Connections Between Women Graduates and Their Roles in Society

What is the difference between women in the Middle East now as opposed to 100 years ago? The answer to that is freedom. Women now have a greater amount of freedom to become educated and enter into a professional job field that is typically male dominated. The struggle for equal rights and treatment of women has always been a topic of dispute within Middle Eastern cultures. According to the first few chapters of Leila Ahmed’s book, prior to the 20th century, women were rarely seen outside of the home and had little involvement within the community. Now, 100 years later, their rights have been completely made over. The involvement of women within everyday society has been increasing exponentially over the last 100 years. By looking at Islamic culture and education, in regions such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria, through an educational and religion perspective, a trend can be seen that shows how the graduation rates of women from university levels of schooling coincide with their public activity within society.

To being with, it is important to understand what an Islamic education, or a religious based educational system, entails before fully delving into the topic at hand. The curriculum of an Islamic student, within the primary schooling system, is Quran focused and very rigorous. The main components of an Islamic education is reading, understanding, and studying of the holy text. Hilgendorf goes into much detail about the curriculum a typical Muslim student would encounter. He states that “[A] Muslim child begins his education by knowing how to read, then understand and commit to memory the holy text. All other facts of the curricula of Islamic education were based upon the acknowledgment of the Quran as the core, pivot and gateway of learning” (65). The Quran is used as the Islamic rule book for daily life as well as the education of its people. Hilgendorf discussed that in 1936, an initiative was passed in order to train all
individuals schooling in Islamic culture the ways of the holy text (70). Hilgendorf also stated that:

[In the] preparatory schools no other language than Arabic should be spoken; studies should include a concentration on the language Muslim culture and histories, and cultures of other parts of the world. [In] secondary schools, the student continues in Arabic and begins the study of two other languages (from Europe, Asia, Africa, or the Orient). The first 2 years include 9 hours of language study per week, which is increased to 12 hours in the last 2 years. [Finally, in] higher education, … education should not have an English department but rather have departments of European languages, Islamic languages, and African and Eastern languages. (70)

As shown within this quote, the Islamic religion is a major focus within the primary and secondary education. One positive aspect to Islamic society’s education is that since it is Quran based, it calls for gender equality. The Quran states that “as for those who lead a righteous life, male or female, while believing, they enter Paradise; without the slightest injustice” (“Equality 1). This excerpt from the Quran shows that men and women are seen as equals in the eyes of Allah, also known as God, in all aspects of life. Until the 20th century, Islamic cultures have used other aspects within the Quran to limit women’s involvement in education and get past the gender equality aspect. However, once the 20th century began, women have been able to further their education immensely.

When viewing Islamic education over the years, one can see how the educational system has been altered greatly to include women. Prior to the 20th century, women across the Middle East were typically within the home taking care of their family, cleaning, and cooking. They were not exposed to education, nor were they working within professional fields. The lifestyles
of individuals were described as “men spending most of their day in public areas, such as the marketplace and the gymnasium, while ‘respectable’ women stayed at home” (Ahmed 28). According to Amin, “women compromise at least half the total population of the world. Perpetuating their ignorance denies a country the benefits of the abilities of half its population, with obvious negative consequences” (12). By not allowing women to become educated to their full potential, Islamic societies are prohibiting half of their population from advancing. Within the Egyptian constitution of 1923 the government made primary education mandatory for males and females. By 1930 the number of females that were attending school added up to be about 24 percent of the total school population (Ahmed 189). These numbers continued to increase as the years went on. For example, it was found that today in Iran, 94 percent of the women attend school (“Women”). Islamic societies are beginning to see that in order to have a successful community for individuals to live within everyone living in the community has to be educated. As one can see, the Islamic educational system underwent a large amount of changes over the course of 150 years in order to include women.

Not only were changes being made within the primary and secondary educational systems, but within the higher education systems. The primary and secondary levels of schooling have sculpted their curriculum around the Quran. However, in university levels of schooling, the main focus is to prepare the individuals for a professional career. There are no longer courses about the Islamic religion that they are required to take, unless they are attending a university to prepare them to become a religious scholar. In the year 1929 “women [in Egypt] were granted equal rights to education at university level” (Nelson 219). Women were finally being given the opportunity to enter into universities and receive a higher level of education because of the shift in views on women within Islamic cultures. Mehran stated that the “female higher education
during the rule of the Islamic Republic is indeed an account of gender discrimination and inequality, as well as of change and increasing equality and empowerment” (544). The previous state of women’s rights regarding higher education was showing how unequal males and females were. However, as time has moved along, females have been able to increase the amount of rights they have in the field of education. Beginning in 1952, less than 10,000 women were seen within the university level of schooling. Then, in 1976 the number drastically rose to over 153,000 (Nelson 222).

As time has passed, women have become more prevalent within the university level of schooling, and they were also graduating at a rather high, increasing rate. In a matter of almost 30 years, the graduation rates of females have come to slightly surpass the graduation rates of males. It was discovered that in Saudi Arabia “the number of males graduating annually from university rose from 795 in 1970 to 21,229 in 1999, while the number of female graduates rose from 13 to 21,721”(Al-Dosary 420). The fact that women graduation rates increased by 21,708 in 30 years is a significant accomplishment for women of this region, but the fact that the graduation rates for women surpassed that of men is an even bigger feat. Saudi Arabia is not the only location within the Middle East that is seeing an increase in women’s involvement within the higher level of education. In Iran, it was found that 60 percent of the students within colleges are female (“Women”). Once again, the fact that the amount of women within the university level of schooling has begun to surpass that of men is a major success for the women within these regions.

Even though a majority of the university system is not focused around a religious education, the fact that these societies are deeply religious based makes it possible for one to look at these changes from a religious standpoint. The changes that are being shown are the exact
equality that the Quran states is needed within each of these societies. The Islamic religion “encourages its followers to enlighten themselves with the knowledge of their religion as well as other branches of knowledge” (Jawad 16). There is no segregation within this religion. Everyone should be seen as an equal to everyone else and be given the same opportunities. It has actually been stated that “during the last decade the number of Saudi women graduating from university has grown at an average rate 2.5 times that of male graduates” (Al-Dosary 420). Historians can consider the fact that woman’s graduations rates have increased so drastically, to predict that the rates will continue to increase. With this information, one can conclude that this is the reason why women are seen more within professional fields alongside men.

Not only are women’s graduation rates increasing, but the involvement of women in male dominated fields of study is also increasing. Nelson noted that typically, male dominated fields of study consist of medicine, veterinary medicine, and engineering. In the early 1980’s Nelson conducted a study comparing the graduation rates of men verse women in three different fields of study within three universities of Egypt. In 1952 about 11% of the students within medical related fields, 10% of the students within the engineering field, and 0.5% of the students within the veterinary medicine field were women. Then, in 1975 the numbers of women within these male dominated areas increased even further. About 25% of the students involved in the medical field, 16% of the students within the engineering field, and 20% of the students within the veterinary medicine field were women (Nelson 223). When one jumps to the statistics of 2007-08 in Iran, the percentages seen are even more surprising. Mehran stated that “women comprised 66% of all students in the field of medical sciences; 68% of those in the arts; 62% in the basic sciences; and 59% in the human sciences. […] Veterinary medicine witnessed a 52% female enrolment” (552). These percentages show a major increase from the previous years. Some of the
more male-led fields of study have become much more feminine in nature. However, the field of engineering still remained a much more masculine field with only 27% of the individuals being female (Mehran 552). This evidence shows that the involvement of women within more male dominated fields of study is on the rise. Once again, the religious aspect of the society can be brought up. The need for equal rights between men and women, as the Quran dictates, has finally been observed within these Islamic societies by the increase of women entering the university level of schooling. The gap between men and women within different fields has shrunk a great deal in a rather short amount of time, thus, bringing this culture closer to following exactly what the Quran states. Now, when looking at these numbers from a historical standpoint, one can come to the conclusion that the cultural norms that have been in place for many years was in the process of changing rather drastically.

On top of women being seen more frequently within masculine fields of study and graduating at a higher rate than before, they were also seen obtaining jobs in much more professional fields through the use of two different kinds of education. It has been said that “women have utilized secular education as the main conduit for their participation into the public world of government, industry and university” (Nelson 224). Women can now be found in jobs within the medical field and engineering fields. As stated within Nelson’s quote, women have used the nonreligious based university system to obtain jobs within the same fields as men. However, Syrian societies have seen a “resurrection [of] a century old tradition of sheikhas, or women who are religious scholars” (Zoepf 1). Typically, within the religious sphere, males are the ones who are focusing on the Quran and are the ones receiving further training around the Quran. This idea of a woman religious scholar was rare, but it is now becoming more and more prominent. It has actually been found that “in many Muslim countries and communities, women
lead and participate in Quran study groups, run mosque-based educational and social services, and are religious scholars and even muftis” (Esposito). Not only are women using secular education to blend into male dominated fields, but they are also using the religious education provided within specific universities to do the same thing. It does not matter which form of education women are choosing to enter into. Whether it is secular or religious based, they are still being placed within different areas mostly dominated by males after they graduate. By examining this from a religious and historical standpoint, one can see that the Islamic society is attempting to bring back how things use to be before the segregation of women took place. At some point, women religious scholars were not uncommon. Then, the segregation of women from society occurred and these sheikhas were no longer seen. Now that women are being allowed to reenter into society within new positions, some of the old traditions can be resurfaced.

A direct correlation between graduation rates and job placement for women can be seen. As the graduation rates from universities increase, the number of women within professional fields also increases. The fact that women are now entering into different fields of studies that they were rarely seen within shows that when they graduate from the university level of schooling, they will enter into fields of work that they never had the opportunity to enter before.

The reason for this drastic change in the placement of women is because “society as a whole began to question old norms regarding the ‘proper’ place of men and women in the public realm” (Mehran 547). However, some may argue that society is not changing the way they look at the placement of women because of the oppression they still face. This opposition can be proven false, because regardless of the oppression they still face in other aspects of life, the placement of women within society and education has improved a tremendous amount because of the shifting cultural norms.
Prior to the 20th century, it was very rare to see women outside of the home. Now, it is not as uncommon to see females out in the community with the men. They hold similar positions within the work world, community, and family. Some may say that the women within these countries are losing their motherly instincts because they are focusing on becoming educated and having a successful career. However, women have found a way to balance their professional careers as well as their family lives. Jawad described this feat as “so long as the education system is governed by the spirit of Islam throughout, there will be a harmony between these two modes of social activity, permitting women to express themselves in accordance with their natural dispositions, and to be given the respect and honour which is so central to the real social message of Islam” (29). It is no longer an issue for women to attend school and hold other positions within society, because they have been given the opportunity to prove that they can balance two different ways of life. Now, women can be seen running “for political office and serve in many parliaments” (Esposito). This is a major change in the way society views women. Not only are they being let into higher fields of education, but they are also obtaining jobs in politics, a generally male dominated area. Esposito also said that “a woman has been a head of state or vice president in Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Indonesia and Bangladesh.” In a matter of 100 years, women have been able to come out of the shadows of the home and stand strong within the community that kept them down for so long.

Taking all of the information given into consideration, one can see how there is a direct connection between the graduation rates of women and their involvement within more male dominated areas of study and work. This idea of an educated woman within the Middle East will now draw a completely different picture within the mind than it would have over 100 years ago. Through the hard work of women feminist and their supporters, women have been granted more
rights compared to before. In the long run, this will only help the societies that women are a part of. According to Amin, “a society is weakened when a majority of its members are dependent on others and not contributing in any significant way to the needs of that society” (13). Through the process of educating both males and females, the Middle Eastern societies will continue to expand and improve their countries as time goes on.

Works Cited


