

### Introduction

To define Arab feminism, it is the right to achieve gender equality and empower women in social and economic spheres that was once considered exclusive to men (Char, 2019). There is a long standing discussion among Western feminists and critics about the nature and existence of feminism in the Arab world. They believe Arab culture cannot co-exist with feminism, citing culture as the main setback. In this paper, I argue that being a feminist and Arab woman can in fact exist harmoniously and feminism in the Arab world has significantly elevated the status of women.

I support my argument with the following supporting arguments. First, I support my claim by illuminating feminism’s long taken stand in Arab nations. Arab women have successfully played their part in colonial and nationalist struggles, seen notably in the Arab Spring (Golley, 2004). This led to the beginning of Arab feminist discourses. Second, I argue that Arab societies have evolved and are taking incentives to be equally appreciative of women’s aspirations, rights, status and in no way pose women inferior to worldly matters and question their place in society (Amireh, 2000). Arab culture promotes and supports feminist discourses both at the state and societal levels (Amireh, 2000). Many are ignorant and unaware of the importance of women’s reputation in Arab societies and how the culture emphasizes women’s importance, rather it is unknown or misjudged (Darraj, 2002). Third, my paper puts forth suggestions and further assess how to better employ more feminist discussions in the Arab world. Educating women helps them to identify their rights and fight against cultural consequences imposed on them. Therefore, creating more women support groups, discussions, and organizations to share collective values and understandings helps to effectively spread feminist ideologies.

I also consider alternative views regarding Arab feminism. Western feminists assert that feminism cannot exist in the Arab world and that being an Arab woman and a feminist is mutually incompatible (Golley, 2004). They argue that feminism originated as a reaction to Western imperialism and as such is irrelevant to Arab culture (Mahdi, 2012). Furthermore,

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Western feminists state that ~~the~~ Arab women are helpless in creating and supporting feminism on their own, implying that the combination of ‘feminism’ and ‘Arab culture’ is inharmonious (Abu-Lughod, 2001). The West views Arab culture as unappreciative of women’s freedom and integrity, limiting women from practicing ~~her~~ their ambitions and desires, rather confining her within society’s standards of a mother and wife (Amireh, 2000). In summary, they believe the patriarchy of Arab society oppresses **women and they stand any** chance for emancipation from the clutches of these patriarch statutes, to follow their endeavors and self-interests.

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### Record of Arab ~~feminism’s~~ Feminism’s Origin

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Feminism in the Arab region began as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Women portrayed their feminist struggles through literature tools such as journals, books, periodicals, magazines, and poems. Writers such as Ghadat al-Zahira (1899), Labiba Suya (1904), Zainab Fawwaz (1899), Buturs al-Bustani (1891) spread awareness for women empowerment, equality and the call for reform, by holding literary salons, meetings, and women’s clubs (Char, 2019). Thus, it should be noted that, early feminist struggles were showcased in the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Male reformers also played an important role in bringing forth feminist discussions and women’s rights. As Char (2019) states, Mohamed ibn Haikal (1913), Malik AL-Qurush (1906), Qasim Amin (1911), and Riffa Rafi el- Tahwati (1910) fervently called out for women’s equality and integrity in society. Notably, Amin, known as the father of Egyptian feminism, in his book *The Liberation of Women*, expanded the discussion on cultural differences and societal expectations of women in the aspects of marriage, education, and divorce. Amin (1911) asserts that women would only be able to contest against restrictions and implications thrown at them and thereby properly function in the society if they are educated. The author emphasizes the role of women in marriage, where her opinions and responsibilities do not matter, **rather whatever deemed** appropriate by society. The book portrays women as the microcosm in the society **she** lives in, indicating the importance of **her**

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status and responsibility in **her** family and community, and calls for urgent improvement in the status of women. Therefore, male feminists such as Qasim Amin helped pave the way for women's liberation from the seclusion of societal expectations.

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One of the primary ways women fought against **their** oppression of patriarchal statuses was through literature. It was through literature they were able to voice their dissents and share experiences of their struggles and hardships (Schick, 1990). A rich collection of journals, autobiographies, fictional books, and periodicals written by women were popular in emergence of the Egyptian Renaissance period, known for its rich and culturally diverted classical art and literature. As Shaaban (2009) notes, women through writing, were able to create an identity and recognizable voice of their own and record their long history of feminist struggles, which was not possible by then to be expressed in any other means. Likewise, through these writings, women could discover and conquer places that were once identified as a 'man's world.' They were able to free themselves and attain some percentage of freedom through these writings (Shaaban, 2009). The main theme for these writings included empowerment, equality, justice, and freedom, that focused on emancipation from male-imposed boundaries. Writers such as Inaam Kachachi, Sahar Khalifeh, Ghada Samman, and Assia Djebar created an uproar of dissent when their work was first published. Female writers had to endure and fight through societal oppositions and disagreement to get through the public sphere. In doing so, their works attracted and garnered support from the young female audiences in Egypt. Thus, through literature Arab women were able to fight against the patriarchal regime.

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One such prominent work that called for the liberation of women was Zaynab Fawwaz's *Husn Al Awaqib* (1899). The novel, one of the most famous and earliest books published in arabic, illustrates a women's journey to break free from the indifferences of the patriarchal regime (Khamis, 2011). In this novel, the author subtly takes us through the equality between men and women. The villains and protagonists, both male and female, are depicted in similar ways concerning knowledge, insight, loyalty, sorrow, wickedness,

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immorality, and bravery. Instead of conforming to the traditional depiction of women as weak and men as strong. The protagonist Fari'a is self-employed, capable, educated, and completely ignores and rejects any patriarchal structures subjected to her. She openly refuses and voices her opinions on society's demands of a woman. The novel reflects on the power of an educated, unmarried women on her right to choose decisions concerning her future life, amidst society's restrictions on her limited powers. The author draws a distinct connection between 'physical' and 'mental' beauty. The male lead Shatib falls in love with Fari'a for her intellectual competence and wisdom, while Tamur, the antagonist, is attracted to the physical beauty of Fari'a. This distinct connection classifying the worth of a woman by man based on her physical beauty, rather than on her intellectual prowess, shows notion of women as a mere object to be possessed by men. This novel illustrates the obligations and conception of women as perceived by men.

Another significant element to be discussed from the novel is the proclamation of Faria's ability to make her own individual decisions without patriarchal authority. When Faria refuses to forcefully get married to Tamur and rejects his proposal, Tamur threatens to hold her captive and impose her to the life of a slave girl. To this statement of Tamur's, Faria remained unfazed and nonchalant, displaying her act of bravery and defiance. Upon turndown, one of Tamur's men captures and intimidates Faria with a sword, to which Faria stood corrected and affirms she is not scared of anyone, most notably, death. This level of defiance and valor towards toxic masculinity signifies Faria's willpower to lead an independent and patriarchy-free life, promoting a New Woman spirit.

### **Women's Contribution in Political Uprisings and Agendas**

The Effects-effects of feminist struggles towards colonization and nationalism can be seen during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Women played an important role in political uprisings in the Arab world, despite enduring patriarchal tyranny and pushback forces from regimes and gender discrimination (Abu-Lugohd, 2001). They fought side by side with their male counterparts in liberating their country from colonial rule, paving the

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way for feminist consciousness. Furthermore, the early twentieth century saw the reinvention of a new face of the Arab women. According to Maestri and Profanter (2017), **Women before being secluded** within four walls and limited to traditional impositions, started coming out by venturing to new places, and actively engaging and fighting against feminist struggles. Their roles in political participation uplifted and reestablished their positions in economic, social and political fields, gaining momentum from forces that held them back.

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One such political reformation can be seen during the 1920 Egyptian revolution against **British colonial rule**. Women alongside men fought to end the unfair colonial rule and serve justice for their country (Moghissi, 1999). However, once the British rule was vetoed and Egypt finally gained independence, women were required to depart back to their homes, while the men built a new country for them (Jones, 2011). Moreover, after the independence, there ensued an inequality in the political domain. Women were restricted and banned from voting, but Arab women revolted and strived to attain freedom from such political disparities, by forming political organizations. One such organization called Egyptian Feminist Union (EFC), was formed in 1923, by feminist pioneer Huda Al Sha'rawi (Moghissi, 1999). It is considered one of the most prominent and first ever feminist political society to be ever established in Egypt. The organization protested towards restoring women's political freedom, and upheld campaigns and reforms concerning women's education, economic policies, and family laws. In 1924, they sabotaged and interrupted the constitutional meeting that was meant to adopt laws denying women entry to universities. They took to the streets, forming rallies and strikes against the prejudicial mistreatment, highlighting the bigotry nature of the government. This incident caused the Egyptian government to revoke their pronouncement on women's education and mandated learning for all women in universities and schools (Moghissi, 1999). By mid 1925, **The** Egyptian government began to empower women to pursue commercial positions and set up their own establishments. These study shows that women strived to attain economic, social, and political equality by effectively participating in political negotiations.

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The Arab Spring in 2011, exhibited thousands of women's support and momentum in political accords and conceived a new era for women. Arab Spring was a string of protests against the autocratic regime in countries such as Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia (Badran, 2011). Women in particular played a crucial role in challenging and protesting the government. When not protesting on the streets, they were increasing momentum and garnering collaboration for the movement by publishing and releasing reports and videos (Ahmed, 2017). In addition, they provided medical aid and food and shelter to the wounded. In doing so, they were challenging the patriarchal society, which served as the basis for the rule of Arab regimes. These contributions inspired and empowered women around the Arab world, who had previously not partaken in any form of activism prior to the protests, to take a stand and fight for their social burdens and truths. It led to the rediscovery of women's citizenship rights and abetted to realize their potential to bring about a political change (Ahmed, 2017). These calls for freedom and social justice governs the same principles of feminist discourses of equality and justice. Therefore, the Arab Spring led to a new collective embodiment of feminist struggles that refined their position politically, socially, and legally.

Among the countries, Tunisia saw the most advancement in endeavoring for equal gender reforms during the Arab Spring. The Tunisian revolution serves as a demonstration that suggests both men and women played an instrumental role in challenging the social and political order and were equally devoted to bringing about that change (Mulrine, 2011). The revolution saw a substantial change in the political representation of women. The parliamentary electoral list was reversed to include 50% of parliamentary seats reserved only for women (Olimat, 2014). In addition, the government invited Asmaa Mahfouz, the most celebrated activist on gender issues to join the legislature. Mahfouz, once enlisted to the parliament, was able to dissolve all testaments of the government that denied women from attaining the agreements of CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) (Olimat, 2014). Now, the Tunisian government is obliged to comply with this convention, that forbids any restriction or exclusion of women on the basis

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of sex, marital status, socio-economic status, and political status that nullifies their free exercise of citizenship rights. Even though women's active role in political participation tethered to the importance of equalizing gender spaces, reformations are still needed for the significant advancement of women in the Arab region.

### **Recommendations to better implement feminist ideologies in the Middle East**

Enhancing the economic prosperity of women facilitates their broader reach into the economic and social sphere. As Afshar (2000) notes, women's take on globalization and industrialization can lead to economic prosperity in the modern Arab world, improving women's standard of living in the Arab world. The author further asserts, there is a global need to integrate women's vision and knowledge towards a homogeneous integration of the economic gap in the Arab world. One such primary way is to implement reformed national and institutional Human Resource Development (HRD) frameworks that support women empowerment and education development (Metcalf, 2011). As Metcalfe (2011) notes, certain initiatives need to be set forth by the Arab regime to inspire and elevate women's status in the corporate domain, promoting the current economic and social status of Arab women. The author further analyzes findings that demonstrate the difference a new HRD framework can have on women empowerment. Refines women's quality of life, augment effective partnerships with civil society to facilitate long-lasting social change, and develop feminist agencies relevant to their own empowerment agendas. Therefore, changing and progressing to support women's aspirations and elevating their status in society and promoting a gender neutral economic domain. Thus, economic policies that empower women to pursue ambitious projects and future national development strategies can improve women's quality of life economically and socially.

Fashioning more women's clubs, organizations, and discussions to share collective values and understandings to spread feminist ideologies. Women when come together, sharing the women spirit, can cause shattering impact and challenge society's operations. As seen in the Tunisian revolution, women joined forces in the form of organizations to riot

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against the unjust government. The revolution saw a substantial change in the political representation of women, earning them 50% of seats in the parliament. Likewise, in Egypt women's contributed representation earned them educational and economic rights. Therefore, forming women's clubs and support groups ignites the effective spread of feminist discourses.

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### CONCLUSION

In summary, feminism has long emerged in the Arab world and have caused innate changes to the societal, economic, and cultural perception of women. Early feminist predecessors expressed their resistance towards patriarchal statutes and oppression in the form of literature tools and forming clubs and organizations. Their participation in nationalist struggles towards colonialism and social reforms by contesting against gender and cultural norms and values, witnessed vital revolution for women's rights politically, socially, and economically. However, much needs to be changed to create opportunities necessary for their advancement. By implementing policies that enhance the literacy rates, economic stability, and social development of women that enables them to identify their rights and fight against cultural consequences imposed on them.

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Great paper – very very interesting

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