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The Shifting Gender Roles in North Africa:
The crisis of patriarchy in the digital age

The argument I make in this paper may expressed as follows: gender issues in North Africa are largely determined by the socio-cultural sources of power and authority in the region and any shift in these sources directly impacts gender perception and gender role assignment. The most significant such a source is a specific type of space-patriarchy that associates the public space with men and private space with women. This explains the twin facts that women needed the support of democratic men to enter the public space and that unlike in the mainstream West, the gender tension in the region is not between women and men but between women and men, on the one hand, and patriarchal oppression, on the other hand. Arab-Muslim patriarchy created secondary sources of power and authority, such as a specific value system, a specific family organization, a male-biased recording and reading of history, a socio-political instrumentalizing religion, and a specific use of languages.

These traditional sources of power and authority have started to undergo a deep change with the advent of the new media at the eve of the twenty-first century. Consequently, gender perception ands gender role assignment are undergoing significant and sometimes unpredictable transformations. The free environment that virtual space is providing as well as the phenomenal speed of action it provides are opening new horizons that are bound the shake the foundations of patriarchy. The recent Arab Spring, itself a result of new media communications, is an example of this. Women are more and more claiming status, functionality and dignity in the public sphere while retaining their cultural role in the private one. Further, women are no longer consumers of stories in this new media, but more and more story-builders. As a consequence, women are now engaged in short, medium and long –term actions that are not only transforming the region but also women and men's mentalities. In the short term, women are increasingly aware of social programs and readily engage in them at all levels. In the medium term, they are targeting citizenship rights, becoming, thus, stakeholders in enlightened religious reforms, enlightened textbook reforms, as well as in political decision-making especially in their local communities. In the long term, they are targeting education and reconcilation with their history.

These new transformations are of course sensitive to the larger political, social and economic transformations and raise interesting questions: Will the new changes lead to a revolution in the mind or will they be hijacked by conservative and opportunistic forces? Will the new political and social reforms lead to cultural reforms or benefit a lucky elite?