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**Feminist Activism in the Arab  
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Linking Research to Policy  
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Paper from

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## **Preface**

This paper was given as the key note speech at the conference *Knowledge - Empowerment – Politics Gender research and women's grassroots activism* 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2009 at Aalborg University, Denmark. The conference was a Danish-Arab Research Conference and organized by FREIA in collaboration with IWSAW: The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University, Beirut, Lebanon. It was initiated by the regional programme 'Dialogue and Cooperation on Women's Rights in the Arab Region', which is financed by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and administered by KVINFO, the Danish Centre for Information on Women and Gender. Apart from this initiative, the conference was sponsored by OBEL. The participants were scholars from the MENA area and Denmark. Valentine Moghadam is Professor and Director of the women's Studies at Purdue University.

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# **Feminist Activism in the Arab Region and Beyond: Linking Research to Policy Reform and Social Change<sup>1</sup>**

Valentine M. Moghadam<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

The global women's rights agenda is reflected in an array of international agreements as well as in the demands of women's rights movements, organizations, and networks across world. It has been accompanied by the proliferation of centres, institutes, and programs for the study of women and gender, largely at institutions of higher education. All of this is the product of at least four factors: the strength of the "world polity"; demographic changes in the female population; feminist activism; and feminist research. There are, of course, variations in the pace of progress toward women's rights, determined by political opportunities, resources, and the capacity of women's organizations.

This conference raises a number of key questions pertaining to the relations among women's grassroots activism, gender research and political changes in Arab and Nordic countries. I will address the questions in three ways: first, by generally discussing the necessary links among activism, knowledge-production, and policy work; second, by discussing my own "situated knowledge"; and third, by describing the priorities, activities, and outcomes of women's movements in the Middle East and North Africa. In so doing, I will draw attention to the efficacy of collaborations and coalition-building toward the achievement of women's rights and empowerment.

## **Doing Feminism: The research-activism-policy nexus**

In analyzing women's movements, feminist scholarship, and policy issues across time and space, one notices striking similarities in their evolution, priorities, and discourses. The women's movement of the second wave – which has been much researched in North America and Western Europe – involved activists, academics, and lawyers who engaged in a combination of public protest, policy dialogues, and new lines of scholarship. This obtained equally across the liberal, radical, and socialist streams of second-wave Western feminism. In the United States, for example, some of the founders of the

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared for delivery at the conference *Knowledge – Empowerment – Politics: Gender Research and Women's Grassroots Activism*, Danish-Arab Research Conference, Aalborg University, Denmark, 13-15 May 2009.

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women's movement of the 1970s went on to become well-known writers, professors of sociology or of women's studies, publishers, filmmakers, novelists, directors of research & policy institutes, international consultants, legal scholars, and even a Supreme Court judge. Others left the limelight or experienced difficulties in advancing their careers.

A similar pattern may be observed in the developing world. In the Arab region, women's movements of the second wave emerged in the wake of the UN's first international conference on women and the launch of the Decade for Women. Constituted by professors, university students, teachers, and other women in the professions, the movements of the 1970s and 1980s were primarily concerned with issues of equitable development, the rights of women workers, and neocolonialism. Nawal Saadawi [1977/2007] and Fatima Mernissi [1987] were pioneers in integrating a concern for women's bodily integrity, agency, and equality with macro-political and economic issues.) Some of the Arab women advocates of the time formed study groups, while others joined left-wing parties or underground movements.

Many of the early Arab women's rights advocates have become well-known writers, notable scholars of women and gender issues, international consultants or civil servants, founders of important women's NGOs, publishers, filmmakers, novelists, law professors, directors of research institutes, and even cabinet ministers.<sup>3</sup> The fate of others has not been as salutary. Some activists have lost their lives, or faced imprisonment, or been forced into exile (e.g., in Iran, Sudan, Algeria). After the U.S.-U.K. invasion and occupation of Iraq, academics were among those targeted for attacks by the so-called resistance. More than one

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<sup>3</sup> Well-known in their own countries as well as in international feminist circles, Arab feminists include Algeria's Khalida Messaoudi and Boutheina Cheriet; Egypt's Nawal Saadawi, Mona Zulficar, and Iman Bibars; Jordan's Haifa Abu Ghazaleh, Asma Khader, and Rana Hussein; Lebanon's Lamia Shehadeh and Lina Abou Habib; Morocco's Latifa Jbadi, Rabéa Naciri, Nouzha Skalli, Fatima Mernissi, Farida Bennani, and Fatma Sadiqi; Palestine's Hanan Ashrawi, Zahira Kamal, and Rema Hammami; Tunisia's Bochra Bel Haj Hmidi, Hafidha Chekir, and Esmá Ben Hamida; Bahrain's Mounira Fakhro and Ghada Jamsheer.

Feminist cultural institutions include publishing houses such as Cairo's Noor (which organized the first Arab Women's Book Fair in 1995) and Morocco's Edition le Fennec. Lebanon's *Al-Raida* is the quarterly feminist journal of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University.

Women's rights advocates who have become government officials include Asma Khader of Jordan; Bouthaina Shaaban of Syria; Boutheina Cheriet and Khalida Messaoudi of Algeria; Aisha Belarbi of Morocco. Nahid Toubia of Sudan – the author of a collection of studies on women's rights in the 1980s (Toubia 1988) who was also associated with the Arab Women's Solidarity Association – became an important figure in the international public health and reproductive rights community.

outspoken woman academic and women's rights advocate has had to flee to Jordan or Syria for refuge.

Many of us who came of age during the second wave, whether in the United States or Western Europe or the Middle East, have gone through many changes, but we retain a strong sense of social responsibility and gender consciousness, even while adhering to a professional identity of scholar, researcher, or teacher. Feminism is for us both a line of scholarly inquiry and a set of ideas about the world, history, and the future. It is a way of analyzing social structures, institutions, and relations; a form of social critique; and a guide to a more egalitarian and peaceful world. For those of us with backgrounds in Marxism or socialist movements, it was not difficult to make the transition to a feminism that was at once academic and activist. And for those of us who have experienced patriarchal social structures, or authoritarianism, or conflict, it is simply not a viable option to shed the activism in favour of abstruse theorizing, or to ignore the political stakes, or to bypass the relevant policy issues. And so our scholarship, as well as our teaching, remains at heart one that is intended to raise awareness and consciousness – about gender injustices, about women's movements, and about the need for legal and policy reform, as well as broader social transformations. And we can raise such awareness and consciousness even while we are publishing and teaching within disciplinary theoretical frameworks and research methods.

In examining the progress of the past few decades, one observes that feminist theorizing has made inroads into the mainstream, and feminist research has influenced the domains of policy-making and the law. Feminist scholars have assumed leadership roles in some disciplines and professional associations. In Sociology, for example, feminist scholarship has had an impact on knowledge about welfare regimes and social policies, poverty, migration, domestic violence, workplace harassment, and employment discrimination. In turn, this has led to new legislation or policy reforms in various countries. Early feminist research on women in organizations led to formulations about “the critical mass” versus “tokens”, which then developed into research and ultimately advocacy and policy around gender-based political quotas.

The synergies among feminist activism, theory-building, and policy-making are evident in at least four ways. First, the field of women's studies itself is the outgrowth of the second-wave feminist movement; more recently, as a result of participant-observation in various movements and subcultures, feminist theorizing has grown to encompass the study of gender relations, identities, and dynamics more broadly. Second, feminist theorizing has made inroads in some of the traditional disciplines. Third, feminist scholars, like activists, have contributed to the global women's rights agenda and to policy-making in their own countries. Fourth, the relationship between activists and academics can be



distant in some contexts but very close and mutually rewarding in other contexts, inasmuch as the two groups tackle the same problems, learn from each other, and work on the same legal and policy reform issues.

The study of women and gender has proliferated around the world, and there are now numerous programs, departments, and institutes, within and outside of universities, that are devoted to both women's studies and women's rights. Many of them combine theory, policy engagement, and activism in their objectives and activities. But how could it be otherwise? To distance oneself from the political and policy issues of our time seems so irresponsible. It is also such a waste of the conceptual and methodological tools we have acquired in our training in the social sciences and the humanities, as well as in feminist studies.

In my own case, disciplinary training, interdisciplinary interests, and political concerns have informed my career choices and various kinds of engagement. I have been an academic and an international civil servant, but always part of the women's movement. I joined the UN because I wanted to work with women's organizations, to contribute something physical and real (e.g., the Palestinian Women's Research and Documentation Center), to engage with policies that affect women's lives, to interact with policymakers and advocate for women's rights. I directed comparative research on fundamentalisms and women; and studies of working women's economic citizenship, women and democratization, gender dynamics of conflicts, and women in the judiciary in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> UN agencies have provided a home for many activists and the means for them to realize progressive objectives; the UN has been especially receptive to those with expertise and interest in gender issues and women's rights. Alas, this is becoming increasingly elusive at a time of management and financial reforms.

In returning to academia, I did not give up my interest in politics and policy. Throughout the years I have conducted my research with familiar methods, but without dispassionate objectivity. One need not read between the lines of my publications too carefully to discern my sympathies, or outrage, or recommendations. I believe my work is credible, reputable, theoretically informed, and knowledge-producing. I am careful to maintain balance, the integrity of my profession, and disciplinary coherence in the classroom. But I cannot imagine doing good research on women and gender without engaging with politics and policy. Good theory derives from observation and participation.

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<sup>4</sup> I worked for the UN between 1990 and 1995 (based at the UNU's WIDER Institute in Helsinki, Finland), and again in 2004-06 (for UNESCO, in Paris).

And so one continues to document women's movements through participant-observation and the accumulation of documentary and interview data while also doing movement work like translating, editing, and distributing petitions and appeals; joining marches and rallies; addressing policymakers; making financial contributions. One writes papers on the meaning of human rights and women's rights in a conflict zone such as Iraq, and in so doing one draws on the concepts and categories of political sociology and feminist international relations, but the real objective is to highlight an ongoing injustice and tragedy. One writes a comparative study of states and feminist campaigns for family law reform in Iran and Morocco, in which social movement theorizing is brought to bear to elucidate the similarities and differences in outcomes – but the real purpose is to celebrate these movements and to bring them to the attention of broad audiences.

Being located within the women's movement, or other progressive movements, imparts urgency and passion to one's research, along with valuable resources; being located within a traditional discipline imposes some *discipline* to the research. But in asking feminist questions or in applying a gender lens to a social problem, one is inevitably spanning theory, policy, and practice.

### **Research and activism for policy change in the Arab region**

When I began studying women's movements in the mid-1990s, I was struck by two things: the first was that transnational feminist networks were visible and vocal, especially within UN conferences, and were actively engaged with economic policy issues along with women's human rights issues more broadly. I went on to research this phenomenon more deeply, examining six transnational feminist networks in depth (Moghadam 2005). My second discovery pertained to the Arab region. There, the focus of women's rights activism was family law reform, along with criminalization of domestic violence (including "honour killings"), nationality rights for women, and increased opportunities for political and economic participation. This activism took place in seven types of women's organizations. In addition to the traditional charitable organizations and the official or state-affiliated women's organizations, there were professional associations, women's studies centres, women's rights or feminist organizations, non-governmental organizations working on women's and development issues, and worker-based or union-affiliated women's groups (Moghadam 1998, 2003). Subsequently, a number of studies were produced on women's movements and organizations (e.g., Al-Ali 2000; Rizzo 2005; Al-Raida, various issues).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Two good sources on Arab women's movements, organizations, and campaigns, as well as cultural productions, may be found in: JMEWS [Journal of Middle East Women's Studies] vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring 2006). Special issue on "Women and the Public Sphere in the Middle East and North Africa." Guest editors: Valentine M. Moghadam and Fatima

What intrigued me as I researched women's collective action – at both transnational and national levels – was the collaboration among academics, activists, lawyers, journalists, and other professionals, including at times, women's rights advocates inserted in government bureaucracies or other policy agencies, as well as in international organizations and funding agencies.

It is this kind of collaboration and coalition-building – mobilizing human and financial resources from diverse domains, carefully crafting a discourse that resonates with a broad population, and seeking allies among decision-makers – that lies behind the dynamism (not to mention success) of feminist campaigns. In this regard, the case of Morocco is especially instructive (see Naciri 1998; WLP 2004; Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006; Skalli 2007). Time constraints prevent me from delving deeply into the Moroccan experience, but suffice it to say for now that the success of the 12-year long Moroccan campaign for family law reform can be attributed in large part to the involvement of an array of stakeholders, the effective use of resonant cultural frames, and the presence of a sympathetic and supportive political leadership. It is also interesting that the Moroccan feminist campaign was conducted almost entirely within the national context and domestic borders, albeit with the moral support of the transnational network Collectif Maghreb Egalité 95. The presence of powerful elite allies within the country meant that Moroccan feminists did not have to seek international advocacy.

The Moroccan experience of successful family law reform illustrates the efficacy of links among researchers, academics, activists and policy-makers to effect legal reform and progressive social change. Through collective action involving civil society and progressive government, even the most entrenched laws can be revised to improve women's human rights and advance society as a whole.

Can the Moroccan success story be replicated in other countries? Yes, though not in exactly the same way. Moroccan women had the advantage of a sympathetic and supportive political leadership, a factor not present in all the countries in the region. Elsewhere, feminist activists may find it difficult to forge a large coalition; or they may not have the benefit of key political allies; or externally-imposed constraints limit the capacity of women's movements. In such cases – Palestine and Iraq come immediately to mind, but also Yemen and [outside the Arab region, Iran] – the role of transnational advocacy and of

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Sadiqi. *And Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State, and Society* Special Issue on "Middle East Politics: Feminist Challenges", vol. 6, no. 3 (Fall 1999). Guest editors: Berkovitch, Nitza and Valentine M. Moghadam.

international organizations, and other aspects of the world polity, becomes much more salient.

Are all women's groups feminist? Research has distinguished women's movements from feminist movements (Beckwith 2007). While women take part in a variety of protest movements (see in particular West and Brumberg 1990), women activists may not necessarily hold feminist values and goals, which have been defined as challenging patriarchy and gender hierarchies and aspiring to women's equality and autonomy. We know that women's groups associated with governments or with Islamist movements are typically less interested in the advancement of women than in the advancement of their government or Islamist agenda. In other cases, the *feminist* label is culturally unpopular or politically risky, and activists may prefer not to self-identify as feminists. Such women's rights activists, however, may be identified as *de facto* feminists (Misciano 1997). For me, the term *feminist action* is an appropriate term to define "that in which the participants explicitly place value on challenging gender hierarchy and changing women's social status, whether they adopt or reject the feminist label" (Sperling, Ferree and Risman 2001: 1157). Such a definition would encompass a broad range of women's groups, including some that draw on an Islamic idiom.

Whether self-described or *de facto*, Arab feminists challenge women's institutionalized second-class citizenship and call for change in women's positions in the family, in the polity, and in the religious community. Women's organizations consisting largely of women from professional categories – such as lawyers, writers, educators, civil servants, and businesswomen – are playing a vocal and visible role in pushing for law reform and policy changes. Their research, advocacy and lobbying efforts are directed at their governments, the clergy, the media and international organizations. The point of reference is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action, but some also use the Qur'an and early Islamic history to make the case for women's participation and rights. "Islamic feminists" call for women's right to *ijtihad*, or religious adaptation and interpretation. They seek the reform of patriarchal Islamic jurisprudence, especially in the arena of personal status and family relations.

The reform of family law is important for several reasons. It is central to the modernization of religious institutions and norms in Muslim-majority societies. It establishes women's human rights and their equality in the family and vis-à-vis their male kin. It has implications for women's wider citizenship rights and their social participation, including economic rights. It brings the Arab region in line with international norms and codes enshrined in such conventions as the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, CEDAW, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social,

and Cultural Rights, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. And it has broad implications for the production of new kinds of knowledge and the formulation of new policies.

Activism around family law reform has necessitated historical research and religious study, resulting in the generation of new knowledge about hermeneutics, early Islamic history, and the relationship between gendered state-building and legal codification. (See, for example, Sonbol 2003. I am also thinking of studies by Asma Barlas; Fatima Mernissi; Leila Ahmed; Amina Wadud; Lynn Welchman). In turn, such a new knowledge base permits more open social and policy dialogues around issues such as age at first marriage, marital property, inheritance, domestic violence, sexual harassment, the right to work, electoral quotas, and political leadership. In almost every Arab society, debates are occurring around these issues. These debates are largely spearheaded by the women's organizations themselves.

### **Examples of feminist collective action with implications for theory and policy**

The Lebanese League for Women's Rights has run candidates (successfully or otherwise) for political office, while the Beirut-based Women's Court launched campaigns "to resist violence against women" in 1995, 1998, and 2000. More recently, the attainment of nationality rights and electoral quotas for women have been major objectives for women's groups.

Palestine's Legal Aid and Counselling Center has lobbied against family violence (as well as Israeli violence); the Jerusalem Center for Women promotes women's rights and peaceful solutions to the conflict with Israel; and Birzeit University's Institute of Women's Studies seeks to produce new generations of women's rights leaders and community activists.

In December 2001, the Jordanian Cabinet approved several amendments to the Civil Status Law, raising the legal age for marriage to 18 for both males and females and granting women legal recourse to divorce. An amendment to the Penal Code holds perpetrators of honour crimes liable to the death penalty (though judges are still allowed to commute the sentences of the convicted). In this regard, journalist Rana Husseini (2009) has done path-breaking research and advocacy, as have women's groups and feminist lawyers, and their allies among the political elite.

Moroccan women's groups worked with political parties to adopt a gender-based electoral quota. A 10% quota was implemented, immediately increasing female representation from 0 to nearly 11% in the 2002 elections. Women's

groups such as the ADFM and the Center for Women's Leadership (CLEF) continue to call for a higher quota and more female political participation.

Egyptian feminists and public health activists have formed or worked with coalitions against female circumcision. In 1999, Egyptian women's groups secured the reversal of Article 291 – which had exonerated rapists who married their victims. They also succeeded in proposing a new marriage contract as well as the issuance of identity cards to all Egyptian women. And in September 2008, Egypt's first female marriage registrar was appointed – much to the opposition of conservative clerics. Today, a major focus of women's activism is around the sexual harassment of women in public places. For the first time, a man was given a 3-year sentence in December 2008 for physically groping a woman on the street.<sup>6</sup> The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights is especially active around this issue, and recently also protested a *fatwa* allowing for *misyar* marriage – a male-biased form of non-permanent marriage which essentially permits a man to have sexual relations with a woman without being responsible for her welfare; he can also end the relationship at will.

In Bahrain, women's groups have called for the codification of family law so that there may be consistency and “rule of law” in matters pertaining to personal status and family relations. Groups such as the Women's Petition Committee, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, the Bahrain Women's Union, and the Supreme Council for Women also have called for a minimum age for marriage and nationality rights for Bahraini women. At present, they have come up against the opposition of the Women's Islamic Action Coordination Committee, along with conservative parliamentarians.

The struggle for nationality rights continues in most countries. Article 9 of the U.N.'s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women requires signatory nations to grant women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality, and to confer their own nationality on their children or spouses. Most Arab signatories to the convention have added a reservation indicating their general disagreement with Article 9. So far only Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Morocco grant women the right to transfer their citizenship to their children. In a major achievement, Algeria passed a law allowing women to transfer nationality to their husbands without any caveats.

Women's groups in Tunisia (such as ATFD, or the Femmes Démocrates) have become especially vocal – and courageous – in calling for the end of all gender-based discrimination, the removal of all reservations to CEDAW, and the penalization of any form of violence against women. On the occasion of

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<sup>6</sup> See BBC World Service, 6 Dec. 2008

Tunisian Women's Day last September (2008), AFTURD issued a statement emphasizing that there could be "no development, no democracy ... without women's true participation and the respect of fundamental liberties for all, men and women."

North Africa's Collectif Maghreb Egalité 95 was the major organizer behind the "Muslim Women's Parliament" at the NGO Forum that preceded the fourth UN World Conference on Women, in Beijing in September 1995; later it formulated an alternative "egalitarian family code" which inspired the reforms in Morocco in 2004 and Algeria in 2005. Another major area of concern and activism has been around violence against women and sexual harassment. Women's groups have established various counselling centres and hotlines (*centres d'écoutes*) and have succeeded – often in coalition with human rights organizations and the women's commissions of the trade unions – to advocate for legislation prohibiting workplace sexual harassment and imposing fines on perpetrators.

I would also draw your attention to what is a certain activist feminist scholarship around the issue of Iraqi women since the 2003 invasion and occupation. It includes works by Haifa Zanganeh (2007), Nadjé Al-Ali (2007), Nicola Pratt and Nadjé al-Ali (2009), and Yasmin Al-Jawaheri (2008). I also want to acknowledge the special issue of Al-Raida on Arab refugee women, which includes an essay on Iraqi women. These studies reflect the passions and commitments of the feminist mission in addition to rigorous research of use to students and policymakers alike.

The issues above – refugee women, family law reform, electoral quotas, sexual harassment – are all tied to women's empowerment and the enhancement of women's civil, political, and social rights of citizenship; moreover, it is important to understand the interconnections among them. That is, certain legal rights cannot be enjoyed without the improvement of social rights or without economic empowerment. Thus, as important as it is for women's rights activists to focus on family law reform or to learn more about the Qur'an, it is equally necessary to engage with issues of illiteracy, poverty, low wages, unemployment, poor schooling, conflict, and socio-economic inequalities. These too are feminist issues, for without their resolution, women cannot be empowered. Moreover, such issues can resonate with a wider population of women – and men – and disarm those opponents who hurl accusations of westernization or cultural alienation or irreligiosity at feminists. The pursuit of women's social rights and economic citizenship is as important as is the pursuit of equality within the family. In fact, they are linked, as seen in the tables below.

Table 1: Summary of Civil, Political, and Social Rights of Citizenship

<b>Civil rights</b>	<b>Political rights</b>	<b>Social rights</b>
Right to contract Equal treatment under the law Freedom of expression Freedom of religion Right to privacy Control over one's body Choice of residence Choice of occupation	Right to vote Right to run & hold office To form or join a political party or trade union To engage in fund-raising Nationality rights Refugee and contract worker rights Minority rights Dissident rights	Health services Family allowances Primary and secondary education Higher education Vocational education Social insurance Compensatory rights

Source: Moghadam (2003) adopted from Marshall (1964) and Janosky (1998)

Table 2: Women's Social-Economic Rights of Citizenship

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The right to equal inheritance;</li> <li>• To obtain a passport and travel abroad without permission of husband or male relative's consent;</li> <li>• To confer citizenship to children or a husband;</li> <li>• The right to gainful employment without husband or male relative's consent;</li> <li>• To own, acquire, manage, and retain property brought into marriage and to control one's own income from gainful employment;</li> <li>• The freedom to choose a residence/domicile;</li> <li>• To participate in social, cultural, and community activities;</li> <li>• The right to an education, including adult education and vocational training;</li> <li>• Equal pay for equal work:</li> <li>• Equality in hiring and promotion;</li> <li>• Non-discrimination by employer;</li> <li>• The right to be free from sexual harassment in the workplace;</li> <li>• Paid maternity leave and subsidized childcare;</li> <li>• Unemployment benefits and equality in social security.</li> </ul>
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Source: Author

In principle, civil rights such as equal treatment under the law and choice of occupation are a prerequisite for the attainment of primary and secondary education and women's access to social insurance. But women also require the expansion of conducive material conditions – such as public schooling, access to healthcare, good infrastructure, decent wages – in order that civil and political rights may be enjoyed (Table 1). Drawing on the citizenship literature, what kinds of social and economic rights are needed for Arab women's empowerment? My list is contained in Table 2. As can be seen, it strongly suggests the need for family law reform as well as the availability of decent social infrastructure and the adoption of women-friendly social policies. This is the sense in which civil, political, and social/economic rights should be regarded as holistic and mutually dependent rather than hierarchical.

I'd like to end with some thoughts on the relationship between feminist research, women's activism, and policy and legal reform, on the one hand, and



democratization on the other. A growing research by feminist scholars has documented the ways by which women are actors and participants in the making of a democratic politics (Phillips 1991, 1995; Jaquette and Wolchik 1998; Burke 2001; Waylen 2007; Fallon 2008). We have studies for Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa. (I am working on the case of the Middle East and North Africa). Many mainstream commentators of the Middle East have focused on the participation (and transformation) of Islamist parties as key to any democratic transition in the Arab region. They tend to overlook what are in fact a key constituency, a natural ally, and social base of a democratic politics – women and the array of women’s rights organizations. When you observe the activities and discourses of feminist scholars and the women’s rights organizations in the region, it becomes evident that they not only engage in a non-violent, democratic politics, but their research, advocacy, and campaigns help to open up the political space and broaden the national political discourse.

The Arab region has seen the growth of research and activism for women’s rights; this has expanded the knowledge base about women and gender relations, led to some significant legal and policy reforms, and increased women’s access to and participation in civil society and the public sphere. In turn, these developments enhance the prospects for democratization in the region. The evidence from the advanced countries of the North suggests that women – more precisely employed women – have different political preferences from men, with a tendency to vote in a more leftward direction, supporting public services and other elements of welfare states (Manza and Brookes 1998; Huber and Stephens 2000; Inglehart and Norris 2003). A plausible connection also may be made between the sustained presence of a “critical mass” of Arab women in the public sphere and the establishment of stable and peaceful societies. If the Nordic model of high rates of women’s participation and rights correlates with peaceful, prosperous, and stable societies, could the expansion of women’s participation and rights in the Arab region lead the way to stability, security, welfare, and democratic governance?

## **Conclusion**

Arab feminism – and women’s empowerment – continues to confront obstacles and challenges. In addition to the resource constraints of many women’s organizations, feminist action faces unreliable or patriarchal governments, societal conservatism, the preoccupation of Islamist movements with women’s appearance and behavior, and cultural debates about “authenticity” versus Westernization. Women in conflict zones such as Palestine and Iraq face dire risks. Feminist groups in the Arab region – like their counterparts in the North and in Latin America – grapple with “strategic dilemmas” (Beckwith 2007) pertaining to movement autonomy versus state involvement, and insider versus

outsider positioning. Most women's groups, however, have opted to engage with legal and policy issues, and very directly. Domestic and global developments have produced women's movements that openly challenge second-class citizenship, demanding equality in the family, more access to the public sphere, and full and equal participation in the national community. These gender-based demands – tied as they are to research, activism, and reform – would not only extend existing rights to women but also broaden the political agenda and redefine citizenship in the region.

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