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Men Must Play Their Part in the Battle for Arab Women's Rights

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ziad-j-asali-md/men-must-play-their-part_b_5172728... [1]

I feel compelled to write this article because the issue of women's rights in the Middle East is not, strictly speaking, a "women's issue," but a pressing and urgent concern for the whole of society, and perhaps even more so, men themselves.

After all, the culture that marginalizes women -- and that bars them from success and prevents them from competing with men on a level playing field in politics, science and economics -- is largely the product of men. Therefore, the onus is on Middle Eastern men to be the first to demand and create changes in this unacceptable situation.

Men, having largely created the problem to begin with, are obliged to move quickly to liberate women from the negative impact of a culture that limits their access to, not just progress and success, but also often basic human rights. The struggle is for Arab women to attain these rights, and therefore it is a battle for the whole of society against those men (and some women) who have historically (and many continue today) defended this oppressive culture.

My point is not that men have to rescue women. That would be only to re-inscribe normative notions of dependence that lead to unjust gender hierarchies in society and reinforce patriarchal ideas. Instead, I am insisting that the battle for women's human and social rights in the Arab world cannot be resolved without a major contribution from those men who are aware of how this marginalization is not only unjust, but detrimental to society at every level and reduces the abilities of their countries to compete with others around the world. It's unlikely the demonstrations by women's rights activists in the Middle East alone can achieve the necessary corrective to an intolerable set of cultural norms. There needs to be a critical mass.

Therefore it's imperative that men throughout society, including but not limited to those who are politically active, move quickly into the front lines to join those Arab women who are demanding their rights immediately and without any delay. It's not enough to celebrate International Women's Day. This has to be a full-time commitment in the interests of the whole society, and therefore it must be dealt with by societies as a whole.

Of course, historically there have been many Arab men such as Qasim Amin, Maarouf Rusafi and others with real intellectual integrity and social consciousness that have been committed to the struggle for women's rights. They were no less courageous than leading women activists such as Houda Sha'arawi and Anbara

Salaam. They all participated together in securing real accomplishments for women at the beginning of the past century. Those men who joined the battle for women's rights did not call their masculinity into question. Instead, they insured the importance of their own historical legacy, for now their example calls for emulation in the present day.

Even though there are indications of improvement on women's rights in the region that have to be acknowledged, this project is still clearly in its infancy and faces both the reality and potential for setbacks.

One of the pitfalls that can be avoided is to shield this crucial issue from political opportunism, ideological disputes and the politics of personal advancement. Instead, if they care at all about the health of their societies and countries, people from all different political and social orientations ought to be able to put aside their differences and focus on the improvement of the status of women.

In order to create an effective program of action that can garner buy-in from the broadest possible set of constituencies we must first create a comprehensive diagnostic framework that illustrates the problems that we seek to correct which face Arab women.

A good place to start is to compare the situation in which Arab women find themselves today with circumstances in countries where women have made significant progress. Nothing makes the basic outlines of

the comparative realities clearer than the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Index [2013 thumbnail map](#)

[2]. Just a quick glance at it shows that most of the countries stained in red, indicating the largest gender gaps at all social registers, are dominated by Arab or Muslim countries, along with India and some African states. The message is obvious: both the present living conditions and future of women in these countries is in peril, and that has terrible consequences for the overall health, stability and competitiveness of those societies in a globalized world.

The popular image is that American women live under the best conditions of freedom and equality. But, in truth, women still have to work harder than men to compete at every level, and especially to achieve parity.

"The truth is that men still rule the world," wrote Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, in

her book, *Lean In*, which, though published in 2013 is still a subject of controversy in the United States.

Sandberg called on women to assume leadership positions in society as men do, and not simply bear a "double burden" in the home. She also put a due emphasis on the responsibility facing American men to collaborate in making this happen. Yet only 14 percent of senior executive positions in the United States are now held by women, and 18 percent at the Board of Directors level, despite the fact that women typically exceed men in educational and scientific excellence.

Nevertheless, women in the West and in many Asian countries are moving steadily towards achieving equality. In some countries and some fields, they are actually starting to outpace men, as noted by Liza Mundy

in her 2012 book, *The Richer Sex*.

Catching up with men, and possibly outpacing them in many social, political and economic fields is becoming a plausible part of the future for women in many countries, despite inevitable setbacks. Sadly, the outlook for

women in the Middle East and North Africa seems far less encouraging. According to the [2013 World](#)

[Economic Forum report](#) [3], this is the only region in which women did not make a measurable improvement in

their overall position during the previous year.

If we are to understand the lessons taught by the American historian Gerda Lerner, we can only interpret this

stagnation as a manifestation of a patriarchal order that is deeply rooted in human history and the anxieties and imperatives of males. As she points out, any phenomenon this deeply rooted will not be overcome without a broad and historical collective correction.

Is it just a coincidence, or might there be a direct relationship between the deplorable conditions facing women and the overall weakness and backwardness that has beset the Middle East as a region in recent decades? Certainly it's impossible for any society to make major strides forward without the active participation of half of its citizens.

Arab women urgently need to be protected by strong laws that ensure their equality to men. Moreover, they are in need of a new set of cultural attitudes that will encourage them to compete with men, and each other, in various fields. With or without the hijab, women should be promoted and encouraged to thrive. And there should be a particular emphasis on science and technology training, increased employment, and an overall improvement in their economic status.

One of the crucial shifts in the West towards women's rights occurred in the 1960s when women and others investigated the crucial distinction between "sex" and "gender." They pointed out that "sex" simply refers to biological distinctions, with no clear social meaning, whereas "gender" -- which does not have an Arabic equivalent -- refers to the entire network of social signifiers that distinguish women from men in terms of assumptions, norms and traditions that are culturally constructed, almost always to the detriment of women. Arab women are not limited by their biology from achieving, and indeed exceeding, what Western women have achieved. But their main obstacle is the ongoing assumptions they face about what is expected of and from them as women.

The problem must be seen in its broad historical context with the full weight of the past taken into account. And it must be firmly rooted in what we want for the future of women in the Arab world: advancement, progress and real achievement for themselves, their families, and the broader societies. With the appropriate diagnosis and prescription, together we, men and women alike, can work to smash the obstacles that impede women's advancement and eliminate social and psychological obstacles in the home, office, street and school.

How is it possible to have any hope for an Arab society that labors under the shadow of laws permitting the marriage of girls as young as nine, or even younger, as one government recently tried to permit? How could a 10-year-old girl raise a child? What would her future be like beyond the home? Any set of attitudes that produces such laws, even in theory, is an enemy to its own society -- its men and women, its sons and daughters. And they are unlikely to change until men raise their voices alongside those women in this all-important struggle.

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