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Prof. Ghubash's many and varied educational, social and intellectual contributions to national, regional and international organizations are reflected in her membership in professional associations and civic organizations such as the WHO's Scientific Committees, the World Future Council in Germany, the Advisory Council for the UNDP, and the Board of Trustees for the Sheikh Khalifa Educational Awards in the UAE. Her many honors and awards include the Rashid Award for Distinguished Scientist (1988 and 1992), Al-Owais Research Award (1992, 1994 and 1995), the Award of Distinction for Citizens from Um al-Mu'minin Women's Association (2002), and the Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum Award for Medical Sciences (2003-04).

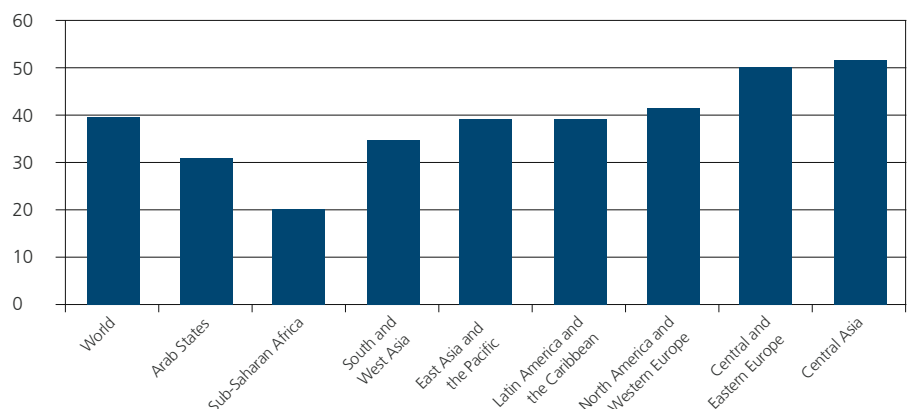
## The Contribution of Women to Intellectual Thought and Science in the Arab World

*Re-evaluating women's roles as intellectual equals*

There have been rapid and impressive advances in human development in the Arab world in recent decades. The vast expansion of education for girls and women has been one of the main pillars of these advances. However, despite the resulting growth in women's formal participation in all spheres of public life, women's contributions to intellectual life in the region—in the sciences, humanities, and social sciences—continue to be underestimated, and sometimes face disparagement and even derision. As a result, the significance and extent of women's roles as actors in all spheres of life, both historically and in the present day, tend to be under-appreciated. Furthermore, prevalent patriarchal attitudes and social norms towards women's intellectual and scientific activities, couched in cultural and religious references to notions of "accepted gender roles", continue to make it more difficult for women than for men to gain prominence in academic and intellectual cultures.

All over the world, women tend to be underrepresented in intellectual circles and in many academic fields, especially at the highest rungs of academia. This is particularly so at all levels of science and technology, and especially in areas such as physics and engineering.<sup>1</sup> In a lecture hosted by the Gender and Public Policy Program at the Dubai School of Government, Dr. Rafia Ghubash pointed to some trends in women's representation at different levels of academia in both Arab and non-Arab countries to demonstrate that it is not only women in the Arab world who have been held back in academia by patriarchal attitudes towards their academic and intellectual endeavors. Figure 1 presents a comparison of percentage female teaching staff in tertiary education in Arab and non-

**Figure 1: Regional Comparison of Female Teaching Staff as a Percentage of all Teaching Staff in Tertiary Education**



Adapted from UNESCO (2010) *Global Education Digest 2010: Comparing Education Statistics Around the World*, Table 8, p. 171

<sup>1</sup> See also UNDP (2003) *Arab Human Development Report: Building a Knowledge Society*, p. 72

Arab countries. It demonstrates that in most regions of the world, women make up less than half of tertiary level teaching staff. However, it also shows that the Arab world has the second lowest regional average for female teaching staff at this level of education. This masks great diversity among the Arab countries, however: Women make up 42% of tertiary teaching staff in Tunisia, while a number of countries, including Lebanon and Qatar, fall only just below the world average, whereas Mauritania, Djibouti and Yemen fall far below – 4%, 17% and 17%, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

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**“Both men and women have been robbed of the right to think and to engage in intellectual activities in Arab history, apart from those – men and women – of certain social status. Scheherazade would not have won her intellectual victory over her husband had it not been for her own social status as the daughter of a minister, which gave her the opportunity to have an education, the key to information and knowledge ... the weapon of the oppressed.”**

*Dr. Rafia Ghubash*

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In the Arab countries, negative attitudes towards women’s academic and intellectual activities further compound the effects of what Dr. Ghubash described as a cultural, political and social climate hostile to freedom of thought, and to creativity and innovation on the part of both women and men. She attributes this climate to the interactions of the “guiding principles” of Arab societies, summarized as tribe, religion, and material interest or acquisition (*ghanīma*), with historical conditions and crises that eclipsed the space for creative intellectual productivity.

Further complicating the interactions of intellectual activity, politics, and cultural and religious norms and practices, were the outcomes of the historical “meeting of the European and Arab minds” during the final period of the Ottoman Empire. Three main trends emerged in intellectual thought at this historical juncture: One

that saw the way to progress in adopting European ways and knowledge; another rejected European thought as a threat to Arab Islamic identity and culture, making the case for isolation and self-sufficiency; and a third trend sought to find a middle way and reconcile principles of Western civilization with those of Islam. Overall, Dr. Ghubash argues, however, the outcome of this period of turbulence in Arab history has been submission to despotism, a fatalistic attitude to circumstance, and a lack of *ijtihad*, or innovative and critical thought and analysis. This predominantly served the interests of the mainly male jurists and intelligentsia of the ruling classes.

It was thus in this context that today’s Arab intellectual positions on women’s social roles and intellectual activities, as well as women’s own self-awareness, came to take shape. To some extent mirroring the trends that emerged as intellectuals sought to grapple with the challenges presented by the encounter with European thought, there have been different references in relation to which such attitudes have formed. These include so-called “Western” references, “Arab-Islamic” references, and “fundamentalist” references that claim to be based on religion. Some reformist thinkers – such as Qasim Amin and Al-Tahir Al-Haddad – explicitly focused on changing women’s status, to reflect European society, as being critical to achieving progress. However, a major legacy of this period has been the negatively construed association of ideas about change in gender roles and relations with “the West” and “western modernity,” which has since colored attitudes towards women’s empowerment and their intellectual, and other, activities.

A closer look at and re-evaluation of the roles women have played in many fields — including literature, law, art, Islamic studies, the humanities and social sciences, and science and technology — reveals that women past and present have achieved and contributed a great deal to intellectual and cultural life in the Arab world, despite the ways in which they have been caught in the problematic intersections of thought and patriarchal politics. From the first centuries of Islam, women were respected – and held authority – as religious scholars, teachers and leaders, for example as narrators and teachers of *hadith*. Women began to be active in the new media at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with women such as Hind Nowfel publishing the first women’s magazines in Egypt. Today, women’s names feature among some of the best known modern novelists and poets. Women’s literary salons have also developed as spaces for “intellectual and cultural exchange free from traditional considerations” that provide platforms for writers and intellectuals that raise women’s

<sup>2</sup> See United Nations Environmental, Social and Cultural Organization (2010), *Global Education Digest 2010: Comparing Education Statistics Around the World*, p. 163.

## ***Highlighting Women's Achievements in the Arab World***

**Sutayta al-Mahāmālī**, who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century of Islam, is recorded as having been a distinguished mathematician who provided proofs for a number of important mathematical problems – as well as being a scholar of *fiqh* and *hadīth*.

A writer and thinker who called for renewal and revival in intellectual thought and change in society's attitudes towards women and their activities, **May Ziyada** (1886-1941) rose to prominence in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She convened an important salon in Cairo in the 1920s and 1930s, attended by women and men, and is remembered as a major figure in the Arab literary renaissance.

A physicist who studied in Damascus and then Beirut before completing her Ph.D. in the US, **Shadia Rifai Habbal** has obtained distinction and prominence in the field. She was part of a team that developed the first spaceship to be sent to the nearest possible point to the sun, in 2007. She has also led an academic movement for women scientists called "Adventurous Women" (UNDP 2005: 108). These achievements represent a number of other prominent Arab women in science.

**Fatima Mernissi** (b. 1940) is a prominent Moroccan representative of a cohort of pioneering feminist Arab writers and social scientists who have gained in numbers and momentum over the course of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her writings, such as *Beyond the Veil* and *Scherezade Goes West*, have influenced the field of Middle East sociology and the study of gender, as well as contributed to the development of a feminist history of Islam.

cultural awareness and knowledge. In the UAE today, salons such as that of Sheikha bint Shamaa' bint Mohamed bin Khalid Al Nahyan continue to play an important role in encouraging and facilitating women's intellectual engagement.

Despite the outstanding achievements of such individual women, the institutionalization of religious and secular learning over the 20<sup>th</sup> century marginalized women overall and undermined the kind of informal authority learned women in the Arab region have carried throughout history. However, in the GCC today, women are entering higher education in ever greater numbers – in some areas they constitute a majority of graduates<sup>3</sup> – and currently the presidents of four of the major academic institutions are women. Furthermore, the potentially great import of the events unfolding across the region during these first months of 2011, for intellectual thought, freedom and innovation, and for women's roles as intellectuals and social and political actors and leaders in particular, remains to be seen.

## **Improving the landscape for women's creative and intellectual activities**

Increasing encouragement and respect for women's contribution to intellectual thought and science in the Arab world means thinking about what we mean by "intellectual thought" and reconfiguring its social definition. Intellectual thought can be understood as encompassing both the "tool" for producing ideas that develops from childhood to become the mind with which one thinks, as well as the "content," or the opinions and ideas a people uses to express their problems, concerns and interests, morals and values, religious and doctrinal beliefs, political and social aims and aspirations, and their philosophies of humanity and existence. These principles of "intellectual thought" are not intrinsic or purely instinctive; a person gains them through her/his interactions with the social environment. Moreover, such a definition both creates respect for diversity and demands the recognition that emotion is part and parcel of intellectual and creative processes, for both men and women. Understanding these principles and reconceptualizing "intellectual thought" accordingly fundamentally undermines repressive attitudes towards women's contributions to intellectual thought that use the differences constructed in society between men and women to assert that they cannot be intellectual equals.

The region faces a number of challenges in education and knowledge production and effective dissemination. Obstacles to a stronger "knowledge society" are many and diverse, and their causes are complex. They include quantitative challenges, in terms of increasing education provision, particularly for marginalized sections of society – including women, whose

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<sup>3</sup> UNESCO 2010: 26; Abdulla and Ridge (2011) "Where are All the Men? Gender, Participation and Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates," Dubai School of Government Working Paper Series, No. 11-03.

literacy and educational enrollment rates remain low in some areas.<sup>4</sup> Stepping up to the qualitative challenges of improving the quality of knowledge production and dissemination, education and research, or the “effectiveness of the knowledge acquisition system,”<sup>5</sup> and creating environments that better encourage critical thinking, creativity and innovation is more difficult.

Tackling the latter challenge is equally urgent, however: Intellectual thought and innovation is a vital aspect and central driver of development in its

broadest sense. It cannot play this role fully without greater freedom of thought and space for creativity and for the development of “indigenous” frameworks and paradigms, nor without the participation of women as equals in all respects. As Dr. Ghubash stated, “The lack of women’s participation in science and technology delays the achievement of development goals in any society.” For example, increasing women’s participation in science and technology, and thus enabling more individuals – women and men – with diverse approaches, significantly strengthens a country’s capacity for scientific development. This is the case in all areas of intellectual activity and development. Greater freedom of thought and expression and increased respect for intellectual equality and diversity are mutually reinforcing. Both are critical for encouraging creativity and innovation in tackling the different challenges faced in the Arab countries, including in terms of ensuring competitiveness and establishing and maintaining the region’s path of economic and human development.

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**“If intellectual thought is enlightened, then all sections of society, women and men, will be enlightened.”**

*Dr. Rafia Ghubash*

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## Conclusions and Recommendations

The re-evaluation of women’s contribution to Arab thought — and its integration with a look at the development of an intellectual environment that has restricted men’s and women’s space, freedom and capability to engage in innovative and critical scholarship in all fields — has some important implications for researchers and policy makers in a number of areas. Recommendations for empowering women as intellectual equals include the following:

- Women’s hidden roles as intellectuals and scientists throughout history and in the present day in the Arab world should be revealed and highlighted through educational curricula (across various disciplines, ranging from history and literature to the sciences), cultural projects such as museums and exhibitions, and via media presentations of their roles and contributions to intellectual life.
- Research on the experiences of women in academia and female scientists, writers, and artists should continue to be supported to identify the specific, gendered challenges they continue to face that can limit their participation or success, and how to address them.
- Women’s rights in all spheres of life should be strengthened and protected to empower them to be free, productive and creative in all fields.
- Quantitative expansion of education in the Arab world remains incomplete, and there are some areas where women’s education in particular is lacking, as detailed above. Progress already made in ensuring equality of opportunity and access for men and women in all levels of education should be capitalized on and continued.
- Serious attention must be paid to the quality and ethos of education. A more inclusive approach to intellectual thought should be encouraged in education through the stimulation of academic environments that accept and encourage diversity, critical thinking, creativity, innovation and intellectual freedom for all, both women and men. Educational curricula should be studied and redeveloped with the ethos of creating space for fresh ideas and references from all fields to inform the development of young people’s attitudes and approaches to intellectual diversity and to consolidate support for women’s roles as thinkers, scientists, and innovators.
- There should be space and support for networks of female scholars and students in the Arab world (such as the Arab Network for Women in Science and Technology, founded by Dr. Ghubash and colleagues) to give girls and women access to role models in their fields, and to help provide practical support and guidance.

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<sup>4</sup> The average female literacy rate in the Arab states is, at 63%, one of the lowest in the world in comparison with other regions, and remains significantly lower than men’s average literacy rate, which is 81% in the region (UNESCO 2010: 23; see also UNDP (2005) *Arab Human Development Report: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*, p. 228). Out of the countries with data, only three have reached gender parity in literacy. These are Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE (UNESCO 2010: 256).

<sup>5</sup> UNDP (2003) *Arab Human Development Report: Building a Knowledge Society*, p. 11

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**The Gender and Public Policy Program** at DSG supports theoretically and methodologically rigorous research that conceptualizes, problematizes, and analyzes gender gaps while, at the same time, linking the research to agendas and instruments for informed policy action.

**The Dubai School of Government (DSG)** is a research and teaching institution focusing on public policy in the Arab world. Established in 2005 under the patronage of HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, in cooperation with the Harvard Kennedy School, DSG aims to promote good governance through enhancing the region’s capacity for effective public policy.

## Suggested Further Reading

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- Camilia Fawzi Al-Salah and Thuraya Al-Turki, Eds. (1993) *Fī Watanī Abhathu: Al-Mar’a al-‘Arabīyya fī Meydān al-Buhūth al-Ijtimā’īyya* [Arabic]. (Markez Dirāsāt al-Wahda al-‘Arabīyya)
- Joseph T. Zeidan (1995). *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond*. (State University of New York Press)
- May Ziyada: *The Meaning of Life* [Ghāyat al-Hayāt]; *Equality* [Al-Musāwāt]; and others.



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