The Empowerment of Arab Women through Higher Education

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Given my background in higher education and women and politics, I have long assumed that it was a fact that higher education empowered women. “Knowledge is power” was the saying that came to mind most readily. Yet this issue of Al-Raida has forced me to reconsider this assumption, to both positive and negative ends.

On the positive side, I was amazed by the theme of “empowerment through higher education” that runs through the speeches of many of the alumnae who spoke at a Lebanese American University Alumni forum in Dubai. Their words speak to the women with higher education who have been and continue to be “pioneers” (a term that was used repeatedly by the forum speakers) in a number of ways in the Arab world. The academic articles included in this issue largely echo this theme. Yet, despite the successes, all the speakers noted the traditional gender roles and other conservative norms that have too often kept highly educated women in the Arab world from realizing their aspirations.

The tension between the desire for self-empowerment and societal development on the one hand and the desire to retain traditions that make the Arab world unique on the other hand, comes up again and again throughout the speeches and articles, though how this tension balances out varies depending on the country of focus. What runs throughout, however, is how inescapably intertwined are the societal, economic, and political benefits of higher education with women’s aspirations for themselves, their families and their societies.

Culture is another concept that is brought up continually in the speeches and the articles. The writers note that the generally conservative culture of the Middle East makes it difficult for young women to break out of traditional roles. While higher education for men and women alike is increasingly valued in the region, the region’s conservative culture seems to limit the empowerment potential of higher education for both genders. This point is supported by the study by Hotit and Debbas as well as by the young women involved in the round table discussion at LAU in winter 2006. Perhaps the strength of cultural norms explains in part why female role models are viewed as being so important to many of the women who gave speeches included in this issue. Female role models in public and private provide known paths to greater self-empowerment.

The speeches, articles and reviews that comprise this issue aim to discuss, analyze, provide personal accounts and pose questions relating to the joint themes of empowerment, women, higher education and the Arab world discussed above. The speeches stem from a forum entitled, “The Role of Higher Education in the Empowerment and Achievements of Arab Women” organized by the Lebanese American University Alumni chapter in Dubai in December 2005. In fact, the idea of publishing the papers presented in the forum was suggested by LAU’s president, Dr. Joseph Jabbra, who attended the conference and whose speech is included here. In his speech, Jabbra champions the successes of women in higher education and calls for much more to be done for women to enjoy the same rights as men in the Arab world. The speech of vice president for academic affairs, Dr. Abdallah Sfeir, echoes Dr. Jabbra’s exhortations for higher education in general and LAU in particular to become even more of a force for the empowerment of women in the Arab world.

Dr. Dabbous-Sensenig, director of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) and an LAU alumna, offers a very personal yet at the same time academic discussion and analysis of how women, empowerment and higher education are connected in the Arab world. Her focus on the relative lack of, despite the very real need for, female role models for young women is particularly striking.

Novelist and researcher Emily Nasrallah also pays homage to the role of LAU and its early female graduates in empowering women to work for change in their societies, particularly as “pioneers” in the development of education in the Arab world. As she notes: “No civilization can be complete without a university.” Yet Nasrallah’s speech also notes the challenge that women face in finding a balance between their role outside of the home, i.e., as career women, and their traditional roles as wives and mothers.

Continuing the theme of the challenges that women in the Arab world face in adding a public role to their traditional ones, Maha Kaddoura expounds on the virtues of educating women. Her speech focuses largely on the benefits societies will reap when they allow for the education and empowerment of their women.

Moving from the more personal to the public realm, Lebanon’s Consul-General in Dubai, Ms. Donna Turk, notes that higher education in Lebanon has offered young people from the Arab world the opportunity “to be anchored in the cultural values and religions that are only available in [the Arab] world” while also gaining the very tangible benefits of higher education for themselves and their societies.

Similarly, Ms. Jeannette Mufti, a one-time parliamentary can-
Given my background in Jordan who is active in academia and charity work, gives a history of the development and subsequent role of higher education in Jordan, starting with the key role played by LAU's predecessor, the American Junior College. A particularly interesting part of her speech is how conservative traditions in Jordanian society have sometimes had to be pushed to change from above, not the least when they concern women and their roles in Jordanian society.

Dr. Hissah Al-Sabah's personal experiences as a businesswoman and her dedication to creating networks among businesswomen provides a pragmatic example of the power of role models about which Dabbous-Sensenig speaks so eloquently. Similarly, Ms. Taline Avakian, a member of LAU's Board of Trustees, blends together her personal experience in business with discussion of development — and the need for more development — in Arab societies. She, too, raises the issue of the need for female role models, particularly in high positions. “Women must be in leadership positions throughout society,” Avakian says, in order for younger women to see that it is not only possible but necessary for women to be involved in all aspects of society.

This issue also includes academic articles related to the overall theme of higher education, empowerment, and women in the Arab world. The Hotet and Debbas article included here is an abbreviated version of their longer study on women and discrimination in academia in the Arab world. Among the more notable conclusions from their study is that despite significant signs of gender discrimination in hiring and promotion in academia in the Arab world, the vast majority of female academics are happy with their careers. Additionally, class and age are important factors in whether or not female academics perceive gender discrimination in the academy. Furthermore, in countries with the most experience with democratic politics, both female and male professors say they are more aware of injustices in academia than professors in countries with more traditional politics.

Professor Abu Bakr Ahmad Ba Kader's piece focuses on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and uses a somewhat personal approach to the themes of this issue. In chronicling the development of female higher education in the kingdom, Ba Kader notes the significant tension between dominant conservative traditions and economic reality as well as individual women's aspirations. As he notes at one point: "In the past, a woman's financial contribution to her family was viewed as unwarranted by the culture but now, working women have become privileged partners that enable families to enjoy decent standards of living." While the economic benefits of higher education and female higher education are noted elsewhere, Kader's emphasis on economic reality pushing change in social norms is worth emphasizing.

In a similar vein, Professor Tim Walters describes and analyzes the development of higher education for women in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. Using detailed survey data from Zayed University, Walters is able to combine the personal and the systemic to create a dynamic picture of the forces interacting in Abu Dhabi today and what this has meant to young women. His article is adept at describing the conflicting forces at work at the personal, familial, societal and international levels in a clear yet sympathetic way.

Through describing and critiquing women's studies and women and higher education more broadly, Professor Shernaz Zuhur seeks to define strategies and theories that will better empower Arab women through higher education. She also includes a “balance sheet” of successes and failures when it comes to women's empowerment in the region and expertly discusses topical areas, such as violence against women, as they relate to women in the Arab world.

The article by young scholar Maysa Hajj makes a significant contribution to research on the topic at hand by pooling and analyzing data that heretofore has not been accessible to non-Arabic speaking audiences as well as non-researchers. She also proposes a number of topics and questions that require further and deeper study.

It is fitting that a beautiful remembrance of higher education pioneer Rose Ghurayib be included in this special issue. Ghurayib died in spring 2006 after a long and productive life as a scholar and role model for women throughout the Arab world. Also included is an interview with Anita Nassar. Through her experience the reader will be able to see a tangible example, indeed a role model, of an educated and empowered Arab woman.

To conclude the issue, excerpts from the transcript of a round table convened by IWSA in winter 2006 is included. The round table highlights in a very concrete way both the hopes for and the challenges to linking women and empowerment through higher education in the Arab world. The assembled women were of a variety of ages, ranging from undergraduates to graduate students at leading universities in Beirut. They spoke powerfully about their commitment to higher education, what higher education means to them and their future as well as how empowerment does and does not come through higher education.

What was both interesting and quite surprising to me, as well as Dabbous-Sensenig with whom I co-chaired the round table, was how seldom these young women had encountered positive female role models and, even more importantly, that for the most part, these young women were only weakly conscious of the concept of power and of their own empowerment. This was a critical revelation as these young women are studying in Lebanon — arguably the most liberal and open of the higher education systems. This forces us to then ask: Can we really even begin to ask whether higher education empowers women — especially in the Middle East? It seems, rather, that we should start by addressing power — what is it, what forms it takes, who has it, and how it can be obtained — and only then move to look anew at higher education in the Arab world and ask how it is — or is not — empowering young women and men alike.