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## **Existential Inequality and Women's Empowerment in Selected Muslim- Majority Countries: Preliminary Considerations**

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## **Existential Inequality and Women's Empowerment in Selected Muslim-Majority Countries: Preliminary Considerations**

*Habibul Haque Khondker* \*

### **Abstract**

This paper surveys the state of the play with regard to women's inequality and the processes of changes leading to potential empowerment in selected Muslim majority countries. This paper uses the framework of sociologist Goran Therborn's existential inequality, which is complimented by the capability approaches of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The main objective of the paper is to bring to light the steady, albeit tardy, empowerment of Muslim women amidst social structural adversities and to highlight diversities in women's existential inequalities in the selected Muslim majority countries where the narratives of women are often reduced to unverified generalizations and stereotypes. The underlying purpose of the paper is to generate debates and promote further evidence-based investigations on the subject of gender inequality / equality, and gender justice in the Muslim majority countries.

### **Introduction**

When an all-female crew led commercial flight of the Royal Brunei Airlines landed in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on March 15, 2016, it created a small media sensation (Sandhu, 2016) but did not last long on the radar of public discussion. Yet, the event, apart from a heartwarming storyline, was rich in sociological significance. Consider the following facts. First, both Brunei and Saudi Arabia are not only Muslim majority countries, both countries are dominated by Shariah Law, a set of laws derived from the Islamic jurisprudence and traditions.

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Second, as systems of governments both Brunei and Saudi Arabia are monarchies. Yet, the irony of the matter was that the female crew who landed their Boeing 787 would have been restricted from driving out of the airport had they made that choice. Saudi women or for that matter, women, in 2016 were not allowed to drive motor vehicle in Saudi Arabia. Although the story of Saudi Arabian women not being allowed to drive a car attained a cliché status and was often used as an “evidence” of Saudi women’s total lack of empowerment, is an example of selective evidence that mythicized the subordinate status of Saudi women. Not that the Saudi women are not subjected to many forms of discrimination rooted in cultural traditions and social structures, to use just a single evidence to capture their subordinate conditions is a case of what some sociologists and scholars of cultural studies call stereotyping or “essentialization”, which is at once an attempt towards homogenization, exoticization and a mystification of reality.

The persistence of a colonial, orientalist discourse on this subject has been addressed by such critical transdisciplinary scholars as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984), Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) among others. I would also hasten to add, any selective evidence of lack of women’s empowerment whether in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere is counter to the ethos of scientific exploration. Such selective narratives neglect the fact that there are other important areas, such as education, employment and income-generation, where Saudi women have made a good deal of progress compared to their counterparts in other Muslim-majority countries, say in South Asia. Part of the Saudi women’s achievements and the diversity in Muslim women’s status are presented in the Tables 2 and 3 below. For example, the mean years of schooling for females in Saudi Arabia is 9 years which is higher than Tunisia, Indonesia, and Egypt and much higher than Bangladesh and Pakistan, all Muslim majority countries. And in all these aforementioned countries, women are allowed to drive a motor car! The point to emphasize here is that there are important differences in the rate of women’s advancement in the Muslim majority countries in so far as social indicators are concerned. In late 2017, Saudi government declared that Saudi women will be able to drive cars from June 1, 2018 (Hubbard, 2017). From the Saudi women’s attainment of the right to driving an automobile as of 2018, a “sign” of women’s status mobility to the mobile phone ladies of Bangladesh (Khondker, 2015) along with various indicators point to transformation of gender role leading to women’s empowerment in the Muslim majority countries in Asia.

In terms of access to wealth and resources, it is worth mentioning that Saudi women own 40% of all private wealth and 40% of real estate assets in the country. They also own 70 percent of the cash savings (Almunajjed, 2006:28). The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a region has experienced rapid progress of women's conditions. Gender gap in the MENA region has declined steadily despite the fact that the Gulf region evokes images of women's suffering and social exclusion. "Progress of women under the veil often creates a sense of dissonance in the minds of casual observers" (Khondker, 2012:156).

In *the Global Gender Gap Report* of 2017 published by the Davos-based World Economic Forum, The United Arab Emirates was ranked 120, Tunisia 117, Egypt 134 and Saudi Arabia 138; while Bangladesh was ranked 47, Indonesia 84, Malaysia 104, and Pakistan 143 of the 144 countries surveyed. See Table 1 below.

Country	GGG Rank	Economic	Education	Health	Political Empowerment
Bangladesh	47	129	111	125	7
Indonesia	84	108	88	60	63
Malaysia	104	87	77	53	133
Pakistan	143	143	136	140	95
Egypt	134	135	104	99	119
Saudi Arabia	138	142	96	130	124
Tunisia	117	131	99	71	55
UAE	120	130	62	129	67

**Table 1: Global Gender Gap 2017 of Selected Countries**

(Source: World Bank Data, World Development Report, 2017)

The above table makes it clear that political empowerment can play an important role in improving the status of women in a society despite its overall economic condition. Bangladesh, a lower middle-income country, according to the World Bank classification with a per capita income of 3.500 (World Bank 2017) is ranked 47 in the Global Gender Gap index compared to the high-

income economies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It is possible, to argue with the indicators and question the methodology used in the calculation of various indices, but such comparisons shed light on the issues of gender inequality and its remedies through public policies. Yet public policies are not simply reflections of well-meaning politicians' progressive thoughts, they are formulated and implemented under conditions of social movements and demands raised by the protagonists of gender justice. Social revolutions produce new demands for gender equality and often create conditions when progressive policies can be formulated. In other words, an enabling condition has to be present before the formulation of public policies that would enhance gender-empowerment. There is multiple combination of factors – social, economic and political - that may open the necessary space for women to gain autonomy enhance their capability and reduce existential inequality.

## 1. Methodology

The paper takes four countries from the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA), namely, Tunisia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and four countries from South and Southeast Asia, namely, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia as empirical referents. All these countries can be considered as the Muslim majority countries. One of the reasons to include the “Arab Spring” countries in the selected Muslim-majority countries is to explore – albeit cursorily given the limitation of space - if the social movements that transpired in those countries had any impact on the transformation of gender roles. To give an example of diversity, for example, I turn to a study summarized in the PEW website that reported interesting variation on a question of women's choice of clothing in seven Muslim-majority countries, four of which are in our selected cases. In Tunisia, 56% agreed while 47% in Saudi Arabia agreed too, whereas in Pakistan 22% favored the idea. In Egypt, the other “Arab Spring” country, only 14% agreed (PEW, 2013). Such results, counter-intuitive as they are, caution us against simplification and unverified generalization. In order to compare, following the rule of comparison stated by J.S. Mill, there has to be similarities as well as differences of the cases. The Muslim majority countries considered here are different not only in their historical and cultural heritage but also in the status of women's movement, and the readiness of the respective governments in advancing the causes of women. The paper relies on most part published reports and secondary data

drawn from international and multilateral agencies as well as author's primary research. Based on this exploratory study, further investigations based on primary and secondary data are in order. It would be useful to look at the big picture in a comprehensive fashion without falling for media sensationalism.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Using Goran Therborn's framework of social inequality, with particular reference to the notion of existential inequality, the paper will examine to what extent women's empowerment is a result of the reduction of existential inequality through gender-sensitive policies of the state favorable to women's cause or is a result of women's struggle linked to the broader socio-political environment. Goran Therborn (2013) outlines three major types of inequality. First, human beings are *organisms*, suffering and death, who can therefore suffer from *vital inequality*, "socially constructed unequal life-chances," which can be assessed through the study of mortality rates, life expectancy and health. Second, humans are *persons*, lives within social contexts. *Existential inequality* is the "unequal autonomy, dignity, degrees of freedom, and of rights to respect and self-development." Third, humans are *actors*, capable of acting towards aims, but their goals limited by *resource inequality* (or, simply, economic inequality),

The concept of existential inequality has been introduced by Goran Therborn, a sociologist. Of the factors contributing to the reduction of gender inequality, enhancement of capabilities via attainment of education played a key role in the improvement of women's higher social status and access to political power, albeit in varying degrees. Therborn's take off point was Amartya Sen's provocative question: "Inequality of what?".

When Amartya Sen asked a simple question: "Inequality of what?" (Sen, 1992) most assumed almost as a matter of convention that inequality is synonymous with economic inequality or income inequality. For Sen, differential capabilities were the heart of inequality. Sen is averse to producing a complete list of capabilities other than the fundamental ones, such as "the ability to meet one's nutritional requirements, the wherewithal to be clothed and sheltered, the power to participate in the social life of the community" (Sen, 1982: 367-368). The main reason for Sen's reluctance to produce a fixed list is that this may deny the rights of the cultural community to engage in a public discussion to formulate

their own list of capabilities in light of their own historical, social conditions and priorities (Sen, 2004: 79). In line with Sen's preference for outlining a set of abstract and general rather than concrete and specific list of capabilities, Martha Nussbaum presents a list of ten abstract and open-ended capabilities, which are: 1. Life, 2. Bodily Health, 3. Bodily Integrity, 4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought, 5. Emotions, 6. Practical Reason, 7. Affiliation, 8. Other species, 9. Play, 10. Control over one's own environment (Nussbaum 2003: 41-42). Nussbaum presents a highly abstract list consciously, since she too is sensitive to the cultural contexts. Yet, it is possible to distill some practical guides from her list which emphasizes on dignity, human rights and the right to participation in public life.

Of the factors contributing to the reduction of gender inequality, enhancement of capabilities via attainment of education played a key role in the improvement of women's higher social status and access to political power, albeit in varying degrees. Using Goran Therborn's framework of social inequality, with particular reference to the notion of existential inequality, the paper examines to what extent women's empowerment is a result of the reduction of existential inequality through gender-sensitive policies of the state favorable to women's cause or is a result of women's struggle linked to the broader socio-political environment.

This leads to an interesting paradox with regard to the starting point. Do gender-sensitive government policies alone are adequate to reverse a situation of extreme inequality to moderate inequality? It also begs the question: why do some states are likely to adopt policies more favorable to women's progress than others? Is it always driven by a progressive ideology of equality or prompted by labor-force needs? Or, what is the role of women exercising their collective agency, demanding rights as their counterparts enjoy in other developed countries. Space does not allow me to pursue all these questions in the remit of the present paper. In the globalized world connected by communication networks, news of achievements of women in terms of economic, political and social rights are transmitted all-over the world. Since the 1970s, women's movement has emerged as a global movement, often backed by the United Nations and other international non-governmental agencies. We do not explore all these questions in this paper, yet it is worth generating these questions for further investigations.

## 4. Discussions

In the discussions below of the MENA region two of the countries selected have undergone the political uprisings, popularly known as the Arab Spring of 2011, and two that escaped any such uprising. Of the South and the Southeast Asian cases, some of the countries had females head of the state / government, and others a deep-seated authoritarian political system. The factors that impede women's quest for equality are also equally complex and should not be reduced to a single set of factors of religious system or cultural traditions. Both cultural and social structural factors need to be combined for a cogent explanation.

Country and HDI Rank	Gender Development Index (GDI)	Group	Life Expectancy (Female)	Life Expectancy (Male)	Mean Years of Schooling Female	Mean Years of schooling Male
UAE 42	0.972	2	78.7	76.5	10.6	8.9
Malaysia 59	...	...	77.3	72.6	10.0	10.8
Bangladesh 139	0.927	3	73.3	70.0	5	5.6
Indonesia 113	0.926	3	71.2	67.0	7.4	8.5
Tunisia 97	0.904	4	77.4	72.7	6.7	7.8
Egypt 111	0.884	5	73.6	69.2	6.4	7.9
Saudi Arabia 38	0.882	5	75.9	73.2	9.0	10.0
Pakistan 147	0.742	5	67.4	65.4	3.7	6.5

**Table 2: Gender Development Index of Selected Countries according to UNDP**

Country	Population	GDP PPP	Female Lit	Male Lit
Bangladesh	163	3,319	69.9	75.6
Egypt	96	10,319	67.2	82.6
Indonesia	261	10,764	93.6	97.2
Malaysia	31	25,660	90.7	95.4
Pakistan	193	4,866	44.3	69.1
Saudi Arabia	32	50,458	91.4	96.5
Tunisia	11	10,752	72.2	86.1
UAE	9	67,133	91.5	89.5

**Table 3: Male/Female literacy in the selected countries**

The differences in, let's say, female literacy between Pakistan (44.3) and Indonesia (93.6) or Saudi Arabia (91.4) are not always easily attributable to religious tradition, Islam, or, for that matter, to any single factor. Of the multiple factors that need to be brought into play, culture plays alongside economic and political factors, an important role. While cultural traditions dominated by the norms of patriarchy play a dominant role, role of state-directed policies as well as economic transformation either directly affect the issues of gender equality in a society. Gender inequality is a near-universal phenomenon. The United Nations and other multilateral institutions along with the scholarly community and various governments are in agreement that women's empowerment is a way to reduce – and possibly, end in the future – gender inequality. In other words, while specific policies with regard to education and employment are important because they contribute to women's autonomy and empowerment.

Empowerment, especially gender empowerment, is not easy to define. Feminist scholars (Batiwala, 1993; Rowlands, 1997; Sholkamy, 2014; Cornwall, 2016) have shown how the concept has evolved over time from the 1970s to the present (c2018). In fact, there is room for a detailed analysis of how women's movement shaped the discourse on empowerment since the 1990s. Rather than going into the discourses and various definitions of empowerment, we will see empowerment as a relative term and relate it to the issue of inequality. Here it will also be useful to unpack the concept of inequality in light of the contributions of Sen and Therborn as outlined earlier.

In the historical cases of Europe and the North America, women's emancipation measured in a high participation in the labor force was triggered by large, macro forces of the Industrial Revolution, as in Europe or the World Wars, as in the case of the United States of America. In the eighteenth century with the onset of industrialization in Britain many women and children became the workers in the factories earning wages and working outside the domestic sphere, albeit in a poor and discriminatory environment. "With mechanization, the gender division of labor changed. Women were widely employed in all the textile industries, and continued the majority of workers in cotton, flax, and silk" (Burnette, 2008). "In 1838", writes Braudel, "only 23% of the textile workforce were adult males; the great mass were women and children..." (Braudel, 1979;595). The relationship between industrialization and women's empowerment has generated some debates among the historians, who detected some non-linearity in the relationship. Yet, it is plausible to argue that on the whole, industrialization since

the eighteenth century paved the way for women’s employment and entry to the public sphere enhancing their autonomy (Pinchbeck, 1930; Honeyman, 2000). In the next phase of industrialization and with the rise of female education, female employment spread into service sectors. One important factor that allowed an increasing number of women to participate in employment and remain in post-secondary educational setting is the decline of fertility. There is a direct relationship between drop in fertility and women’s employment in the Western history as it is evident in the industrialize economies of the present world. The decline in fertility and increase in female employment which paves the way for female empowerment seem to be mutually reinforcing. A simple one-way causality would be hard to establish. One could argue that decision making power on the part of women is itself a marker of women’s empowerment and such decisions include fertility decision, i.e., use of contraceptives. A decline in infant mortality is also a good indicator of the overall development of society in various sectors including availability of high quality health care. Both Malaysia and the UAE present a clear case of this relationship between decline in fertility rate – 2.0 for Malaysia and 1.8 for the UAE with the female labor force participation 54.3 percent for Malaysia and 47.5 for the UAE. Pakistan’s high fertility rate 3.8 is positively related to its relatively lower female labor force participation rate of 24.2 per cent.

Country	Infant Mortality	Female Labor Force Participation (ILO)	Total Fertility Rate	Contraception Use
Bangladesh	38	33.2	2.3	62
Egypt	22	23.0	3.5	59
Indonesia	31	50.9	2.6	62
Malaysia	7	54.3	2.0	49
Pakistan	69	24.2 (2015)	3.8	35
Saudi Arabia	16	22.2	2.9	24
Tunisia	16	25.6 (2013)	2.1	63
UAE	6	47.5	1.8	28

**Table 4: Total fertility rate, contraceptive use, infant mortality and female labour participation in the selected countries**

In terms of political representation measured in the aggregate number and percentage of women in parliament or parliament-like bodies provide an interesting, albeit uneven picture in the selected Muslim majority countries. Although Muslim majority countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and

Indonesia grabbed international attention as these countries elected heads of the government in 1990 when Benazir Bhutto became the Prime Minister of Pakistan, or Khaleda Zia became the prime Minister of Bangladesh in 1991, or Shiekh Hasina became Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 1996, or Megawati Sukarnoputri became the president of Indonesia in 2004. In fact, South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and India blazed the trail in electing women as heads of the country since 1960 as in the case of Sri Lanka, and 1966 in the case of India.

In Indonesia, which has made a successful transition from authoritarian rule to democracy has seen a steady increase of women's representation in parliament over the years. In 1955, when the first election took place during the rule of Sukarno, 5.06% parliamentarians were women. This number increased to 11.4% in 1997 in the last year of Suharto era. President Suharto introduced a quota system, where political parties were required to field at least 30% women candidates. The number of women's seats increased from 11.24% in 2004 to 18.21% in 2009 (Prihatini, 2018) and 19.80% in 2014 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017). Yet, part of the increase of women's representation can be attributed to the quota system concerning fielding female candidates by the political parties was introduced by Suharto Indonesia's military strong man and not by the democratic regimes.

Country	Election Year	Total Seats (Lower House)	Seats held by Women	% of women	Regime type	Remarks
Tunisia	2014	217	68	31.30%	Democracy	"Arab Spring" country
UAE	2015	40	9	22.50%	Monarchy	
Pakistan	2013	340	70	20.60%	Democracy	
Bangladesh	2014	350	71	20.30%	Democracy	
Saudi Arabia	2016	151	30	19.90%	Monarchy	
Indonesia	2014	560	111	19.80%	Democracy	
Egypt	2015	596	89	14.90%	Democracy	"Arab Spring" country
Malaysia	2013	222	23	10.40%	Democracy	

**Table 5: Women in National Parliaments in selected Muslim Majority Countries**

Take the case of Saudi Arabia, the ruler of the country King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz in January 2013, issued a historic decree allowing women to be members of the kingdom's previously all-male Shura Council – functional equivalent of their parliament - for the first time. What was interesting about this reform by the state-initiated decision that not only women in Saudi Arabia obtained their voice in the public arena, on a percentage basis they even outranked the United States, a long-standing democracy, in female representation at the legislature. The United States has 84 Congress Women in the 434-string House of Representatives as of 2016 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017). In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) women have been represented in the Federal National Council – equivalent of parliament – since 2006. As of 2016 not only the speaker of the parliament is a woman, 27.5% of the cabinet are made up of women (Dajani, 2016). In both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, highly educated and professional women found their ways in to the legislature.

From the above Table No. 5, it is evident that the regime type is not the singularly most important determinant in removing women's exclusion from the political process and public role. In Bangladesh, women's groups have been active in mobilization and collective action registering demands for equal opportunities as in Pakistan, Malaysia, Tunisia, Indonesia and Egypt. Yet, in countries without the presence of a civil society movement, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE women have done very well in achieving their voice and representation.

The paper attempts to emphasize that just because the countries under consideration are all Muslim-majority countries they will be similar is an assumption bred in stereotypes and hypothesis that somewhat Islam, the dominant religion, has a role in the perpetuation of gender inequality. Decades ago Fatima Mernissi (1975), the late Moroccan sociologist, dispelled that myth by arguing that it is the patriarchal interpretation of the doctrines of Islam that account for the subjugation of women in various Muslim societies. Moghadam (2003) too has pointed out the diversities of the Muslim-majority countries by focusing on their politico-economic developments. The variations of women's empowerment in the Muslim-majority rest on a multiple set of factors that include the differential entanglements of the globalized norms of gender equality and justice. It is worthwhile to note that in Tunisia, the launching pad of the Arab Spring movements, women have gained important rights since the momentous changes of 2011. Tunisia is the first Muslim majority country to grant equal

inheritance rights to men and women and allow Muslim women to marry outside their faith (Eltahawy, 2018). Historically, Tunisia was perhaps ahead of other Muslim majority countries under study here, as Tunisia, according to Egyptian scholar Gihan Abou-Zeid, “stands out as a unique model in addressing women’s issues from both the Arab and Islamic context... largely because of the government’s enlightened interpretations of Islam” (Abou-Zeid 2006:174 quoted in Dahlerup and Danielsson, 2012).

## Conclusions

Since the tumultuous days of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, there has been a reversal of the democratic gains. Egypt, a nominal democracy, has been under an “elected” military ruler. Both Pakistan and Bangladesh have been democracies that are termed as “flawed democracies”, yet because of the historical antecedents of women’s movements, women have achieved tangible success in reducing some aspects of gender-discrimination and social exclusion. The only country that seems to have been able to consolidate the gains of the social and political transformations that the “Arab Spring” ushered in is Tunisia, where women’s gain in political representation has been tangible. This is not to suggest that the struggle to end social exclusion and existential gender inequality is about to end in Tunisia. But at the same time, it has to be recognized that the Arab Spring countries as a whole have seen a new beginning insofar as gender empowerment is concerned. According to Marwa Shalaby, “Tunisia’s 50 percent constitutional quota for women, the repeal of rape marriage law in Morocco, the guarantee of 25 percent of seats for women in Egypt’s municipal elections... are the beginning” (Shalby, 2016:2).

All the Muslim majority countries, as in the rest of the world, patriarchal norms remain dominant. The preliminary explorations in this paper indicate that in some countries – Saudi Arabia and UAE, for example, appropriate policies implemented by the state can help open up space for women to gain remarkable advancement in literacy, education and employment. In the case of Tunisia, and the Arab Spring countries a combination of factors that include historical movement for equal rights, and revolutionary transitions empowered women. However, the attainment of long-term gender justice is dependent on the improvement of women’s socio-economic conditions and attaining equal social, legal and political rights that may help remove the entrenched norms of

patriarchy ensuring socio-economic equality for women. Removal of existential inequality is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for women to achieve gender equality and justice. Attaining existential equality is an important step in the road to dignity, liberty and equal justice for the Muslim women.

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