



Book review: *Improving Educational Gender Equality in Religious Societies: Human rights and modernization pre-Arab Spring*, by Sumaia A. Al-Kohlani

Khalaf Mohamed Abdellatif 

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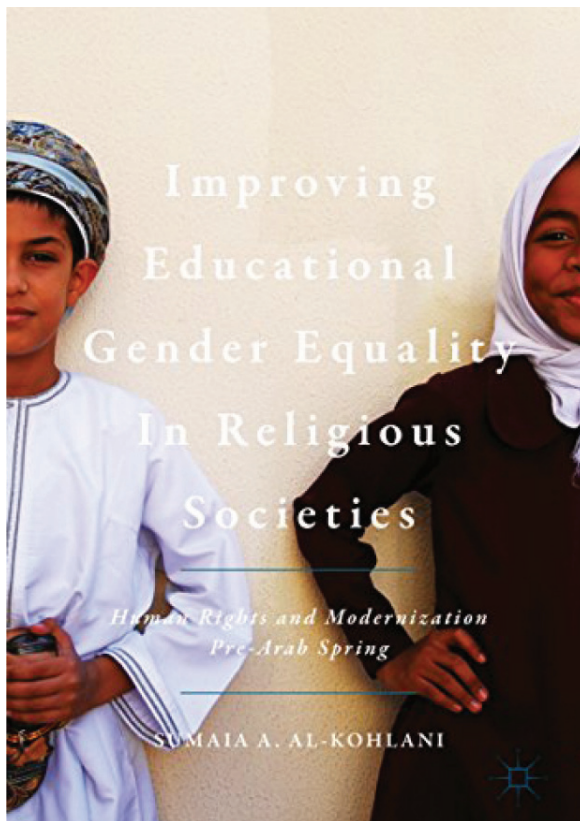
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## Book review

Khalaf Mohamed Abdellatif\* – *Hiroshima University, Japan;*  
*Cairo University, Egypt*

### *Improving Educational Gender Equality in Religious Societies: Human rights and modernization pre-Arab Spring*, by Sumaia A. Al-Kohlani

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan; 2018; 195 pp.; ISBNs: 978-3-03009-966-4 (pbk)  
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Women and girls, in comparison to males across the world, suffer discrimination, violence and lower access to education. Consequently, gender equality has become a topic of global interest. For more than two decades, almost all developing countries have struggled to promote learning equal opportunities, and therefore the Sustainable Development Goal 5 is 'to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' (United Nations, n.d.). In *Improving Educational Gender Equality in Religious Societies*, Sumaia A. Al-Kohlani provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of religion in gender inequality generally, and educational gender inequality specifically. Furthermore, she compares 'religious theory', which links gender inequality to a certain religion, and the 'modernization theory', which links gender inequality to socio-economic factors

and diminishes the role of religion; moreover, she offers the Al-Kohlani Constitution Religiousness Index (ACRI).

This book studies 55 Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The book is divided into five chapters, along with a concluding chapter that highlights some policy implications. In her introduction, Al-Kohlani discusses gender equality, religion and modernization. Accordingly, she reviews gender equality before the Arab Spring, as well as Western and religious feminist theories. While the author also clarifies that women's right to education has been met in many Western countries, she argues that Islamic feminists in the Arab world 'have been experiencing governmental rejection, so progress has fluctuated' (30).

Chapter 2 sets out Al-Kohlani's framework, offering varied voices of religious and modernization theories. While religious theorists highlight religion's influence on societies, modernization theorists argue that modernized life influences religious societies and forces them to change; yet some Muslim societies show cultural resistance. Therefore, Al-Kohlani points out female-to-male school enrolment and some modernization and religious variables (that is, urbanization and fertility respectively) to be investigated in the case study. Moreover, studying 29 Muslim countries alongside 26 non-Muslim ones adds merit to this book.

In Chapter 3, the author introduces the source of her data alongside the method. She makes clear that the education data of Barro and Lee (2018) are used because the World Bank data have some missing observations. However, Barro and Lee's dataset starts from 1950, while Al-Kohlani's study covers the period between 1960 and 2010. Al-Kohlani eliminates the first ten years and uses the linear interpolation method to impute the data between each five-year period; the elimination of the first ten years and data imputation have increased the number of observations from 605 to 2,805. The significance of the book lies in its new approach to studying the influence of modernization on educational gender equality in conservative societies. Moreover, it focuses on education, rather than on any other aspect of gender equality. From my point of view, this is the biggest sample for such a study; hence, the scholarship of this book is rigorous, and comprehensively responds to the question: is educational gender equality associated with the religious orientation of societies?

To illustrate the relationship between female-to-male school enrolment and education, Chapter 4 provides a detailed view of the statistical analysis of data; therefore, varied religious and modernization factors are investigated. Unsurprisingly, the analysis shows that modernization has a great positive influence on the reinforcement of educational gender equality in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies; this influence could also be understood as a result of globalization and other modern socio-economic factors. However, Al-Kohlani provides neither the discourse of gender equality in light of globalization nor the critical pedagogical vision of educational gender equality that addresses the oppression that women and girls are facing. If Al-Kohlani provided a critical argument on the philosophical assets, the analysis would seem more rigorous and comprehensive.

Chapter 5 provides a close view of the gender gap in education and labour-force participation in two Muslim societies: Iran as an example of a conservative Muslim society, and Turkey as a secular Muslim society. Using the ACRI approach to differentiate between more conservative and less conservative societies, Al-Kohlani indicates that there is a significant variation between Iran and Turkey. Female enrolment in elementary, secondary and tertiary education, as well as the number of educated women in the labour market, are higher in Iran than Turkey. As a consequence, it could be hypothesized that conservative Muslim societies express fewer gender gaps than

secular societies. Moreover, Al-Kohlani argues that 'maintaining identity and improving the interpretation of Islam seem to be more rewarding than declaring a war against people's identity and religious beliefs' (151). However, she clarifies that 'this research is not meant to defend some of Iran's unfair treatment of women and their rights, nor is it intended to ignore Turkey's efforts to improve gender equality and women's rights' (151).

These results establish a new understanding of the contribution of political and religious systems to the promotion of educational gender equality. In other words, the countries that have less conservative systems will show no reluctant visions to support educational gender equality; therefore, the enrolment in education will be higher, whereas the conservative systems will show no significant association with educational gender equality. Thus, in her concluding chapter, Al-Kohlani provides some policy implications, highlighting that 'reducing the level of the influence of constitutional religion has the potential to increase educational gender equality, especially for conservative Muslim countries' (160).

The book has some limitations. Particularly, the brief policy recommendation does not add anything to the book's argument. Additionally, Figure 4.3 (118), which shows 'the total female-to-male school enrollment for Muslim and non-Muslim countries', is overlapped, and the names of some countries are hard to read. Perhaps the book's conclusions and approach would seem more rational if a comprehensive close review of a non-Muslim country was included in the Iran–Turkey comparison. Overall, the book is a good contribution to the research on religion, politics and educational gender equality. It is particularly recommended to scholars, practitioners and students who study secularism and religious conservatism.

## References

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