

Arab Women: Duality of Deprivation in Decision-making under Patriarchal Authority

Nader Said-Foqahaa

Birzeit University and Arab World for Research and Development—AWRAD

nader@awrad.org

Translated by Marwa Maziad, University of Washington, Seattle

marwa@u.washington.edu

Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges impeding Arab women from fully participating in decision-making processes. A gender-based Dual deprivation is defined, analyzed and diagnosed as vicious and multi-layered circles surrounding women's abilities to make decisions concerning their own lives on the one hand, and restricting their capacity to delve into established institutional mechanism of decision making, on the other hand. This "dual deprivation" not only isolates women from decision-making processes, even on issues directly impacting their lives, but also denies them the ability to act as agents of change and create an empowering environment, due to women's absence from decision-making positions. Other challenges addressed include high fertility rates, circumcision, early marriage, domestic violence, and inequitable laws. Employing testimonial interviews with women from various countries in the Arab World, the data offer in-depth analysis of the status of men and women, in relation to decision making in the private and public spheres in Arab societies. Findings show some progress despite its insufficiency, confirming that authority is still patriarchal in Arab countries. The study also shows that as opposed to men, women tend to be more participatory and democratic in their decision-making processes, veering towards ending conflict and favoring dialogue. Other issues addressed include high fertility rates, circumcision, early marriage, domestic violence, and inequitable laws. An action plan regarding social, economic, legislative, cultural, administrative, political, and communicative issues is recommended for women's empowerment.

Keywords

Gender, decision-making, Arab society, patriarchy, women, empowerment

Words by Women

Impediments to women's empowerment are like iron circles, interconnected and entangled within one another. When I escape one ring, the others grab me. When I leave my family,

I am tied down by the neighbors, the society, the culture, the local mentalities and the law. (Manal, Saudi Arabian, employee, 35 years old)

As a woman, I have not felt defeated. I was number three in the Ministry. I contributed to decision-making before number one did! (Noha, Sudanese, employee, 58 years old)

My father was the source of opinion, income, power and decision. My mother persistently resisted the decisions he imposed upon us. (Amina, university activist, Moroccan, 36 years old)

Introduction

Throughout history, men have possessed the right to make decisions in all public and private aspects of life. Women's participation in the decision-making process has been limited, within the context of a patriarchal system that imposes itself at all levels. In the Arab world, traditional patriarchy is built upon a hierarchy of roles and authorities and is represented in the power of the old over the young, men over women, the rich over the poor, and the majority over minorities.

Since the outcome of societal decisions, at all levels, reflects the existing power distribution, policy decisions cannot be neutral. Contrary to current notions of policies being "gender-blind," it is clear that these policies, actually, discriminate against women. They work directly and indirectly to maintain the status quo of unbalanced relations within the objective reality, as reflected in economic, political, and social indicators.

These policies are woven into the dominant culture. As they reinforce existing social roles within the culture, these policies operate under the pretext of being the means for maintaining the balance, survival, and continuity of society. Hence, discrimination, particularly regarding decision-making, becomes an essential part of an integrated culture that must protect itself by keeping women in their "natural place" within the social reality. Within this mix, where the patriarchal intersects with the economic, the institutional and the cultural, "social religiosity" plays a decisive role in rationalizing and normalizing the process of discrimination against women, and in providing cognitive and mental justifications for the discriminatory reality.

Under this system, men gain free reign in making decisions. They do that, at all levels, by virtue of what society knows to be right, religious and lawful, and in protection by the existing social organization. Meanwhile, men use various means for co-opting women at times or subjugating them by direct and societal force at other times.

Moreover, the socially-rooted conceptualizations of differences in women's and men's sexualities and their biological nature are so frequently evoked to the extent that they become part and parcel of the individual and collective consciousness. In this regard, the "natural role" of women is one of the most deeply rooted interventions at the conscious and unconscious levels. Consequently, women's fulfillment of their "natural role" associated with the reproductive process becomes compulsory and coercive. In the end, this leads to women's lives becoming regulated through the *sharia*, constitutions, laws, and predominant social norms, in ways that far exceed what applies to men.

This gives men the power and legitimacy to control women (as well as their bodies and minds) in all aspects of life. This also works on normalizing discrimination, especially within the realm of family law. By extension, this equally works on normalizing decisions related to political, economic, and social policies.

Moreover, the dominant system also provides a "blank check" for men in terms of personal liberties. At the same time, the system provides tools for controlling women and keeping them in their "natural place." The dominant system sustains that by curbing women's impulses, instincts, and sexual desires and by transferring these sexual aspects of women to the favor of men—at home and in the privacy of sex. These are assumptions which are predominant indeed in mainstream culture—a culture that calls on the community to do everything possible to rid women of "the devil therein." Consequently, these assumptions are the hidden forces behind calls for forsaking women's rights and behind allowing men to make decisions on women's behalf—always framed in the interest of maintaining the status quo and "collective good of society."

Although these dynamics are not always played at a direct and conscious level, nonetheless they are rooted in the culture and are instilled in the consciousness of community members. They become an outcome of mainstream cultural understanding of class, gender and educational relations.

Moreover, in light of the absolute and relative absence of women's participation in decision-making positions, it is a consequence that institutions and organizations do not take women's lives and needs into account. As such, women are unable to hold decision-makers accountable. These institutions, thus, continue to produce policies against the rights of women, leading to an increase in the gap between women and men.

Within the aforementioned contextualized realities, the greatest challenge is to define a conceptual framework and reach an analysis that clarifies

the depth of the problem beyond the dominant language and concepts in the literature of the international organizations with regard to gender, albeit without ignoring this literature. This analysis should address the nature of the vicious circle of dual deprivation surrounding women's *limited participation* in decision-making on the one hand and their overall *limited access* to decision-makers (who are usually men) on the other hand—an access that would have enabled women to hold institutions accountable to their needs and demands. This “dual deprivation” not only separates women from the decision-making process, even on issues directly impacting their lives, but also deprives them of the ability to act as agents of social change, in light of their absence from decision-making positions.

Accordingly, the deprivation of decision-making must be extended to a set of binaries, which are in fact binaries with an extended space in between. Within this space interactions are possible and therefore these binaries have not reached polarization. This interactive process, whose outcome does not always equal to a zero-sum game, does not always have women come as losers. The processes, as well as the outcome, reflect a negotiated, competitive relation within a space that is limited by contextual imperatives. The deprivation duality is also related to competing and interactive dualities: public-private spheres, objective-subjective realities, nature-nurture debate, views of men sexuality-women sexuality, and gender-class analyses. These dualities and their interactions may contribute to reaching an in-depth analysis of the status of women and men with regard to decision-making in Arab societies.

Conceptual Grounding

In an attempt to understand and analyze the established system and mechanisms for gendering the decision-making process, a number of issues, indicators, and perspectives for vision might be useful.

Empowerment

We are accustomed to speak of “empowerment” models in several fields, including that of decision-making. For social beings, the concept of empowerment is grounded within the realm of the human quest to pursue happiness and rid life of pain and agony. From Piaget onward, human fulfillment implied a “hierarchy of empowerment” that ranks the needs of

humans as basic and material to cognitive and perceptual. A hierarchy implies that the struggle of women to attain full equality will only be achieved if women reach the top of the hierarchy. They must fulfill their basic needs, attain a healthy life and quality education, must work and earn income, must have access to opportunities and institutions, must participate in decision-making at all levels, and must own and control resources. In the field of decision-making, this chapter proposes three distinct conceptual areas of interest: empowerment as ability to make decisions at all levels; empowerment as the ability to gender the system as a whole and the ensuing decisions; and empowerment as the awareness that is within, at the level of consciousness where all humans are convinced of the basic value of self-worth and the worth of others. Because the relationship between these elements and the systematized social life represented especially by dominant systems and relations of production is dialectical, the separation between them becomes theoretically easier to understand, as long as it does not conceal the extent of interaction and connection between these elements.

In this chapter, the empowerment hierarchy is conceived as reinforcing a male-dominated discourse, which focuses on hierarchies and consecutive levels of analysis. A model, informed by a feminist conceptualization, introducing a more spatial analysis, freeing the researcher from the rigid analytical models and methods replaces it. The model introduced here focuses on the spheres of empowerment through which humans—men and women—must go. These spheres of empowerment include the self and body, the family, the community, the civil society, the economy, the State, and international dynamics. Empowerment must be viewed as a continuous, ongoing process rather than a static reality. The process entails mobility, dynamism, competition, agency, achievements, and setbacks. The attainment of basic needs, education, training and job opportunities; the participation in decision-making at various levels and in various fields; owning assets and controlling them; and self-actualization are all interconnected and interactive occurring at the same time in the social sphere. Material and cognitive elements also interconnect and mutually reinforce each other. Gender relations are roles present within the spaces where men and women interact. Such spaces are not neutral; instead they are influenced by the interaction between the private and the public spheres. A woman must work hard to move from one sphere to another; even then she does not leave that sphere fully but must work to ensure that no setback will occur as a result of moving from one sphere to the other.

The weakness of women's participation in decision-making is linked to the total sum of what women and men attain within all these spheres and not in only one of them. The value of attainment within each sphere is only true and sustainable if it is connected to empowerment within all other spheres. For example, attainment of the right to work outside the home will only serve as part of the emancipation of women if it is accompanied by legal frameworks that allow women to work without having to worry about reproductive and family duties as caretakers, if women are able to make decisions about their own incomes and bodies, and if it allows women to have time to participate in political and social activities. The right to work for women must be accompanied by meaningful changes in gender roles and relations between men and women. At the same time, men must also seek to perform as caretakers. This has implications for the role of the State and the economy in influencing gender roles and relations.

This essay focuses on deconstructing the dynamic relationship between the spheres of empowerment. This will allow for a new perspective that is liberational and emancipatory in nature, one that is dynamic and not static. Any intervention that aims to promote the role of women in decision-making must go beyond the traditional gender analysis that ignores the relationship between the various spheres to truly capture the shifting boundaries between the spheres within which men and women function and interact. Gains in one sphere might be offset by losses in another, leading to superficial changes, with no economic, social, cultural, and political change in the system as whole.

Invisible Authority

What sociologists have called "women's invisible authority"¹ has been addressed in different writings. The concept emphasizes that behind the apparent visible authority of men, there is an actual authority for women that can be deduced from the actual presence of women inside the house, where generations of girls and boys are actually socialized. Additionally, the actual and physical distance of men from this domain gives women the opportunity to construct a suitable environment in the home, by which they can aspire to a broader realm of decision-making. In spite of the

¹ For more details, see Halim Barakat and Hisham Sharabi on patriarchal society.

importance of this type of participation and the importance of looking into it as a facet of women's ability to make decisions or at least influence them, it must be viewed within the prevailing societal context wherein the actual institutionalized authority in society derived from the law, *sharia*, and norms grant men a truly greater advantage in the realm of decision-making. If women were to enter in the realm of decision-making from this entrance, it would still fall within the field of a patriarchal society, or, in other words, with permission and approval of one of the men around her, who can deprive her of it (i.e., delegated authority) any time he wishes. Moreover, this "delegated authority" ends up putting additional burdens on women within the realms of housework, child-rearing, and money management in what concerns the house and family affairs. Therefore, the invisible authority arguments, while worth studying, must not be exaggerated to the extent that they become dominant myths that are not even questioned.

The Objective, the Subjective, and the Cognitive

It is important to study both the objective and the subjective conditions that, together, constitute the contextual limitations and opportunities of humans. The objective conditions are comprised of laws, legislations, and economic realities within which women must function. The subjective conditions (meanings) are based on a system of values and traditions pervasive in society and transmitted from one generation to another through a formal and informal educational system. The importance of looking at the subjective (value-related) becomes more important if the concept is expanded to clearly present the essence related to the cognitive (subjective) given that the sphere of the subjective expands to include symbolic interaction and the definitions and the disparate value-based frames in society when we look at the objective reality. In other words, determining what is important or problematic does not reflect in many instances (the objective reality) nor conforms to it, but rather sometimes contradicts it.

That which some societies hold to be true is not important or problematic in other societies. Sources of power and centers of decision-making play the major role in determining the important and the problematic (traditional values, the acceptable, the unacceptable, the less important). Thus, the conflict to determine the (feminist) agenda in order to reach equality is a conflict over definitions. It is a claims-making process carried

out by competing claims-makers.² The essence of objective reality is determined by (or at least influenced by) the aggregate of conflicts over claims-definitions among groups and individuals unequal in power and in access to resources—material, institutional, and moral. These groups have opposing and contradictory interests, and they use all platforms and arenas to gain the upper hand in the battle over defining reality. It is important to recognize the nature of “the cognitive” in the Arab world, where reliance on traditional values and the supernatural trumps relying on objective reality through scientific studies and on critical, creative thinking. Based on this, Arab women’s reality can be looked at in light of the reality of gender roles and relations as a product of the conflict and competition or harmony and accord between social movements. This, in turn, underscores the importance of studying such movements. Moreover, it is important to study the disparate definitions and claims of those movements, the resources they use, and the platforms in which they invest to attain a more powerful status in society. One of these movements is the feminist movement in its various manifestations. Among the organizational setups in this realm are:

- Representative institutions: These include unions and syndicates under which women are organized and that work like the rest of lobbying groups representing the interests of special groups.
- Development institutions: These are institutions working in the field of aid and development. For the most part they have a modern globalized nature, in terms of their agendas, financial support, or work facilities. They include research centers and community-development organizations, primarily adopting the concepts of “gender and development.”
- Institutions operating within the framework of political parties: These are also varied. In some countries, political parties assign women into (specialized units), while in others women work within the institutions of the political party itself.
- Charitable organizations: These are institutions traditional in nature, seeking to improve the status of women. For the most part, they target women by means of relief work. They do not lead to important changes in gender relations.

² For more details, see Malcolm Spector and John Kitsue, *Constructing Social Problems*. California: Benjamin-Cumming, 1977.

Women are Not a Homogenous Group

In order to objectively study women's reality in terms of decision-making, it must be recognized first that a single analysis will not apply to all women. In spite of the importance of sex as a variable, the concept of gender necessitates a comprehensive study of the nature of gender relations in the context of the patriarchal system. Within this system, women of the elite might be helping reinforce the status quo more than they are helping other women. Moreover, it is important to realize that the varying situations of women, their needs, and the types of obstacles they face are related to class, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and regionalism (urban vs. rural). Another important factor is the effect of foreign occupations, wars, and violence on women's opportunities and capabilities (e.g., women refugees, displaced persons, and families displaced from Arab countries due to political conflicts).

Interconnected levels of Decision-making Body and Self: The Sexualization of Women

The question of decision-making begins and ends with a person's ability to have control over oneself, including the body, the spirit, and the mind, and to liberate oneself from external control. She who does not have control over her body and mind would have difficulty gaining similar rights over different spheres of life. It is not hard to think of things to which Arab girls are subjected, such as early marriage, "honor" killings, circumcision, direct and indirect coercion to veil, limited sexual freedom, and restricted movement. Millions of women live imprisoned at home based on direct and indirect coercive measures. As the saying goes: *A woman leaves her house twice, when she gets married and when she dies*. Also, control over the body and the ability of self-actualization is affected by women's ability to make decisions related to her reproductive health. Fertility rates among Arab women are the highest in the world, which puts women at the service of reproduction without rights that are derived from such a preoccupation. Women have limited or no time to work on influencing other aspects of life. Moreover, the objectification of women's bodies renders the practice of physical violence (beating, detention), sexual violence (rape, harassment), psychological violence (insult, commoditization of women in the media) and social violence (abusive divorce and polygamy) as acceptable and ordinary (normalization of violence). All these practices

form substantial indicators that cannot be ignored when studying the question of decision-making, whether at the private or public level.

Family: Conceptualization of Femininity and the Sacredness of the Family

Most women spend most of their time engaged in family life. The family is the space where women perform their assigned roles. By socialization and due to division of social roles (by choice or coercion) many women reach the conviction that self-actualization is achieved by perfecting the reproductive role, proper organization of the house, and the husband's satisfaction (which is satisfaction to God). Some women are convinced that entering into men's affairs is in of itself a state of "masculinization" that strips "the true woman" of her "femininity." This self-victimization, self-hate, and denial of sexual rights for women fall in the deepest areas of oppression, manifested in a low self-regard (packaged in a feminine frame) and fall within the scope of "false consciousness."

Thus, moving toward greater ability in decision-making (in public and private spheres) requires solving the question related to that cognitive state assigning women's status to the family, and the state of sanctity assigned to the role of the mother in isolation of the role of the father. This will logically lead to returning the role of motherhood to its proper place in society, meaning men's sharing in this role and participating with the state in providing the means to play the "reproductive" role, and defining it as a societal function (social production), whose responsibility should be held by society and its institutions as a whole and not only by women. By the same token, and in spite of the putative sanctity of the role of "mother," the rights associated with this role and its performance are disproportional, whereby women in the Arab world are punished several times and at several levels: for being women in a society that discriminates against them by law and deprives them of the basic rights of humanity and for being mothers without alternative opportunities to put them in the workplace, from which would ensue material benefits such as social security and retirement.

Kin-Clan-Family

The kin-clan-family is considered the primary regulator of the relationship between the public and the private sphere, especially on what concerns the

political ability of its members. In most Arab societies, family patriarchy interlaces with the patriarchal political system and government institutions. The clan nominates its members to bureaucratic positions or to seats in the legislative institutions. The clan's arena (for example the family-clan *diwan*) is exclusive to men, who use the *diwan* as an entry to their political activities and as a launching point to secure their gains in this field. It is enough to look to the majority of decision makers in Arab hallways of political power to find that most of them come from clans or families with monetary influence or power through number or other resources. It is also known that most families choose men and do not support women in their attempts at entry into political life.

Local Community

The patriarchal tendency prevails in local community institutions and especially the municipalities, village council, and community-based organizations. Although these institutions concern the lives of women and families, they are considered men's domain, where men compete for leadership and access to resources by dominating the sites of decision-making. So, it is not hard to conclude that women in the Arab world are far removed from actual representation in these institutions, either at the decision-making level (as presidents or members) or at the employment level, and especially in influential positions. In spite of some attempts to employ women in local councils/authorities, nonetheless, this happens in absence of a commitment to truly comprehensive changes in women's status. It is not enough to look toward local councils, but it should be assured that women are indeed represented in the rest of local community institutions, its parties' leadership, charity organizations, and other civil institutions.

Civil Society Institutions

Institutions of civil society are the space through which it is possible to influence decision-making in the public and private sector and at the political level. Included within the scope of civil society institutions are parties, unions, syndicates, and charity and community organizations. The interests of different groups in society are represented. Women's contribution in decision-making is not considered important in the Arab world (in spite of the differences between various Arab nations). Historically, women's

contributions have been restricted and confined to charity institutions, whose work has been stripped by law of its political dimensions and the condition of their work therein is that they stay away from politics. This has also been related to the background of the women working in those organizations, who primarily come from aristocratic classes in society. Moreover, women's work in charity has been regarded as an extension of their reproductive role. Working within these organizations has led to women expending their efforts to make decisions regarding issues limited in influence on society, on public policies, especially those related to peripheral and poor women. No doubt, there is an increase in the number of women represented in community development organizations in a number of Arab countries. However, unions that are patriarchal in nature lead many of these institutions and networks. As for political parties (and they are not present in all countries), they are the primary axis of political work in democratic and semi-democratic systems. Within the parties, programs and policies supported by the party are designed, and decision makers are chosen and supported in elections, attaining power and in keeping with those programs and policies.

The Government: The Legislative, the Judicial, and the Executive

A group's contribution to decision-making is made clear through the extent to which it is represented in the legislative, judiciary, and executive branches of government. Women are still far from having achieved acceptable rates of occupying important places in these fields. Many Arab countries, for instance, deprive women even of the possibility of appointment as judges or bar them from nomination as parliamentary members or voting in elections. Women are also completely out of the game in terms of executive positions, aided by a religious culture that justifies the positions of decision makers. Sometimes decision makers worry about women's participation because of the limited numbers of seats. By any measure, an analysis of women's status in relation to decision-making is not complete without considering the extent to which women have attained those positions. Indicators related to the level of legislation, jurisdiction, and executive branches are outcomes of the entire process of societal interaction. Additionally, they are entry points that can influence women's participation in all aspects of life. Among the questions that must be raised are those related to determining the indicators of the gaps between men and women in light

of the absence of the vast majority of members of society in the political system, either through elections, parliamentary councils, or other means of participation.

National Governmental Policies

Women's absence from decision-making positions or their limited ability for influencing decisions is one of the most important fields of research. It is crucial in this field to study the extent of countries' commitment to policies that fulfill (at least to the minimum) international obligations in the scope of gender as related to the agreement "to end all forms of discrimination against women" and the recommendations of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing (1995) and other world summits. In spite of a number of countries' recognition of those provisions and agreements, the commitment remains at the token level and is not at the core. Moreover, the commitment only touches the lives of a limited number of women, especially those from rich and influential classes.

At the same time, in spite of the importance of countries' commitment and execution of international provisions, the role of the State in protecting women's rights is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, and within the hegemonic authoritarian regimes in Arab countries, the State monopolizes the agenda, priorities, and means of working for change. On the other hand, feminist demands are kept below a ceiling of real change in attaining equality but are reduced to the level of programs and projects, limited in their scope and influence, in order to add legitimacy to State control over women's status and to keep women within the limits and frames chosen by the State. In this way, the State includes a number of theorists and academics, men and women alike, working within civil society institutions involved in attempting to change women's status within the established authoritarian regime, without effecting any radical change. In this way, these men and women provide the legitimacy needed by the State, in order to suppress meaningful feminist demands. At the same time, governments exempt themselves from protecting women in other fields such as personal and family issues, social security and retirement, by tying these sorts of protection to paid work within the official capitalist system. The State, sometimes, also abandons its role in protecting women of specific ethnic and religious minorities by delegating family and inheritance issues to social and religious institutions within those minority groups.

The Economy (the Market)

Women's participation in decision-making cannot be studied without considering the relation between the political elite and the economic elite. In many instances, decision makers in the political and economic spheres are the same individuals. The political capitalist is a common characteristic of many decision makers. Additionally, many important decisions take place within the private (commercial) sector and affect the status of women either at the level of financial policies, banking, and loans, or state policy toward employment, work, protection of women's rights to equal employment and equal pay, vacations, and other rights. There are several indicators related to the private sector that should be studied closely when researching women's status in decision-making. Although a number of women have achieved important positions in business, their percentage is still small and their success in achievement has been reached within isolated and highly contingent circumstances.

Arab Decision-making

Many important decisions (even if they are at the level of tokenism) are taken in the caucuses or councils of Arab institutions, among them institutions such as the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and regional and economic organizations. We are not going to study the importance of these institutions in the Arab world; however it will be necessary to study women's status in those institutions in detail, later.

The Global System (United Nations, Funding Institutions, Multinational Corporations, Technology, and Media)

What applies to Arab institutions applies to a greater extent to women's presence and their representation in different international institutions, especially UN organizations and funding and economic institutions (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization). The influence of the programs and policies of these institutions might exceed institutional policies of national governments, especially in light of the globalization of international funding in governments and civil institutions. Arab women's status is also affected by this international system. The intersections between the work of these institutions and national

institutions should be studied in order to understand women's status, gender relations, and the negative (or positive) effects on their lives resulting from the programs, policies, and projects executed by these institutions.

This globalized dimension gains additional importance in relation to the effect of technology, the Internet, and the international communication and media network on women's entry into positions of decision-making at the local and international level and their ability to provide opportunities or pose additional challenges, especially that the extent of pressures on women and their living standards increase through the alliance of local and international patriarchal institutions aimed at maintaining the status quo.

On Gender and Decision-making: Results from the Field Approaches and Goals

Approaching the issue of participation in decision-making begins with an analysis based on developing gender. The importance of understanding the economic, social, cultural, and institutional structures within Arab societies, in light of globalization, is also considered. Accordingly, the concept and forms of decision-making are discussed and expanded; and the factors within which women's and men's capacity to contribute to the decision-making processes at different levels are analyzed, taking into consideration the emerging and renewed relation among these levels (within the family, the economy, the state, and civil society institutions). Quantitative and qualitative indicators were relied upon to help understand forms of participation, accomplishments, and gaps.

For an advanced comprehensive analysis, decision-making should be regarded as a process. This takes place within political, economic, social, and cultural contexts. This process is shaped in the context of social roles and gender relations within a differentiated distribution of power between men and women, among women themselves, and among men themselves, depending on their social and economic backgrounds. The approach adopted in this report emphasizes the importance of the incorporation of gender in all policies, decisions, and institutions. Women achieved progress in all fields of decision-making (horizontal integration) and at all levels of authority (vertical integration), in decision making.

Decision-making takes place within the context of a complex process that is affected by the form and content of the relations of gender roles.

These decisions take into consideration women's practical and direct needs, relative to their reproductive roles, in addition to their economic and political productive roles. At the same time, these decisions aim to change gender social roles in order to reach equality within an enabling environment for both sexes and at the same degree.

This chapter relies on the data obtained while working on the Report on Arab Women of 2006–2008 wherein a participatory method was adopted. Moreover, annual meetings of the Anjed Network³ were used as a motivation for sharing visions around the subject, which resulted in a number of background papers that contributed to the present analysis. The analysis employed participatory gender studies that relied on Arab women's experiences in their daily context and in their relations to men, family, government institutions, the economic sphere, and civil society. Accordingly, the original reports as well as this chapter include points of views of women and men and their practical experiences in order to reach recommendations that are reflective of reality. The analysis relied on national reports of six Arab countries: Tunisia, Sudan, Lebanon, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco. These countries were chosen based on their geographic distribution and the nature of their economic and political regimes. National teams worked on preparing local reports based on in-depth interviews (70 interviews were conducted with women and 30 with men), 16 life histories, and case studies, in addition to 6 focus groups. The qualitative study in this report also relied on quantitative data, taken from institutional reports produced by international organization in the field.

The Public and the Private in Women's Lives: Some Qualitative Results

In light of the absence of social welfare institutions, gender roles constitute an added burden on women, in terms of patterns of obtaining rights, where these rights are often less for them. Women's entry into the public sphere has not been accompanied by a redistribution of gender roles within the private sphere, which doubled women's burdens and limited their ability to enter into public life and their capacity to influence decisions in the

³ Anjed Network is a network of organizations working to promote the status of women in the Arab World; the network is coordinated by CAWTAR (Center for Arab Women Training and Research).

realms of legislation and policy-making, in addition to other factors interfering with achieving equality. Thus, the social system still works on limiting women's capacity to participate in decision-making processes at all levels. Moreover, gender roles at the family level, including reproductive roles, household roles, and production roles, are still the most important factors in limiting women's abilities to venture into the workplace and the political world. Women still combine household work, taking care of their family members of different ages and social backgrounds, with managing the family purchases and expenses as well as day-to-day operational decisions. It is also noticeable that the kind of rights and duties women possess at the family level are guaranteed based on authorization from men, or the lack of their objection. However, such rights could be withdrawn or imperiled the moment men feel the need to do that. Women make many decisions within the family unit out of necessity to fill the void left by men who delegate the burden to women, all the while retaining their positions of inspectors. In case a man feels a transformation in those duties into rights, he resorts to withdrawing some of what he had delegated to the woman to emphasize that he is the first and foremost decision maker.

Souad of Saudi Arabia: Work Does not Guarantee Equality

The examples for the qualitative study are abundant. Here, a testimony from Souad (Saudi, government employee, 40 years old) is a case in point. Souad is married to a 75-year-old man. He has a low income and received assistance from charitable organizations. She is one of four wives. Souad has basic education at the elementary level. She works as an employee and has eight children. She lives in an apartment of two rooms. Her husband has a total of 22 daughters and 10 sons from his four wives.

From Souad's testimony, the distribution of gender roles within the family are clearly revealed when she says:

I am responsible for the house management, taking care of the children, buying necessities, paying bills except for electricity that is shared amongst everybody. My husband's economic contribution is very limited within the household, but he takes the kids to school." Even when she obtains assistance, it comes from other women around, for "boys do not contribute anything. The girls help in the house. I also have a low-salaried Sri Lankan maid who looks after the children when I am at work.

Souad's role in day-to-day decision-making gets more significant, considering that she is a working woman compared to the rest of the wives when she emphasizes that, "*decision-making in our family is related to the ability to spend. I am the one who gives my husband the authority, for I am the stronger and who has the upper hand.*" However her daily decision-making for her family, as opposed to the rest of the husband's families, does not extend to true decisions that remain exclusive to the husband, "*I make decisions regarding all household affairs, except for marriage, traveling, and leaving the house.*"

Accordingly, the right to work becomes a functional right that her husband can withhold from her. For he is the one who decides on her leaving the house and therefore going to work. She uses what she earns to look after her husband and to exempt him from his responsibilities. Souad goes on to say, "*I am the one who built the house that I live in with my children from a bank loan. But unfortunately the deed is in my husband's name because of the laws and the social and family circumstances. My bank account is in my husband's name.*"

Women, especially those not financially capable, often attempt to manipulate the general circumstances that oppress them and make their husbands feel that they are the decision-makers. Souad testifies: "*I am strong and independent but manipulative when necessary. He is weak due to his age and his personality.*" Yet she internalizes justifications from the cultural and religious systems to support her ability to accept her conditions and to influence the husband's decisions, "*I treat my husband gently and with love because I fear God and I don't want to teach my children bad dealings... through this treatment, I can change [my husband's] positions.*" Facing the legal, political, cultural, and social establishments, women, especially the poor among them, often does not find opportunities for empowerment and improvement. For instance, if a woman resorts to family members, she often encounters strong opposition, in an attempt to oblige her to accept the status quo as the best option. Souad says: "*My husband incites my family against me. And they do not want to be troubled with my problems, my expenses, or my children's responsibilities. My return to their home with my children would be a burden that they do not want.*"

A woman finds herself facing the entire society, in light of the complete absence of any governmental, institutional, or family support. Souad gives evidence of this, saying, "*I think that all societal institutions neither serve nor assist a woman, instead, they stand against her. Courts and legislation oppose*

a woman. Religious institutions control her. And organizations do not play a role in her life.”

Although it might seem that Souad’s concerns are personal matters, this case study emphasizes that what could be considered personal matters for women are in fact first-order public issues in the Arab world. Moreover, Souad presents some solutions for empowering women and improving their conditions when she says, “*Women should be allowed to drive a car. We need the State to play the role in raising the status of women. Emphasis should be on training, professional development and on opportunities for women to work even in co-ed situations.*”

From Tunisia: Muneera’s Concerns Go Beyond the Laws

Actually, Souad’s testimony does not mean that the phenomena shown are exclusive to her particular country, Saudi Arabia, and that they do not exist in other nations within the Arab world. On the contrary, for although women obtained many rights in many countries, the relationship between the public and private spheres still substantially impacts women choices, including the educated among them as well as those in higher positions, involving degrees of decision-making.

Muneera’s case (Tunisian, head of department in a governmental institution, 48) shows that reproductive roles are still the primary indicator for women’s role in the public and private spheres and to their achievement of decision-making positions, in light of the absence of a societal institutional system that provides childcare and offers family-assisting services. She says:

In the beginning of my career, I worked at the Ministry of Transportation (Transportation Department). I was very comfortable back then. Whereas what bothered me and made me change my job was the long distance that separated me from home, when I had a newborn and one on the way. When an opportunity arose to work part-time at a specialized hospital, under the National Social Security Fund, I could not let it pass. Working part-time was what interested me, because working hours for a woman employee and for an employee in general is not flexible. I am against this timing because it forces you to leave your newborn from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., with all the problems that could arise from this situation, and then you must take care of the baby till 11 p.m. I wonder how I am supposed to open up and grow under these circumstances. I was really miserable because I could not see my baby except for two hours a day. So when I was offered this job at the Fund, which allows me to be home after 2 p.m., I gave up everything and prioritized myself. But the work in the hospital does not allow for growth or professional development. Although many managers

suggested to me moving to the Headquarters, this does not suit me because of the part-time opportunity the Fund provides me.”

From the aforementioned we deduce that family support for women within and outside the family context, and all the changes that took place within gender roles play a decisive role in empowering women and their ability to advance and to make decisions at all levels.

Thuraya from Sudan: Family Support is Key

As for Thuraya, a 45-year-old Sudanese business owner, her family circumstances were influential in her public trajectory. She says:

For me, my personal circumstances contributed to my arrival at positions of decision-making. For, my father is a political activist, and in my family I lived all the circumstances of political work. Second, my belonging to the ruling political party expanded the opportunities to contribute to decision-making. Moreover, being the daughter of a well-known politician made the opportunities of active participation easier, and provided an easy entry for me, as well as enabling me to directly influence the higher leadership.

This formula is not available for most women in the Arab world. Family hindrances are often among the largest challenges facing women. Men have the power to restrict women's movement and their going out to the workplace. For every supportive and helpful father, husband, and brother, there are also those who are authoritarian, indifferent, absent, and possessive. In very few cases, the cooperative “partner” husband appears to saliently change his role in the family, to reach a fair redistribution of roles between him and his wife. The testimonies in this report highlighted some unjustified exaggeration in relation to man's support to his wife. For such support becomes a topic of exaggeration among men, as a quite unusual condition, whereas women's support of men is considered greater in most cases, and with no return or appreciation for such support and its translation into equal rights. Rajaa (Tunisian, owner of an industrial and trade organization, 60 years old) says, “*Every time men recognize a woman as CEO, they say and believe ‘she must have a man: He’s her husband, her brother or her son.’ I answer them, ‘Do women work alone? I, for example, worked with my husband when he started his project. I was always giving 100 percent. I even worked more than everybody else.’*”

The change in a husband's role and his fulfillment of that role toward the family constitutes the main factor for women's empowerment and enabling her to take a true opportunity for development professionally, socially, and politically. But the husband is also the product of a social culture that raises sons on strength, courage, veering toward control, dealing with crises and the exterior world, and making decisions regardless of obligations. Whereas girls are brought up on shyness and modesty, conviction of inferiority, offering services without contributing to decisions or expectations for enjoying equal rights. The case studies portrayed in this report show the influence of patriarchal culture on raising women, their reluctance to assume leadership positions, and their exploitation by men as well as by institutions in order to prove on paper participation for women.

In addition to all those factors, the absence of a democratic system and how this causes a lack in educational curricula, political, social, and media institutions, in shaping awareness of justice and women rights, principles of democracy that require equal participation in decision-making for men and women. Samah, a 48-year-old Sudanese program officer in an international organization, says:

Among the factors negatively affecting women in reaching positions of decision-making is the regressive view society has towards women, and that she is weak and inefficient; men's inferior regard towards women and the way they treat them as less intellectual and maturity; incorrect interpretation of religious concepts such as "women lack mind and religiosity," and the scarcity of women who reached high positions of decision-making to stand as role models, and open the field for other women; the social norms and traditions that limit women's freedom of mobility.

The patriarchal mentality varies according to variables such as gender and education. It is more widespread among men than women. Moreover, it is aggravated among those who have only a modest level of education. It is worth mentioning that the social and cultural situation of a given country is reflected at the same level as men and women's attitudes toward women's participation. For example, women do not differ a lot from men in Saudi Arabia in terms of their views regarding women's right to drive a car. The majority of both sexes do not see a justification of this right. If we were to compare this to another country, such as Lebanon, for example, we find that the majority of men and women support women's right to work, mobility, and participation, albeit with an incomplete recognition of women as an entity.

Despite the verbal support for the importance of women's participation in decision-making, such support is often translated into less than equal participation. In fact, the approval for participation is given under disabling conditions that empty out the concept of decision-making from its content. As has been shown above, language use becomes a part of a cultural system that instills man's superiority and the superficial entrance of women into the field of decision-making. In most cases, the decision is reserved to men. In the best cases decisions are reached by "consultation" or "mutual understanding," according to the expression of the majority. And these words "consultation or understanding" seem as if they are the lifesavers to express men's feelings of lack of guilty conscience and women's feeling of satisfaction and equity.

The role of the relation between the family and governmental policies is also clarified in all aspects that influence women's abilities and empowerment. The law still represents, albeit in varying degrees from one country to another, the most significant impediment against women's progress and development and the most important indicator of power relations and discrimination between men and women. Sohair, a 41-year-old Egyptian university professor, gives a testimony that illuminates the nature of the relations between culture and law on the one hand, and woman's ability to professionally develop on the other hand, through concessions she gives in order to adapt to the roles and values that society instilled in girls and boys. She says:

Since our engagement, I used to travel to supervise girls' training camps. But he refused and said do not travel and stay overnight. So I stopped going to camps, as a woman. Why bother? I can accept this or, unwillingly accept it! I can accept it, no problem. Or I am obliged to accept it in order to adapt to his character. I must adapt to him. Otherwise we will be completely on opposite ends. This would be difficult. Sometimes I get ready to go out for some reason, either an interview relevant to a research project or some other private matter. Then he starts mixing jokes with seriousness and say: I'd divorce you if you go out. I say: what shall I do in this case? Of course I stay home.

Sohair still adopts ideas prevailing in society, despite her university education. She considers housework to be women's responsibility and does not blame the husband or not participating in this housework, even if her work outside demands more effort than her husband's. She says:

I do all housework, except for weekly cleaning where a maid comes. I do daily chores at least three continuous hours. When the maid cannot come, I have to do the weekly cleaning on

my day off. If I need to see a doctor or to get something from the market, his permission is a must. This is a duty in Islam; a woman is not to leave her house, even to visit her family, without her husband's permission.

Women's subordination to men is intensified through laws, in all relevant aspects to women's personal life or within the political and economic domains. According to Mohamed, a 45-year-old Saudi Arabian civil society activist, "*The major impediment is the 'trusteeship' system of men over women that is enshrined by law in everything: education, traveling, legal custody, marriage, divorce, polygamy, and child care.*"

Additionally, the nature of the economic system associated with women's household roles, as well as daily transactions, impacts and limits women's capacity for participation. Customs and traditions also stand in the way of women's attempts for progress. This is illustrated in Awatef's testimony (Moroccan, contractor, 42 years old):

The difficulties that I face at work are related to my work hours. For example if it is specified that work starts at 7:30 a.m. and they could go as late as 8:30 p.m. this presents difficulties to my decisions, especially in regards to closing time, appointments, and communication. I must always be present to make sure there are no abuses. Support and assistance to women is less than to men. Moreover, it could be that women's clothing, her appearance, and/or her behavior cause her problems at work. And this could be used against her. For example I faced a problem at a telephone booth at a hospital, for there is an organization where a number of people are involved (Muslim Brotherhood members, with long beards). When I went to complain to an official, he mused me, but indirectly, said, 'if you were the greatest one of all women you wouldn't have been treated this way.' They made up reasons, and hindrances for me to give up. Society regards my position as one of a man's, and prefers that a man would be in my place. I am a mother and my children finish school at 5:30 p.m. and I should be home by 6 p.m. at the latest, in order to look after them and fulfill their needs, while men do not have these obligations and responsibilities. A man can enter the house after midnight, given the extent of his work. It's hard to balance between being a real estate agent and a housewife. Working outside the house and going home late could be interpreted by some people in a way that might hurt my reputation. My job requires that I talk to men, laugh with them, and sometimes go to a café with them in order to negotiate a deal. But society's view of such behaviors is contrary to the truth because they accrue to things that are not true of me."

War and violence are primary factors that prevent women from achieving success in work, especially when it comes to entrepreneurial projects. Nidal, a 60-year-old Lebanese businesswoman, says, "*I seriously tried to own a commercial store. It happened that I knew that there was a store for sale. So I paid the down payment. But due to the war, the store was bombed.*"

It is clear from the aforementioned that the development that took place in women's roles in positions of decision-making at the workplace did not leave its mark on the decisions and responsibilities of men and women within the family. In spite of the tendency toward more participatory patterns of decision-making, the decisions are still essentially divided along gender: Women make decisions regarding home and family, spending on daily necessities or child rearing. In other words, they make decisions on things related to the private sphere. These are decisions that require follow-up, responsibility, and additional burdens. Yet they do not lead to more power or rights. Women share with men decisions related to children's education, marriages, and reproductive health. However, major family decisions are still reserved to men, especially those linked to the public domain, including economic matters such as investments, or sale and purchase of real estate. More importantly, decisions concerning the lives of women themselves are still hostage the mood and desires of men, with cultural, societal, and legal support.

Conclusions Regarding Gender and Decision-making in the Arab World

Important Political Achievements

Women accomplished a lot in terms of participation in decision-making processes at all levels. Moreover, it is clear that there is a change at the degree of sensitivity among decision makers toward the concept of gender. These achievements represent a state of social mobility in Arab countries. Yet they do not exceed being attempts that have not lived up to bringing fundamental changes in the nature of the systemic societal and cultural structures that perpetuate discrimination between men and women at all aspects of life.

Role Models in Private and Public Sphere

Women role models have appeared in the Arab world. They have progressed to decision-making positions as presidential candidates and parliamentarians; as ministers, directors for local and international institutions; in political parties and civil society organizations, in addition to entrepreneurial work and decision makers in the private sectors and as heads of households who struggle for the benefits of their families. These

role models are symbolically important, for they break the barrier the male-dominated decision making molds, as well as the sanctity accorded to such dominance.

Additionally, these role models offer young girls “successful models” that they could seek to emulate in the future. As a matter of fact, however, women reaching these decision-making positions are still very limited in number both qualitatively and quantitatively. More importantly, such breakthroughs and achievements are still threatened since they have not been accompanied by changes in women’s capacities to make decisions in what relates to their own being—the body, the self, and within the family unit. Discriminatory laws against women emphasizing their dependency on men are still in place.

Moreover, such laws enable men to resort to them whenever the need arises or whenever they see it appropriate. This is to pull the rug from under the women who took strides in the public and private spheres, by consent or authorization of men within the general social sphere. And so far such achievements have not been translated into substantial changes in the dominant culture that still regards women as inferior.

Prevalent Patriarchal Tendencies

In spite of the transformations witnessed by family and women conditions in Arab society, the traditional social power still infuses patriarchal authority with legitimacy, providing men with the privilege to make crucial decisions. This occurs even when some women assume political positions, since society continues to measure women’s success by the extent to which they adopt patriarchal values, roles, and attitudes. But by accelerating the pace of social change, the presumed “complementarity/ integration” between genders also changes, allowing for women’s increase opportunities to develop their autonomy. This happened for two main reasons: First, a growing proportion of women entered the workforce resulting in an economic independence and mobility outside the house. Secondly, broad categories of women were enabled to make decisions regarding maternal roles, and accordingly causing, to a large extent, a separation between sex and reproduction. This new situation increased the degree of flexibility in performing different roles, leading to the emergence of a new path of marital negotiation with the intention of redistributing roles and creating conditions of adaptation to that new status.

Diverse Family Patterns

The fieldwork showed various family patterns concerning decision-making. “The suppressive family” is a traditional family based on full suppression and exploitation of women and their rights. This family is usually characterized by a passive role for men, meaning the man’s abdication of his responsibilities toward his family almost completely, while exploiting the family members for his personal interests. This oppression includes resorting to polygamy, arbitrary divorce, or making the wife and children work for his service. Additionally, direct violence and oppression are practiced—facilitated by society’s consent—in order to reinforce man’s authority over family members.

The second type is the patriarchal “traditional family” where the father is at the top of the family’s hierarchical authority. He makes decisions or delegates as deemed appropriate for the family’s interests. Within this type, the mother and children work side by side with the husband in order to apply what the man believes to be in the best interest of the family. The husband directs his wife to do specific tasks, such as taking care of the sons and daughters until a certain age, managing finances, and playing a role in raising children.

The third type is the “hybrid family” in which both husband and wife work outside the house. Within this type, the real power remains in the hands of men, but they may significantly give up on making a lot of decisions related to the family. The man rather delegates decision making to the woman, putting more burdens on her shoulders, without redistribution of roles within the private sphere.

The fourth type is the “oscillating family”. This could be described as an interactive family type, based on competition between the man and woman sometimes and on cooperation at other times. In that case, both the husband and wife are capable individuals, versed and aware of their own rights and the rights of the other partner. Accordingly, the final distribution of roles depends on the circumstances of each partner as well as their individual abilities to express himself or herself, their interests and their understanding of their relationship. In this case, each party is capable of making individual decisions. However, joint decisions are made depending on each party’s personal ability to negotiate, as well as their individual status in the relationship in terms of income and strength of character. In this family type, the objective factors of society’s reality are less influential.

Although they are still present, and accessible, just in case the man changes his mind or principles, and develops a need to resort to societal support in the form of existing customs, traditions and laws as he draws strength from them in his attempts to control the woman.

The fifth type is that of the “participatory family.” This is a rare type, where men and women agree to cooperate together in order to face the objective conditions that hinder achieving equality between them. Both work outside the house and return home to share household tasks, child-care. Moreover, the man pro-actively supports the woman in facing societal pressures and legal difficulties that stand in the way of her ability to develop and progress. This family type often requires fewer children, and a common cultural awareness of the importance of equality for both men and women in achieving their humanity.

In addition to the aforementioned family types, another family type continues to grow in Arab societies, including “Female-headed Households,” and what that means in terms of women being burdened by all aspects of negotiating the family’s public and private realms. It is important to note here that these types are affected by the dominance of nuclear, extended or clan-based families within the society and the subsequent complexities in understanding roles and relationships.

Differentiation in the Patterns of Decision-making

In many cases, women follow similar decision-making mechanisms as men do, at the family level and in the workplace, as a way of “accepting” existing dominant patriarchal culture and in order to avoid conflict. After all, women and men in the Arab world are ultimately the product of the cultural and social system of their communities.

However, the field study demonstrated that women, qualitatively, differ from men in their decision-making style and at many levels. Women tend to veer towards a participatory decision-making style, allowing more space for democratic consultation with peers and colleagues. Women also, take into account the interests of the different groups involved, such as the family, community and society in general. Women add to decision-making a larger space for dialogue rather than conflict, and teamwork rather than individual input, and collective benefit rather than personal. That said, however, a number of women do practice decision-making mechanisms that are in line with the prevailing patriarchal decision making patterns within the dominant culture.

Double Burden, Dwindling Rights

Women decision-making process within the family is in most cases, an additional burden on them, whether they work or are housewives. It is in fact a form of men escaping their family responsibilities regarding reproductive health care and meeting the needs of their homes and families. Gradually, these burdens and additional tasks constitute the meaning of women's existence and presence in the family. This is often referred to, mistakenly, within the patriarchal culture, as women's "hidden power." In reality these are capacities women enjoy through the authorization of the men in the family, in order to alleviate their own burdens. Men can withdraw such authorization, as they see fit.

The Body Sphere... the Gate to Decisions

The question of decision-making, first and foremost is tied to the human's ability (woman or man) to control the Self, including the body, the mind and the spirit, liberating them all from external control. For she who does not have the right to decide on matters regarding her body would hardly have a similar right to different aspects of her life. A lot of what Arab girls are subjected to comes to mind in terms of: marrying them off at an early age, so-called "honor" killing, female circumcision, direct and indirect coercion to wear particular clothing, and limitations on sexual freedom and freedom of movement.

High Fertility Rates

Controlling the body and women's self-actualization is affected by their ability to make decisions regarding their reproductive health. Fertility rates of Arab women are among the highest in the world, which subjects women to reproductive service without any time for self-realization or influence on other aspects of life. It is noted that fertility rates vary significantly from one Arab country to another. They are lower in countries such as Tunisia and Lebanon, where women participate in the labor force and where governments have clear policies supporting family planning and granting rights to women in various walks of life, especially with regard to individual freedoms, whereas other countries such as Palestine, Somalia and the Sudan, have much higher fertility rates than the world average and the Arab world's average. High fertility rates are associated with certain patterns

of development, where poverty, destitution, political violence and social instability prevail.

Early Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation

The question of productive health is linked to early marriage, where some girls are forced to marry at the age of 16 sometimes, and in some cases down to 10 years old. A set of complex factors are associated with pushing or forcing young girls into marriage, most notably poverty, lack of education, large family size, rigidity of the attitudes towards women, fear for the girl's and subsequently family honor and seeking a provider for the girl instead of her family. The process of early marriage takes place by manipulating the law, which restricts the minimum age of marriage allowed for both sexes in many Arab countries. Moreover, some Arab and African societies practice female genital mutilation, in belief that this procedure will reduce the sexual desire of the girl when she reaches puberty.

Victims of Violence

Women in the Arab world are murdered daily. Some die as victims of foreign occupation, as is the case in Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon. Others fall prey to sectarian and ethnic violence. And more die in poverty, need and destitution. Among them are citizens of the Arab world and others are foreign women workers who get assaulted. Killing of women may also occur as a result of forced pregnancy that does not correspond to their health conditions or the needs of their bodies. For women's fatality during and after pregnancy remains a main cause of death among Arab women. Additionally, some women undergo abortion for social reasons and have those operations conducted in unsanitary conditions. Moreover, hundreds of women are killed as a result of direct violence against the girl child who may die as a result of neglect due to social discrimination, oppression, violence, physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuse.

Arbitrary Divorce

Divorce in the Arab world is mostly arbitrary. It is nonetheless, prescribed by law. It is also a unilateral divorce, since women are not able to get a

divorce except within specific terms and conditions provided by law. In most cases, a male judge legitimizes those conditions. In most Arab countries, a man continues to have the right to divorce his wife without any negotiations or legal proceedings. The Tunisian case remains the exception since in Tunisia there is no room for divorce but within a legal framework necessitating the presence of the two parties, and in reservation of the rights of both.

Unjust Laws

The Arab legislator still regards the relationship between women and men with suspicion. He formulates legislation on the assumption that women are by nature “delinquent” and that an authoritarian or tolerably authoritarian man should control them. Thus the Law gives men all tools needed to keep control over a woman’s body and self. The laws in the Arab world (family, criminal, and labor . . .) all contribute to reinforcing men’s power over women.

Unbalanced Roles and Relationships

The relationships within the family are characterized by men’s control over women, by the objectification and codification of a woman’s body and by considering that body a man’s property, whose movement, potential, and reproduction he controls. Men also control women’s “Self” and mind to the point where women become prisoners of the prevailing culture since childhood and till an older age and beyond gaining marital and family experiences.

This occurs in connivance of culture, laws, and the State. Additionally, the change in women roles to enter the public sphere has not been associated with men’s carrying out family responsibilities related to their reproductive role, nor with a community responsibility crystallized by the State and civil society to render the reproductive role an overall societal responsibility not restricted to women alone. Moreover, neither laws have been established nor a conducive culture that stimulates genuine participation of women has been promoted.

A Healthy Family Relationship

Dialogue, understanding, mutual respect and autonomy of each of the spouses are essential characteristics and pillars for achieving success in building a marital relationship based on equality and shared responsibility. Unlike men who make their decisions based on their power to define reality and their control over normative statements to the extent of allowing themselves to deviate from such normative forms when necessary, women participate in decision-making from a position of injustice that discriminate against them within the framework of sexual division of labor, relations of dependency on men and an unequal integration in the public domain.

Moreover, the social practices of the majority of women who have not yet delved into labor and educational realms still fall under the rule of “a system of gender differentiation” which is rooted in older times and is currently expressed through various forms of social regulation and control.

The Importance of Family Support

Relations of synergy and mutual influence are formed among various social, economic and political institutions such as the family, the non-governmental organization, the political party, the union and the State. For, the woman who is successful in her social, civil or economic activities is the one who receives her husband's or family support of and whose dignity and independence are maintained and guarded within their scope. She is also the woman who participates in family-related decision-making within communicative and dialogue-oriented framework. What is woven and ensues within family relationships and what takes place in terms of family events and the kind of decisions taken, are inevitably reflected in women's capacity in terms of level of participation in public life. It is also unlikely that women participate in decision-making at the level of public institutions and not do so within their family life.

True Participation without Value or Rights

This study has shown that women's contribution to decision-making may equal to or exceed that of men, especially at the level of household tasks and how that contribution bring benefits to the economy and to society.

Thus the problem is not in the size of the contribution and the subsequent responsibilities and burdens, but in the community's assessment of this contribution. For, the decisions made by men in the public sphere (political or economic decisions) are materially well compensated for. They also give men extra political power in law making and allow them to influence the media and school curricula. In contrast, the contribution of women in decision-making and the burdens related to reproduction, family matters and responsibilities towards their surrounding community go unappreciated and neither materially nor rightfully compensated for.

The Importance of Working in the Public Domain

Perhaps women's familiarity with prevailing patriarchal practices and with dominant values made them qualified to give their all with substantial excellence. Therefore, it is necessary to open the door to women's participation in community organizational work and political parties, and to create for them a space that enables them to take initiative. Additionally, all forms of support in the fields of economics and finance should be provided for women entrepreneurs.

Paid Work, Relative Independence

The human element, with its capacities and qualifications, remains the decisive factor in expanding the scope of participation in decision-making in all realms, such as the family, civil society as well as political parties and professional organization. The point now is that women, compared to men, represent the least benefiting category from education, training and employment in the private and public sectors. Therefore, they are less prepared to assume positions of responsibility and decision. The following are among the key factors that impede women's access to these positions: Inclusion of the majority of women within the "housewives" category of; aggravation of unemployment among women than it is for men. On the other hand allows her to work outside the home permits a degree of autonomy within a woman's family life and it also enables her to participate effectively in decision-making. However, paid work remains a necessary but not sufficient factor for such autonomy.

Education is Vital . . . But What Kind of Education?

Achieving a level of education, for men and women alike, allows women to prove herself socially as an active, conscious and influential entity within her family and her surrounding community. A woman's acquisition of intellectual capacities and communication mechanisms enable her to continue to participate actively in decision-making, to defend it in case of its adoption and to achieve success in its implementation. In contrast, illiteracy is the exclusion of women from decision-making sphere. If access to educational opportunities has allowed some women to participate in decision-making within and outside the family, such participation for the broad categories of women who have not had her right to education remains incomplete. It remains important also to emphasize the quality of the accompanying education and culture and whether they contribute to creating an enabling environment towards equality or not.

Modification of Men's Roles, Modification of Societal Structures

It is a network of relationships and factors that makes it almost impossible to expand the participation of women, except for participation in clerical jobs, as voters or candidates who vote according the whims of men surrounding them and by cultural motives reinforcing the status quo. The understanding of the existing system, in terms of what is required to change it in relation to gender roles and values of human rights that follow, is the gateway to fundamental changes in the participation of women and men in society as a whole. Any change in the lives of women and their roles must be followed by a change in the roles of men. That may occur by changing the nature of existing systems, economic and labor relations and relevant laws, as well as the rest of the laws, especially family law and the exiting penalties that blatantly discriminate against women.

Urgent Action Plan

1. Intensification and acceleration of fighting illiteracy, especially among women.

2. Stimulating the initiative mentality among women and facilitating necessities for all those who want launch new projects. 3. Protection of women from all forms of domestic violence, especially those inflicted by

the husband. 4. Drafting a law on sexual harassment, or the inclusion of clauses on sexual harassment in all Arab legislation. 5. Ensuring the conformity of Arab national laws related to human rights and gender equality, with corresponding international laws. 6. Urging the media to provide a balanced picture of women, as well as changing women's image in academic curricula and pedagogical materials. 7. Organizing workshops in order to strengthen women capacities for decision-making and carrying their decisions through with implementation. 8. Sharing successful women's experiences in the field of decision-making and widely disseminating information on these experiences. 9. Developing a culture of human rights and equality between genders, in educational textbooks and in all training programs. 10. Adoption of a quota system or any similar mechanism in order to increase the representation of women in decision-making positions in all institutions. 11. Budgeting on the basis of gender in order to serve both men and women.

Priority Recommendations

- The social level:
 - Encouraging an integrated approach to equality between the sexes in order influence various practices and structures producing discrimination, as well as all regulations, policies and related activities.
 - Sensitizing the couples, especially men, of the importance of dialogue and consultation between spouses and among all family members, before making any decision concerning the family as a whole or one of its members.
- 2. The economic level
 - Reconsideration of gendered division of labor based on the separation between paid and unpaid work; between female and male labor, as well as combating gender discrimination in terms of access to employment, career development and assessment of remuneration paid for the same work.
 - Exertion of more efforts to prepare women to enter the labor market, as paid employees or as entrepreneurs of independent projects, and facilitating the conciliation between family life and professional life.
 - Recognizing that the job market, entrepreneurial realm and various professional organizations not only reproduce what family life creates in terms of inequality between the sexes, but that they themselves

produce new forms of inequality along the career path of women and men.

- Enabling women to benefit from various training programs at the national, regional and international levels to raise their capacity for good preparation of projects as a result of easier access to marketing networking and the use of modern communication technologies.
- Reducing globalization's negative effects on the involvement of women in the labor market, by ensuring stable work positions for them, with a fair wage, recognized social value, reserved social rights, appropriate working conditions and clear prospects for professional promotion.

The Legislative Level

- Legal recognition of the independence of women with the requisite changes in legislation.
- Advocacy for and continued solidarity with women's issues such as making all the legislative measures to amend some laws (Family Laws) and laws that discriminate against women. Endorsement or withholding reservations regarding the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and increasing representation of women in political participation (Quota appointment).
- Recognition of women's reproductive labor as formally calculated work, including what ensues from that recognition in terms of citizenship rights such as the right to health insurance, retirement benefits and equal rights in the rest of the laws.
- Legislation to make the reproductive role, including health care for pregnant mother and child a public responsibility borne by the state and the family and the private sector.
- Providing services to guide and counsel women of their legal rights at all levels.

The Cultural and Media Level

- Launching targeted national and regional campaigns aiming at mobilizing citizens and raising their awareness of the importance of expanding women's participation in public life as well as allowing women to assume positions of responsibility and decision making by utilizing strategic spaces for that.

- Promoting scientific research in order to keep pace with the development of relations between the sexes and monitoring various obstacles and difficulties women face, especially when making and decision-making.
- Conducting field research on the implications of women's participation in decision-making to the family's ability to achieve its objectives and stability.
- The preparation of media messages based on scientific evidence that would change practices and attitudes regarding women's participation in making and decision-making.
- Monitoring the achievements of women's participation in decision-making as well as the obstacles still impeding their participation.
- Collecting the experiences of women leaders in different areas, and publicly disseminating them.
- Inclusion of anti-violence against women campaigns in school programs and advocating education ministries to participate by adopting these kinds of projects.

The Political and Administrative Level

- Promoting dynamic involvement of women in decision-making positions especially in relation to the completion of administrative reforms and the adoption of principles of transparency and merit.
- Establishing objective criteria to ensure equal access to senior positions.
- Emphasizing the necessity of networking and advocacy between women's groups and the international community.
- Highlighting the need to establish an Arab network in the domain of "Women and decision-making", in order to exchange information and experiences, and to encourage research and advocacy programs in this area, as well as to develop qualitative and quantitative participation of women in decision-making at all levels and in all areas.
- Building a strategy to change the status of women in decision-making processes, based on the involvement of all segments of society in this struggle.

Towards a Feminist Perspective of Examining Decision-making

Producing an Arab report on women and decision-making requires the use of an approach consistent with feminist perspectives on methods and

focused on qualitative research. Feminist approaches use multiple research methods where creativity constitute an important factor associated with the research methods, employing all disciplines of knowledge, either individually or with each other. Feminism adopts research methodologies either the way they are or with modifications. Yet there are situations where feminist researchers cannot use any of the methods, despite modifications, which call for the creation of a new approach (new /original) to answer the research questions.⁴ Moreover, feminist researchers are interested in women as individuals and also as a social class. Also, they note that there are similarities among women, but at the same time there are differences and variations, linked to the different communities and environments where they live. It is also to be noted that there could be some greater power for women in a particular community compared to women in other societies, in relation to their understandings and experiences, which they had received in their lives. Despite the fact that the researcher is a woman her experiences are different from the studied women.

Knowing the impact of gender requires a return to multiple fields of study and recognition of the importance of gender as a basic fact of social life. Among the most important elements are:

First: Women and their experiences, including their relationship with men is the focus of questions and research. Research analyzes the lives of women and their world.

Second: Knowledge about the prevailing social human behavior is in fact knowledge about men's behavior, for production of knowledge has relied on men and constituted as them as natural subjects for research, rendering the world a man's world. Since men took on the academic fields, where research is carried out, a masculine scientific culture has been established that has taken its characteristics from males. Their social life became the ground for the Academy.

Third: Looking at the researcher from a gender perspective and understanding the general experiences of women researchers is of importance.

⁴ Carlson, R. (1972). Understanding women: Implications for personality theory and research. *Journal of Social Issues*, 28(2), 17–32
Smith, Dorothy. (1987). The everyday world as problematic: A feminist Methodology. In Dorothy Smith(ED.), *The everyday world as problematic* (pp. 105–145). Boston: Northeastern University Press.
Weskott, Marcia. (1979). Feminist criticism of the social sciences. *Harvard Educational Review*, 49(4), 422–430.

Women as social subjects are characterized by gender inequality, which enabled Feminist researchers to focus more on women's reality.

Fourth: Qualitative research, the use of case studies and content analysis are among the most important methods of obtaining knowledge that contributes to discovering the world through women's eyes. Regarding the most important issues that still need further research and scrutiny, the following list is offered:

The Relationship between Women's Reproductive Health and Decision-making

Limiting the reproductive role and its tasks to women and recognizing the impact of all of this on all phases of decision-making in public and private spheres are important. Thus, understanding the position of the female body and its sexuality within the culture and the reflection of this on roles, relationships and rights is indeed at the core of understanding all levels and realms of decision-making.

Quota System and Legislation

A deeper understanding and analysis of the role of the quota system and the legislations within various Arab countries and examining the possibility of their reunification are necessary.

Re-evaluation of Policies, Programs and Projects

It is essential to conduct an assessment of the nature of programs and projects aiming at the advancement of women in order to participate in decision-making. These include training and awareness programs, economic support programs such as small and micro-economic projects, and programs in support of women in investment, in addition to reproductive health programs and women's health, as well as all that is provided by the

State and institutions in this area, all assessment is to be from a gender perspective.

The Role of Women and Human Rights Movements

It is important to assess the role of women's movements and organizations in promoting women's participation in decision-making and to review their programs, mechanisms of operation and action plans.

The Relationship between a Culture and the State's Orientation

It is important to understand the relationship between state policies and its leading role in the process of change towards wider and more effective participation for women. It is equally important to pay attention to culture and education and to create a state of integration and balance between the two.

Promoting Knowledge, Conducting Studies and Collecting Data

It is important to work towards establishing databases and gathering statistics in the area of gender and decision-making that involve all levels of decision-making in the private and public spheres and to develop an integrated guidebook (that includes a set of indicators in an Index) to assess the participation of women in decision-making as well as to evaluate the sources of support for women locally and nationally.