Muslim girls struggle for education
By Safa Faisal
BBC Arabic Service

In the major capitals of the Arab world, it is very common to find girls, rather than boys, on the front pages of newspapers, celebrating their academic success.

But this conceals the fact that in total numbers, far fewer Arab girls than boys are completing - or even going into - education.

In countries like Sudan and Yemen, the situation is particularly bad. Indeed, Sudan is actually going backwards - 45% of children of school age are not attending school.

And literacy rates of women in the Arab world, according to the latest report of UNDP, are around 55%.

Traditional society

The reasons for girls' comparatively poor performances are varied, though some are common to girls' education throughout the Arab world.

In Sudan, they are undoubtedly linked to the civil war and Sudan's desperate economic situation - as well as the fact that it is such a vast country, with parents simply unwilling to let their children travel the long distances needed to attend school.

“When we asked parents why they did not allow their girls to school, they would say "because it's wrong, it's irreligious, it's improper - they should stay at home to prepare for their real life, their married life" ”

A similar problem exists in Yemen - where it is exacerbated by poor resources and funding that means children have to be taught in classes of a hundred or more.

Girls also face an added hurdle in that Yemen, as a conservative society, would usually object to the girls being educated by male teachers and mixed sex education.

But in Jordan, enrolment is excellent at 86 percent - however, girls drop out in secondary school because of early marriage.

Jordanian society is very conservative with tribal traditions and many girls are pressurized into marrying young. Some still continue their education after marriage - but many of them do not, especially if they have children.
Sociologists in the country - such as Dr Nazih Hamdi - pointed out to me that a girl's role in Jordanian society is heavily stereotyped, and this is reflected in the education students receive. The system tends to make very strong statements in school books to children, such as "my father is working and my mother is cooking".

At one Jordanian girl's secondary school, 80% of the girls I spoke to said that the first role of the woman was to stay at home and bring up her children.

I met the head of student affairs in the Jordanian Ministry of Education, who said, "In our experience, women tend not to endure work like men".

Failing

While teaching as a job is very popular to women in the Arab world - as is the case all over the globe - teachers are not paid well, and rarely receive enough training. Many also teach using very old-fashioned methods.

I found that the quality of education was affecting both girls and boys - but especially girls.

If the school environment is bad, if it is remote, unclean, and has no toilets, it is the girls who tend to give up and go back home. If the teacher is bad and is not qualified, the girls tend to simply fail at the end of the year.

After failing two or three times, the girls simply give up altogether.

When we asked parents why they did not allow their girls to school, they would say "because it's wrong, it's irreligious, it's improper - they should stay at home to prepare for their real life, their married life".

The latest UNDP report stated that education in Arab schools in the future is likely to be split into two parts - very expensive private education, enjoyed by the better-off minority, and poor quality government education for the majority.

Should this happen, it is likely it will be the girls who suffer more - Egyptian sociologist Dr Abdel-Basset Abdel-Moti said such a split would be "dangerous" for girl's education.

In the Arab family there is a tendency to pay for boys' education but not girls'.

I met a Syrian father who said to me, "I can pay for my son. But not for the girl. This is the way we are thinking in our society and this is the life that we are used to."

One of the results of these long traditions is a vicious circle whereby very few women receive the education needed to become policy-makers - and therefore education policy remains male-dominated.
Further, some Muslims in the region believe that there is little point in paying for a girl's education, as they are destined only for a life as a mother, and not a career where they could make money.

Thus money is spent on boys, who could eventually pay it back.

**Restrictions**

However, there are many who argue that this situation derives from a specific way that Islam has been interpreted in the region, rather than from Islam itself.

The Mufti of Egypt, Dr Ahmed Al-Tayeb from Luxor, told me he found a huge difference between his society and what he had been taught about Islam at university.

The principles of Islam - such as allowing women to give back her dowry in order to obtain a divorce - were not happening. In Jordan, an attempt to pass such a law failed - whereas it was accepted in the Prophet Mohammed's time, 1400 years ago.

All these problems would make a gloomy picture. However, there were always bright success stories in the countries that I visited.

I met many teachers committed to their own profession.

Fatima in Sudan, for example, agrees to run a small basic school for two villages, teaching the children in their home rather than their struggling to school. Her "nomadic school" is very popular with girls.

Elsewhere, a girl who married very young and had three children had now chosen to go back to university and is now looking at completing a Masters degree.

Meanwhile educated girls in Egypt and Sudan have begun campaigning against female circumcision - and their campaign for women's rights has even involved going out and protesting in their holidays.

Where it is received, education is obviously changing the character of Arab girls. The task now is to make sure many more are able to access it.

*A six-part series on this topic is being broadcast on BBC Arabic over the next five weeks.***

**Your comments:**

All people, regardless of age or gender deserve a good public education. There are no exceptions to this rule (assuming normality) and any attempt to make excuses is unacceptable. "Tradition" is just an excuse to oppress someone.

*Michael, USA*
Once again the corruption of a country has been associated with the teachings of Islam. One would find it impossible to quote anything in the traditions of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) or in the Holy Quran that allow, much less demand, lesser education for women. This is a case of the rich minority using Islam as their excuse for suppressing the poor majority.

Qasim Rashid, USA

“In many Arab countries girls actually outnumber boys in high school and college attendance”

Rasha Al-Mahroos, USA

While the article is correct in many aspects, it is very misleading to generalize and to say there is a problem with female education in the entire Arab world. The article only portrays the negative. However, in many Arab countries girls actually outnumber boys in high school and college attendance. In Bahrain for example, the majority of the top 10% of high school graduates are females and female attendance in the university of Bahrain is much higher than males. The 'problem' has reached a point that the university's admission's board is actually considering lowering the minimum high school GPA requirement because most male high school graduates do not meet that minimum. I know for a fact that the same problem is occurring in Kuwait as well as Oman.

Rasha Al-Mahroos, USA

In the Arab world girls are restricted by cultural beliefs not by religion. In fact, Islam encourages girls as well as boys to educate themselves, and whoever does will be rewarded. But the common problem is the ideology that says girls are made to stay at home. This is what keeps girls from going out and participating in society.

Faisal Ibrahim, Oman

Problems with female education are not restricted only to Arab countries but to the third world at large. Most countries in the third world have a rather high illiteracy rate for females as compared to males. This is not restricted to the poorer classes but even to the conservative rich ones.

Taha Suglatwala, USA/ India

I grew up a Christian in Amman, Jordan and received private schooling all the way through my Masters degree, including college in the US. The Muslim tradition of lesser education for women has also been passed on to Christian families in the Arab culture. A major indicator of a country's civilization is the quality of its education.

Omar, USA

For the third year in a row in Iran, more women have gone to university and colleges than men.

Mohammad Ali, Iran

“Islam emancipated women”

Irfan, Pakistan
I do not have the slightest clue why Islam is blamed for the so-called lack of women rights in the so-called Islamic countries. We must be careful not to confuse real Islam with the prevalent form of twisted Islam. Contrary to the common perception, Islam emancipated women and gave them their deserved respect. The West did not give women the right to vote till the early 1900s whereas Islam did this 1400 years ago. Headings such as "Muslim girls struggle for education" cause confusion and lead some readers to believe that it is Islam that is the cause of this struggle.

Irfan, Pakistan

I find it quite rewarding to find that more and more women are getting their education. Unfortunately many people in the Middle East and in other parts of the world where Islam is practiced feel that women do not need education. This is contrary to Islamic beliefs and what the Prophet has written and said. Islam specifically says that women should be treated equally.

Ali, Canada

“Any nation that wants to improve its status must educate its girls”
Pat Young, USA

Statistics tell us clearly that the status of women in a country determine the status of that nation. Women spend a higher proportion of what they have on their children, they often determine whether and how well their children will be educated. An educated woman is better able to nourish her children, both emotionally and physically. Any nation that wants to improve its status must educate its girls. This is often an issue more of culture than religion. Has anyone looked at the statistics between Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India? We need to separate these issues in order to consider them fairly.

Pat Young, USA

Even if the girls are not to be educated in order to carry on into a profession they have the right to an education according to the Unicef charter. Apart from that, a wife and mother who is educated is a definite bonus to any man and his family. Unfortunately the impression that many gain from this behaviour of the male dominated society in the Muslim world is that men are frightened of what the women could do with a little education. This will of course be refuted but as the western world is slowly coming to realise woman has her place beside her man. Neither above him, nor below him.

Anne-Marie, Germany

“It would be better to compare the literacy rates between genders to present a more accurate picture of the problems involving education in the Arab world”
Melissa M, USA

I think this article in general presents a slanted view on education for women in the Arab world. In response to the quote: "Literacy rates of women in the Arab world, according to the latest report of UNDP, are around 55 percent." My question is what are the literacy rates of men in the Arab world? It would be better to compare the literacy rates between genders to present a more accurate picture of the problems involving education in the Arab world. As a university student who studied Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies, I am aware of issues involving equality for women in the Arab world and Middle East.
believe there are obstacles to overcome, however I think there are other issues that need to be explored more that are relevant to the lack of education in the Arab world - such as poverty and sociological issues.

*Melissa M, USA*

From the quote: "When we asked parents why they did not allow their girls to school, they would say "because it's wrong, it's irreligious - they should stay home." This implies an uneducated study, like the interviewer took this out of context. In fact, Islam encourages education for females as well as males. Those who release such phrases are unfamiliar with Islam themselves. On the contrary, it is unreligious to keep females from being educated. As long as it is within a decent environment, education is highly encouraged. Unfortunately, the Western media emphasises undermining the Muslim world, forgetting the great Muslim and Arab history.

*Othman, USA*

“I don't think that the higher illiteracy rate of women has anything to do with Islam”

*Amany, Egypt*

The general information is ok, but I don't think that the higher illiteracy rate of women has anything to do with Islam. It is all about tradition and general poverty. Has the writer made any comparison in the rate of literacy between Muslim Egyptians and Christian Egyptians for example? Not only in literacy, but I think it can apply also to male and female circumcision.

*Amany, Egypt*

“We need to be doing some much needed soul-searching”

*Hanafi, UAE/Malaysia*

I do not agree with Amany. I know from my experience from many different Muslim countries that some teachers in schools discourage girls from pursuing their education and/or abandon their careers and instead encourage them to get married and focus on supporting their husbands. In many Muslim regions there are layers of scholars who promote these misinterpretations of the true words of Allah. Even in a relatively rich country like Malaysia, it still happens, refuting the argument that it all has to do with poverty. As a Muslim, I am not particularly proud of it. This is one of many salient issues we have in the Islamic community today. I feel that instead trying to find external enemies and come up with all kinds of fantastic conspiracy theories, we need to be doing some much needed soul-searching and to go back to the fundamentals of the Holy Qur'an.

*Hanafi, UAE/Malaysia*

Gender discrimination in virtually all aspects of social life is not endemic to Arab countries, yet very visible there. Improvement is a challenging and necessary goal for Arab societies.

*Michal K., Poland*

“Emphasis on female education in the Arab world is lacking almost altogether”

*Jennifer Ward, USA*
As a returned Peace Corps Volunteer who taught English to girls in a rural Jordanian village, I commend you for recognizing the cultural impediments to Arab girls receiving a full and fair education. In fact, emphasis on female education in the Arab world is lacking almost altogether. The teaching methods employed by teachers are far outdated and the facilities often lack even the basic necessities. Additionally, the use of force in punishment also clearly affects the abilities of the students to perform, but this is not a purely gender problem; boys also often face significant corporal punishment on a daily basis as well. In short, regardless of cultural issues that prevent girls from receiving a full education, there is a plethora of other issues that must be addressed as well.

Jennifer Ward, USA
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