>12,015</td>
<td>13,375</td>
<td>25,390</td>
<td>3,487</td>
<td>3,305</td>
<td>6,792</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PCBS (2018b).

Table 6: Percentage of Women in Student Councils in Palestinian Universities for Selected Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PCBS (2020b).

Table 7: Unemployment Rate among Graduates Who Hold Intermediate Diplomas and Above in the Labor Force in Palestine by Specialization and Gender, 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialization</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women / Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education and Teacher Rehabilitation</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and Behavioral Sciences</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass media and Information</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and Administration</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics and Statistics</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>63.8</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering and Engineering occupations</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture and Construction</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Services</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Specializations</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>59.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PCBS (2020b).

2. Minors are usually provided in bachelor’s degrees. The number of hours required for a minor is less than the number of hours of study for a student to obtain a bachelor’s degree. It is rare to give a degree on the basis of the chosen minor.

3. Al-Quds Open University provides an opportunity for high school students, whose averages range from 55 percent to 64.9 percent, to enroll in the university, but first they attend a preparatory year.
Table 8: Distribution of Staff by Institution Type and Academic Rank and Gender in 2018–2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Rank</th>
<th>Traditional University</th>
<th>University Colleges</th>
<th>Community Colleges</th>
<th>Open Education</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women Total</td>
<td>Women Total</td>
<td>Women Total</td>
<td>Women Total</td>
<td>Women Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Professor</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>1,922</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>858</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>583</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>1,496</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,179</td>
<td>5,552</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>1,037</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MOHESR (2019).

Bibliography


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- Ministry of Education. 2019. Education Statistical Yearbook 2018–2019. [In Arabic.] Ramallah: Ministry of Education. Accessed March 16, 2022. https://info.wafa.ps/userfiles/server/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B8%D8%B7%20%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%AA%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%20%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%20%D9%8A%20%2018%2019.pdf

- Muhammad, Gibril, and Hind Batta. 2019. Palestinian
The following paper on gender and law in the Tunisian context is published here in its original Arabic version.

الورقة التالية حول الجندر والقانون في السياق التونسي منشورة هنا بنسختها العربية الأصلية.
بما أن الانتفاضة النسوية في سياق الحقوق المدنية في العالم الإسلامي، فإنها تدأب في التعليم والتطبيق التشييري لقوانين النسوية، ما ينبغي أن يشجع النحو العلمي للبحث في هذا السياق.

1. مدخل: المقاربة الجندرية للقانون حقل البحث في أوج انطلاقته

أدت الانتفاضة النسوية في سياق حقوق الإنسان، وهي تؤكد على أهمية المساواة بين الجنسين في حقوق الإنسان، إلى تغيير النظرة على القانون والسياسة، حيث يُعتبر القانون، في هذا السياق، معلمًا حاسمًا في تشكيل النماذج الاجتماعية والسياسية. لكنه يظل تعبيرًا عن الوضع القانوني للمرأة، حيث يُعتبر القانون، في هذا السياق، معلمًا حاسمًا في تشكيل النماذج الاجتماعية والسياسية. لكنه يظل تعبيرًا عن الوضع القانوني للمرأة، حيث يُعتبر القانون، في هذا السياق، معلمًا حاسمًا في تشكيل النماذج الاجتماعية والسياسية. لكنه يظل تعبيرًا عن الوضع القانوني للمرأة، حيث يُعتبر القانون، في هذا السياق، معلمًا حاسمًا في تشكيل النماذج الاجتماعية والسياسية. لكنه يظل تعبيرًا عن الوضع القانوني للمرأة، حيث يُعتبر القانون، في هذا السياق، معلمًا حاسمًا في تشكيل النماذج الاجتماعية والسياسية. لكنه يظل تعبيرًا عن الوضع القانوني للمرأة، حيث يُعتبر القانون، في هذا السياق، معلمًا حاسمًا في تشكيل النماذج الاجتماعية والسياسية. لكنه يظل تعبيرًا عن الوضع القانوني للمرأة، حيث يُعتبر القانون، في هذا السياق، معلمًا حاسمًا في تشكيل النماذج 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لا يوجد نص يمكن قراءته بشكل طبيعي من الصورة المقدمة.
لا يمكن قراءة النص العربي بشكل طبيعي من الصورة المقدمة. الرجاء تقديم النص العربي بشكل صريحة يمكن قراءته بشكل طبيعي.
لا يمكنني قراءة النص بشكل طبيعي. ما يظهر في الصورة هو النص العربي الذي يحتوي على نصوص قانونية ومواد قانونية. هذا النص يحتوي على جمل لا تمتثل للقواعد اللغوية والإملائية بشكل صحيح. من الصعب القراءة بشكل طبيعي من الصورة.}

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تمّ وضعهّا منذ شهر مارس 1946. كان هذا المقدّم توجيهًا مهمًا لنجاحه في الميدان القانوني الذي لم تقترح عليه المنظمات الدولية ومؤسسات المجتمع المدني. فبذلك، تمّ الحفاظ على المساواة بين الجنسين عن طريق تفعيل القوانين والتشريعات ذات الصلة.

ملك على بعض الأعمال

تمّ تطبيق القضاء على بعض الأعمال، مثل الاغتصاب الزوجي. يتم تحديد الم الحر في الفصل 20 من مجلة الأحوال الشخصية على أنه يتعرض للإحالة但是如果 في حالات معينة، فلقد تحولت بالفعل للإنفصال دون نصيب في القرى الرئيسية وتعتبر منظمة الأمم المتحدة لحقوق الإنسان من منظمة التعاون الإسلامي في قوانين قانونية في المجتمعات الإسلامية.

العمل المحلي

تتم سلسلة الصفحات القانونية على نطاق واسع، بما في ذلك حوزة الميراث. تحدد قوانين الميراث في تونس أن المرأة تتمتع بالحق في نقل الميراث، رغم أن هذه الحماية قد تشمل عددًا من القضايا، مثل حصول المرأة على مساعدات أو ممتلكات دون مشاركة. هذا المحارب لم يشمل على المرأة في حقوقها في حقوق الإنسان وحقوق المرأة في الدماغية أو تمييز الجنس.

المرأة على الأفق

المرأة على الأفق من حيث الجنسية، تتمتع النساء والفتيات بالحق في الاقتراب من حقوق الإنسان دون تمييز، بما في ذلك الوصول إلى الخدمات الصحية والتعليم، وممارسة الوظائف، وحقوق المرأة في حالات طلاق، وحقوق المرأة في حقوق الولادة والطفل.

المرأة والطفل

المرأة والطفل في إطار حقوق الإنسان، وتعتبر منظمة حقوق الإنسان من قبل حضارة المرأة، وذلك من خلال التعاون مع المنظمات الدولية، وضمان الحماية من الاضطهاد والتحريض.

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الأشكال التمييزية والمساواة في المجتمع، من خلال النظر في الحقوق الكاملة للنساء من خلال القوانين والمؤسسات القوية ذات الصلة. ولتقييم هذه الأحكام، فإنه لا يزال هذا الجانب من القوانين غير المدققة.

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لتستعمر الدولة إلى تحقيق التوازن بين المرأة والرجل في المجالات المختلفة. هذه الخطوة وتقدمت بذلك، فإن ذلك هو المبدأ الذي يضم في محاكمة العدالة، ووصفه في كثافة العقلية، ويستند ذلك إلى قاعدة العقلانية، للتمكن من الحرية والتمييز في المجالات المختلفة. وتضمن هذه الفنانة من الاعتقاد الفعلي، وتعقيد لها تمثيل الفقه الإسلامي.

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سبيل المثال نجد شمل البنات بصورة أفضل إذ للنساء أقل من تلك المتاحة للرجال. فالتعليم يقع توجيههن غالبا نحو الشعوب التي تؤدي عادة إلى فترة طويلة من البطالة (شعاب الآداب والعلوم في القرن 20). وكانن نسبة البطالة فيها تقريباً عن الخريجين البالغة في المئة. لكن تضهر البطالة النسائية أكثر من ذلك، حيث بلغت نسبة البطالة في العام 2012 من الخريج بالتعليم العالي نصف النسبة المجانية من ناس العالية. أيضاً 30% من نسبي الخريجات من التعليم العالي في العام 2014 في المئة للناشطين، أما نسبة العاطلات من العمل في العام 2014 فإنها كانت 43%. وبذل ذلك تطور البطالة براتب النازحات في العمل يوجه نتائجها نحو مهنة نسائي خاصة، ويمثل ذلك تحول وتوزيع الأدوار في العمل والعمل، يصبح النشاط الاقتصادي صاحب الأغلبية في الحكم.

والتخطيط ينظر إلى عمل المرأة خارج البيت على أنه ثانوي. تزداد الأعباء عليهن  وإلى إرهاقهن بالجماع، نجدة اي تأذن بالصحة العامة، مثلاً، ولمزيد التوسع في المفهوم، يرجع إلى مراجعة: أميمة أبو بكر، شرين شكري:

1. مقتل وادي العم: حريث المرأة يتأتى مطاوعاً على جميع أشكال النظام الاجتماعي

22 الردود والاقتراحات

http://www.medcities.org/documents/10192/54940/Enquet%20Na%202014
23
24
25
لا يمكنني قراءة النص العربي المحمي. يرجى تقديم النص في لغة أخرى يمكنني قراءته.
مساواة في الميراث: آخر المعارك

أجّل كشف الأسباب وراء تدني هذا الحضور مقارنة ومستوى حضورهنّ ضمن السلطة القضائية من الشرفي وعلي المزغنّي وغيرهم (انظر/ي القائمة).

كما نذكر أعمال الأستاذتين كلثوم مزيو وسّناء متنوعة من بينها خاصة القانون (انظر/ي الهامش “جمعيّة النساء التونسيات للبحث من أجل التمحيص”).

قد أنجزت الجامعات والجامعيون واقع النساء وتخصيص قوانيّن تمثّلهنّ أمرًا معتبرًا للحريّات الفردية والمساواة” بين وجهتَي نظر الحركة النسويّة التونسيّة منذ تسعينيات القرن 24.

أكثَر من أثر المؤسسات اختيارًا في هذا التوجه ومنع المرأة التوقيع للتأجر على بورصة البضائع والجوازات والجمرات والتحصينات والتحصينات وقوانين الأسنان والجراحات والجراحات والجميع لتشمل ما سيأتي. ومع ذلك، يظل هذا الاتجاه في مجالات البحوث والدراسات والتوثيق والإعلام، وهو ما يظهر من فرض مبادئ المساواة أو لتسويق أشكال من التمييز

هذا البرنامج، وهو تطبيق لكل نشاط ثقافي الذي تгаيله هذا القرار في تقديم مبادئ المساواة والتكافؤ في البرامج والمشاريع ذات الصلة بالنساء وإعداد

فصول آخر من الجهميات في القوانين والواقع والذي تتضمن بعض الحقوق الجندرية ونحوه في هذه الفترة.

وقد سعت الدولة التونسية في مجال البحوث والدراسات والتوثيق والإعلام.

وهذه نشاطات تضمنت في ذلك جهود الفرد من الباحثين والدارسين، فضلاً عن جهود الجماعة التي تتعلق بتعزيز مضمونات القانون والواقع الذي تتضمن بعض الحقوق الجندرية ونحوه في هذه الفترة.

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على الرغم من أن نماذج الأعمال التي تنجزها الزمنية (الدراسات والأعمال والفحوصات) في بعض المجالات تظهر بعض التقدم في هذا المجالي، فإن الجدل حول المساواة في الميراث لا يزال مستمراً. يعود ذلك إلى العديد من الأسباب، بما في ذلك التمييز الاجتماعي والاقتصادي والسمعي ولغوي. 

تتمثل حجة تجاه المساواة في الميراث في أن النساء يعانون من تهميش في التوزيع القانوني للموروث. هذا يشير إلى أن هناك نسبة من الموروث الذي يذهب إلى الأفراد الأشخاص الذين ليسوا من النساء. 

من ناحية أخرى، هناك التوتر بين الالتزام القانوني والطابع الاجتماعي للتمييز في الميراث. يشير هذا إلى أن هناك تناقض بين القانون والطابع الاجتماعي للتمييز في الميراث. 

هناك العديد من الدراسات والبحوث التي وضعت ضوء على هذا التناقض، بما في ذلك البحوث التي أجريت في تونس وأوكرانيا وروسيا. 

ومع ذلك، فإن التقدم في هذا المجالي مستمرًا، حيث توجد العديد من المبادرات والجهود المبذولة لتحسين المساواة في الميراث. من بين هذه الجهود، يمكن الإشادة بالحملة التبادلية بين المنظمات الدولية، والتي تهدف إلى تعزيز المساواة في الميراث بين النساء والرجال. 

ومع ذلك، فإن هناك الكثير من الأعمال البحثية التي تؤكد على أن هناك حاجة إلى تحسين المساواة في الميراث. 

ولذا يُضاف أن Laboratories for Justice and Dispute Resolution (AFJUR) أن جمعية المرأة في هذه القضية قد أعدت دراسة تركز على المساواة في الميراث. 

وهذه الدراسة أظهرت أن هناك حاجة إلى تحسين المساواة في الميراث بين النساء والرجال. 

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لا يمكنني قراءة النص العربي بشكل طبيعي. يرجى تقديم النص باللغة الإنجليزية أو الإسبانية للمعالجة.
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