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3. DEBUNKING MYTHS SURROUNDING WOMEN'S CAREERS IN THE ARAB REGION

A Critical Reflexive Approach

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, and stemming from our position as academic researchers and as women living and working in the Arab Region, we engage in a critical reflexive exercise that echoes our feminist standpoint. We aim to tackle and debunk some of the assumptions that often underpin research on women's careers in our region. Such assumptions may find strong support in a Western context, but they do not necessarily hold in a different socio-cultural and political context. We therefore highlight foundational points of departure often assumed to be relevant for women pursuing careers generally, and we provide evidence to suggest that many of these points are not necessarily 'true' for women working in many countries of the Arab world. By so doing, we hope to raise awareness about women's real lived experiences and on-going employment- and career-related struggles. We believe that gaining awareness of these realities is an important first step towards generating meaningful knowledge and fostering transformation in regard to women's employment- and career-related realities in the region.

INTRODUCTION: CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY ABOUT OURSELVES AND THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our focus on women's careers in the Arab Region is primarily of personal interest as we are women based in this part of the world. Feminist explanations of women's work experiences have largely been grounded within Western epistemological frameworks that conceive of a reality that is principally individualist and based within a liberal democratic context (Luke, 2001). Such explanations have not resonated well with our personal experiences at work in the Arab Region. Certainly, there have been overlaps between the concepts and discourses emerging from the Western literature and our personal experiences and those of women living and working in the region; however, we feel that greater effort must be made on our part to document our own voices and the experiences of women at work in this region. It is in this way that our personal experiences and commitments have shaped the current chapter.

This chapter reflects, therefore, our feminist standpoint that privileges the female experience of their social and personal worlds (Haraway, 1988). This is a type of self-reflexivity and, in gender research, is an essential outcome of emancipatory research (Lather, 1986). Our position as academic researchers on gender and career related topics and as women living and working in the Arab Region, allowed us to develop a heightened awareness of the burden of these particular patriarchal societies. This, in turn, allows us to bring what Stanley and Wise (1983) call a "double vision of reality" to our work. This double vision consists of membership in two groups, one oppressed (women) and the other élite (scholars). This gives us an experiential base from which to explore women's perceptions of their/our own realities (Shields & Dervin, 1993).

We therefore take great care in our research to explore the realities surrounding women's employment and careers in a manner that moves beyond simple juxtaposition to the West and to explore more indigenous and contextualised patterns, problems and solutions concerning the careers of women in Arab workplaces. In pursuing our research agenda and while asking localised research questions such as: *What are the career patterns of women in the region? What are the key challenges they face? What type of work-life balance policies are offered by organisations to support their careers?* we encounter an immediate stumbling block that necessitates further reflexivity not only about our position as researchers but also about the research questions themselves. This second form of reflexivity has been referred to as *epistemological reflexivity* and it "encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings" (Willig, 2001, p. 10). Reflecting on our research in this way raises important questions about the assumptions upon which the research itself is based.

Epistemological Reflexivity and the Uncovering of Our Assumptions

Being reflexive about epistemological assumptions involves exposing the underlying assumptions on which the logic of arguments is built (Holland, 1999). In our attempts to be reflexive about our research questions, we are surprised and disturbed by the number of hidden assumptions underlying some of the research questions that we pursue within our research agenda. The assumptions may find strong support when researchers explore our central research questions in a Western context, but they do not necessarily hold in a different socio-cultural and political context. It becomes clear at this point that we cannot be rigorous in the pursuit of our research agenda before we critically examine this set of assumptions, and clarify whether they are supported in the specific context of our research.

Our aim in this chapter therefore, is to focus specifically on six fundamental assumptions and proceed to first define the parameters of each assumption and then to try to provide empirical evidence toward debunking each assumption in turn. Through picking apart each assumption our ultimate aim is to depict the variations

in the realities, forces and factors that work to shape the career patterns and the workplace realities of working women in the Arab Region. Although there may be many more, we suggest a set of six fundamental assumptions as listed in Table1. Each assumption will be discussed and debunked in the sections that follow.

Table 1. Assumptions underlying our research questions

Research Questions: What are the career patterns of women in the region, what are the key challenges they face, and what type of work-life balance policies are offered by organisations to support their careers?

Assumptions:
  1. That the Arab Region (and women living within it) is/are homogenous
  2. That choosing to have a career is a positive and encouraged option for women
  3. That the legal climate safeguards women's equal access to having a career
  4. That women have full agency in regards to their career choices
  5. That work-life balance policies exist within workplaces
  6. That careers occur in the formal economy and/or are an integrated piece of a growing economy.

DEBUNKING ASSUMPTION ONE: THE HOMOGENEITY OF THE ARAB REGION

The Arab region encompasses 22 States, spanning from Oman in the east to Mauritania in the west (ESCWA, 2016). Despite similar historical, cultural and linguistic features among countries in the region, there are marked differences in the economic, social and political realms of these countries (Karam & Afiouni, 2014; Moghadam, 2004). There are also significant variations in terms of geographical size, population, level of urbanisation and wealth. Reflecting the latter characteristics, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA, 2016) has grouped Arab countries along four sub-regions:

• The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.
• The Maghreb: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia.
• The Mashrek: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Palestine.
• The Least Developed Countries (LDCs): Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan, and Yemen.

An examination of the gender outlook across the four sub-regions clearly shows significant heterogeneity. For example, Gulf States typically receive higher rankings on gender equality indices that include components linked to income (e.g., UNDP Gender development index or GDI). The latter has been criticised for the predominance of its income variable, which implies that countries with lower

income are unlikely to receive high scores regardless of their achievements in the field of gender equality. Even when income is factored out, gender indices still show significant variations. For example, the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), elaborated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), focuses instead on contextual factors shaping gender inequalities including five specific dimensions: discriminatory family code, restricted physical integrity, son bias, restricted resources and assets, and restricted civil liberties. Based on these factors, the SIGI index shows that the highest discrimination levels in the world are to be found in the Arab region and the between-nation variability is significant (OECD, 2014). Taken together however, the picture is particularly bleak with respect to the family code and access to resources, while mediocre performance on governance indicators further contributes to the region's poor performance (ESCWA, 2016). Table 2 maps the countries in the Arab region along the SIGI index, for those countries with available data.

Furthermore, variations in the gender outlook among regional countries may directly affect women's professional journeys in different ways (see Budhwar & Mellahi, 2006; Hutchings, Metcalfe, & Cooper, 2010; Karam & Afiouni, 2014). For example, when examining the range of country scores on the Global Gender

Table 2. SIGI index in the MENA

OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)				
Country	SIGI Rank (Arab countries)	SIGI Rank (global)	SIGI Score	Level of discrimination
The Maghreb Countries				
Morocco	1	36	0.1052	Low
Tunisia	2	62	0.1985	Medium
The Mashrek Countries				
Egypt	8	100	0.4280	Very High
Iraq	3	78	0.2630	High
Jordan	5	87	0.3118	High
Lebanon	4	83	0.2896	High
Syria	7	98	0.4162	Very High
The Least Developed Countries				
Mauritania	6	96	0.3953	Very High
Somalia	9	103	0.4573	Very High
Sudan	10	107	0.550	Very High
Yemen	11	108	0.5634	Very High

Source: OECD, 2014

GAP Index (WEF, 2015), we see dispersion in ranking with, on the one hand Yemen scoring the lowest in the world, and Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon also toward the bottom, while Kuwait, UAE, and Qatar score toward the top. In terms of economic participation and opportunity we also see wide variation across the region (ILO, 2015) as will be elucidated in subsequent sections.

Furthermore, we also see variations in the way women mobilise in the region as well as variations in state responses to such mobilisation. Here, Moghadam (2004) draws attention to the differences in the discourses and political strategies of secular feminists, Muslim feminists, and Islamic feminists across the region, which further highlights the need not to consider all women in the region are homogeneous, nor speaking in one voice. Despite this variety of feminist movements and political ideologies, Moghadam (2004) identifies four common overlapping demands: (a) the modernisation of family law, (b) the criminalisation of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women, including honour crimes, (c) women's right to retain their own nationality and to pass it to their children, and (d) greater access to employment and participation in political decision-making (p. 44).

Moghadam (2004) also notes an equally varied reaction from formal structures with state responses ranging from indifferent (e.g., Palestine Authority, Lebanon) to hostile (Saudi Arabia, Egypt) to receptive (Algeria, Morocco), with a number of states now actively promoting women's rights and implementing legal reforms (Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia). In conclusion, and based on the evidence above, it is difficult to suggest that the countries that constitute the Arab Region (nor the women living within these countries) are a homogenous group that can or should be considered as a single unit of analysis. Thus, assumption one that the Arab Region (and women living within it) is/are homogenous does not hold.

DEBUNKING ASSUMPTION TWO: POSITIVE CAREER CHOICES FOR WOMEN

Each society has its own set of beliefs and behaviours about what it means to be female or male. Cialdini (2007) describes these as gender norms or as the unwritten rules concerning appropriate behaviour or what men or women should do. Although there are common aspects to gender identified across cultures, the specifics are still determined through local cultural socialisation. The influence of gender norms on women's perceived career choices are profound. The seminal work of Sandra Bem (1981, 1983) argues that children learn appropriate definitions of gender – and the respective gender norms and roles – early in life and that this becomes a key structure around which other information is organised in social life. Bem (1983) further suggests that when a girl learns that the cultural prescription for femininity includes politeness and kindness, these are then incorporated into her emerging and lasting schemas of gender and she will adjust her behaviour accordingly. The impact of this on career choices is likely far reaching with a person's sense of adequacy and possibility becoming tied to his or her sense that their behaviour matches the

appropriate gender schema (Crane & Markus, 1982; Markus, Crane, Bernstein, & Sidani, 1982).

In the Arab Region, gender roles are largely normalised within the home, and women who choose to have a career and engage actively in the public sphere often experience different kinds of implicit and explicit discouragement (Karam & Afiouni, 2014). Most drastically perhaps are the restrictions on access to employment (Metcalfe, 2008; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2010) and on continued inequality in pay, position and decision-making positions (Karam & Jamali, 2013; Omair, 2008).

Even in these economic times with the global rise in rates of unemployment and with an increasing social acceptability of dual earner households as a matter of necessity (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004), we see covert restrictions on women's careers such as that which has been described as the 'Double Penalty'. *Penalty One* occurs when women pursuing a career experience negative feedback from family and society because they are deviating from the expected gender roles of homemaker, mother, and caretaker. The penalty faced by women who work out of choice (not need) is often particularly harsh.

The *second penalty* occurs when women are precluded from particular developmental activities, resources, or positions at work because it is assumed that they will not remain in the job for long or because they are not perceived as dedicated or committed as their male counterparts. Women are often considered a riskier investment that might walk out of the door as soon as they marry and found a family. Therefore, *Penalty Two* occurs when women are penalised at work because of gender stereotypes and deeply engrained gender-based expectations. The double penalty has been found to be particularly drastic in the Arab Region and other neo-patriarchal states (see Karam & Afiouni, 2014; Karam, Afiouni, & Nasr, 2013). Taken together, and in conclusion, these examples suggest that many women in the Arab Region are not encouraged to have a career. In fact, women who do pursue a career often suffer from an overt double penalty as well as a plethora of other challenges Thus, assumption two: that choosing to have a career is a positive and encouraged option for women does not hold.

DEBUNKING ASSUMPTION THREE: EQUAL ACCESS GUARANTEED THROUGH LEGAL PROCESS

Although most countries in the Arab Region guarantee *equality of all citizens* in the constitution*,* women still face legal forms of discrimination that are systematic and pervade every aspect of life (Kelly, 2009). This is a key consideration in the context of women careers that cannot be ignored. The existence of laws and regulations which limit access, pose restrictions and strictly govern women's movement, actions and possibilities of interactions have stark implications for career paths and progression. In a study about the level of women's rights in the region, Kelly and Breslin (2010) conclude that there are localised complexities within this region that restrict and stifle women's participation in political, civil, legal and economic life. In particular,

these authors note numerous legal restrictions, which many have argued are tied to deeply entrenched societal norms combined with conservative interpretations of Islamic law (Kelly, 2009); as well as the prevalence of restrictive constitutional rights and labour laws (Moghadam, 2004).

Laws and institutional measures therefore play an important role in either supporting or undermining women's access to employment. Many Arab States have been successful at enacting laws which guarantee equal rights between men and women in the labour market. Indeed, the principle of equal pay for equal work, which has recently received attention as a key measure of women's access to resources in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, has been enshrined in Egyptian, Moroccan and Saudi legislation (ESCWA, 2016). However, there are several areas in which legislative frameworks in the Arab region continue to pose difficulties for women's access to formal work, namely in regards to provisions for maternity leave and gender discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

Provisions on Maternity Leave

Only a handful of Arab countries currently meet the international standard of ensuring a minimum of 14-weeks of maternity leave (UNESCO, 2015) and the duration of maternity leave established by the law falls below this mark in most Arab States. According to the OECD report (2014), only 23% of MENA countries have established the recommended ILO length of maternity leave (14 weeks). Another important consideration is that the costs of maternity leave are borne by the employer in the majority of Arab countries. These current provisions indirectly reinforce gender discrimination in employment, because they create additional costs that strongly discourage employers from recruiting women of childbearing age. Several countries have established safeguards that prohibit the dismissal of women during maternity leave (ESCWA, 2016), but this does little to alleviate the disincentive in the initial hiring process.

Gender Discrimination and Harassment in the Workplace

The labour laws in many Arab countries have explicit clauses preventing discrimination in the workplace. The problem, however, lies in the lack of mechanisms to ensure their actual implementation. The equal pay provisions that exist in the region remain largely unenforced and undermined in practice. Inequalities in non-wage benefits, such as pension schemes, housing allowances and child subsidies remain largely unaddressed. Women also rarely have the same rights as men to pass on their pension benefits to their families (ESCWA, 2016). Moreover, the phenomenon of violence and sexual harassment against women at the workplace remains a pervasive problem in many Arab countries, with a shortage of national and international legislation to address this serious rights violation. In a report published by the UNFPA in collaboration with the Egyptian Centre for Women's Rights

(Aboul Comsan, 2009), it was found that 30% of working women in Qatar faced some sort of sexual harassment at their workplace. Astonishingly, approximately 90% of Yemeni female respondents reported sexual harassment incidents in either public places or at work. Moreover, there is a lack of reliable statistics concerning the prevalence of sexual harassment at the workplace in the Arab World that is most probably due to social taboos and stigmatisation leading to underreporting. Some researchers suggest that sexual harassment is more prevalent among low paying jobs (Waugh, 2010). It is particularly in these positions that women are the most vulnerable to sexual harassment and are less likely to speak out of fear of losing their jobs, and of facing public embarrassment and defamation. This is further accentuated for female immigrants and refugees (Waugh, 2010).

Taken together, the impact of these restrictions coupled with social expectations of women's role discussed in the previous section, is evidenced in the number of women who formally participate in the labour force of these countries. Overall, the Arab Region has the lowest scores on female labour force participation rates (LFPR) compared to that of men in the same region (listed in Table 3), with very little progress achieved over the last 10 years except for some GCC countries.

In sum, the legal climate in most countries of the region is not favourable towards women's employment. Therefore, the assumption that there is equal access to employment guaranteed thought legal process does not hold.

DEBUNKING ASSUMPTION FOUR: CAREER CHOICE FREEDOMS

The low rate of female employment in the region has often been interpreted by observers as due to a lack of an internalised desire to work (Jamali, Sidani, & Safieddine, 2005; Omair, 2008) and/or due to structural constraints which force women to stay at home (Abdalla, 1996; Al-Lamky, 2007; Fargues, 2009; Marmenout, 2009). The current chapter acknowledges the possibility of both, while at the same time acknowledging the interconnections between them. Following the longstanding agency-structure debate within the institutional literature (Giddens, 1984; Reed, 1997), we adopt the position that recognises the power of both the structural constraints as well as the agency of individual women within these constraints.

According to some studies, women do not readily attempt to change the social attitudes or to counter the prevailing gender norms, instead choosing to adhere and identify with them (Hilsdon & Rozario, 2006; Jamali et al., 2005). Farahat (2009) indicated that women in Egypt changed their career goals to accommodate their household obligations, rather than the opposite. Al-Lamky (2007) documented the way that working women in Oman had strong guilt feelings for not being able to be more available for their children. Marmenout (2009) similarly found that Emirati women always gave priority to their family responsibilities and chose careers to suit domestic needs. As a result, the precedence of the family over paid work, both from a social and an individual perspective, needs to be accounted for when examining

Table 3. The economic participation and opportunity index scores in MENA, 2006–2015

Country	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
				Economic participation and opportunity for MENA countries 2006–2015						
Qatar	N/A	0.4556	0.4146	0.4005	0.4829	0.5473	0.5557	0.5735	0.6197	0.632
Kuwait	0.5773	0.6036	0.5697	0.5571	0.5369	0.5407	0.5567	0.5252	0.6083	0.615
Bahrain	0.3829	0.3903	0.3988	0.4830	0.4967	0.5079	0.4967	0.5146	0.4803	0.597
UAE	0.4027	0.4210	0.4198	0.4148	0.4605	0.4898	0.4751	0.4672	0.5152	0.519
Tunisia	0.4803	0.4740	0.4757	0.4524	0.4501	0.4440	N/A	N/A	0.4634	0.444
Oman	N/A	0.3845	0.4149	0.4059	0.4003	0.4068	0.4284	0.4489	0.4707	0.441
Egypt	0.4157	0.4210	0.4367	0.4498	0.4530	0.4573	0.4536	0.4426	0.4609	0.441
Lebanon	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.4483	0.4482	0.4425	0.4420	0.4321	0.439
Algeria	0.4428	0.4643	0.4680	0.4697	0.4666	0.4452	0.3776	0.3307	0.3930	0.410
Saudi Arabia	0.2401	0.3210	0.2589	0.3096	0.3351	0.3576	0.3404	0.3223	0.3893	0.387
Morocco	0.4612	0.4006	0.3926	0.4477	0.4077	0.4177	0.4151	0.3949	0.4	0.378
Jordan	0.4421	0.4832	0.4889	0.4524	0.4225	0.4333	0.4296	0.4145	0.3580	0.350
Syria	N/A	0.5240	0.5084	0.4609	0.3980	0.4090	0.2743	0.2508	0.2975	0.279
Yemen	0.2528	0.2507	0.2523	0.2334	0.1951	0.3180	0.3424	0.3577	0.3596	0.225
Mauritania	0.499	0.5046	0.4894	0.4908	0.4668	0.4639	0.4955	0.3651	0.4661	0.447

Source: World Economic Forum: The Global Gender Gap Report 2015

work-family relations in the Arab region (Afiouni, 2014; Gallant, 2006; Karam, Afiouni, & Nasr, 2013; Neal, Finlay, & Tansey, 2005).

A study by Afiouni (2014) further confirms the importance of context in shaping women's careers in the region. The findings of her study highlight both organisational (i.e., lack of mentoring and organisational support) and cultural factors (i.e., Islam, patriarchy, and family centrality) that shape/bind women's careers choices and patterns allowing thus for a better understanding of local constraints to women's careers in the Arab Region. In this context, therefore, and based on the review above, the assumption that women have full agency over their career choices does not hold in the light of the prevalent contextual constraints discussed above, that bind and restrain their career choices. Therefore, the assumption that women have full agency in regards to their career choices does not hold.

DEBUNKING ASSUMPTION FIVE: FAMILY-FRIENDLY WORKPLACES

The development of a family-friendly organisational culture that values the integration of employees' work and family lives has become a necessity for reducing work/family mismatch (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012). Such a culture reflects the shared assumptions, beliefs and values regarding the degree to which the organisation recognises and facilitates the integration of its employees' work and family lives simultaneously (Mandeville, Halbesleben, & Whitman, 2016). Creating a work culture that is supportive of women's career advancement means that companies need to re-examine the definition of the ideal worker, the definition of commitment, and challenge the norms about the time needed for work to get done (Shapiro et al., 2007). In that regard, Bailyn (2003, p. 141) states that:

> If we meet the criteria of equal opportunity and pay and even if we create policies to help people with families, but the ideal worker continues to be seen as one with no interests or responsibilities outside of work, then we will only recreate and reinforce existing practice. And that will continue to disadvantage women.

While the region is making important progress in establishing supportive work-life measures, many companies and organisations still do not provide satisfactory work-family policies. There is an "emphasis on supporting traditional responsibilities of women in the household, particularly those related to their reproductive and caretaker roles and less related to their capacity to fulfil work responsibilities" (OECD, 2014, p. 24). A study by Karam and Afiouni (2014) shows that while family-friendly policies in the West are mostly addressed to women and aim at helping them juggle their work and family responsibilities, family friendly policies in the Arab region are often addressed to males and help them juggle their work and Islamic duties (Karam & Afiouni, 2014).

Several MENA governments have approved increasing measures to facilitate the work-life balance in areas such as increased length of maternity leave, specified

nursing areas for women (e.g., Yemen, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, the Palestinian authority and Bahrain) and part-time employment solutions (OECD, 2014). Only a few countries, however, reported employers providing childcare facilities (Egypt and Jordan) or subsidising childcare (Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon) (OECD, 2014). Clearly, further action is required from institutions to create and implement policies that balance women's responsibilities for the care of children and the elderly (Moghadam, 2013), and workplaces in the Arab Region still cannot be described as family friendly. Therefore, the assumption that work-life balance policies exist within workplaces does not fully hold.

DEBUNKING ASSUMPTION SIX: WOMEN'S CAREERS IN THE FORMAL ECONOMY

Women tend to make up the largest portion of the informal labour force generally and women in the Arab region are no different (Moghadam, 2015). Indeed, women remain concentrated in hidden areas of the informal economy (e.g., domestic labourers, assistants in small family enterprises). Under such circumstances, they endure hazardous employment status, low, irregular or no remuneration, little or no access to social security or protection, and limited ability to organise to ensure the enforcement of international labour standards and human rights (Chant & Pedwell, 2008). Indeed, often in this context, women who are interested in work or who currently work, often face institutional pressures questioning their legitimacy (Abdalla, 1996; Al-Lamky, 2007; Omair, 2008). In fact, when gender roles dictate the rightful place of women as belonging in the private sphere (Miles, 2002; Neal et al., 2005), there are very strong and very real institutional pressures restricting and/or often largely precluding employment in the formal economy (Jamali et al., 2005; Metcalfe, 2006).

But this activity, and rethinking the importance of career parameters within the informal economy, is a growing consideration for many feminist scholars – what has been termed the care economy (see Bergeron, 2011; Healy & Bergeron, 2015), The Beijing Platform for action acknowledges how valuable women's unpaid contributions to development are (ESCWA, 2016). In most Arab societies, labour markets have a very significant and essential informal sector, with informal work including occupations that do not have great regulation or are not formalised, such as traditional arts and crafts, auto mechanical repairs and street vending (MEDA-ETE, 2007). As such, the assumption that women are predominantly employed in the formal economy does not hold.

CONCLUSION, PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY ABOUT HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

Overall in this chapter we highlighted foundational points of departure often assumed to be relevant for women pursuing careers generally, and have provided evidence to

suggest that many of these points are not necessarily 'true' for women working in many countries of the Arab world. We have attempted to tackle and debunk some of these assumptions that often tend to underpin many of our research questions, with the hope of raising awareness about women's real lived experiences and on-going employment- and career-related struggles. We believe that gaining awareness of these realities is an important first step towards generating meaningful knowledge and therefore toward fostering transformation in regard to women's employment- and career-related realities in the region.

As researchers and as women living and working in the region, debunking these assumptions is important because it provides a better foundation to support progress in this area. From this standpoint, we see possibilities for change along three simultaneous fronts. The first is on the ground, reflected in women's mobilisations within their countries, but also transnationally. The second is through scholarly feminist writings, attempting to bring women's marginalised voices to the mainstream discussion and scholarly debate, the third is through transformative career guidance practices that seek to enhance social justice.

Mobilisation and organised efforts by groups of women to push the women's agenda forward in the region is promising (Metcalfe, 2008). Heightened transnational feminist dialogue, the mobilisation of women's networks and the requirement of the Arab societies to expand into new markets have made gender a salient issue and placed women's empowerment on policy agendas of international organisations and national government (Metcalfe, 2008). In parallel, steps have been taken by governments toward either (1) ratifying or complying with international standards or recommendations concerning women's rights or (2) supporting local women, women's groups, or women-centred initiatives to improve the status of women. Moreover, women are increasingly engaging in transnational alliances and using outlets to lobby for the institutionalisation of gender equality in the constitution of the country or for example to make educational curriculum free from gender stereotypes in collaboration with powerful others, such as, for instance, strong male actors, politically powerful incumbents, international regulative bodies, strong international NGOs, and/or transnational feminist alliances.

In terms of scholarly work, women's careers in the Arab region undoubtedly deserves research attention, namely due to the high untapped potential for economic growth and development. The variations that exist across countries discussed above clearly highlight the need to pay close attention to context while examining career related issues (Afiouni, 2014; Karam & Afiouni, 2014; Cohen & Duberley, 2015). Researching women's employment and career related issues in the region is a much needed and timely endeavour, namely in light of global initiatives such as the millennial development goals as well as the regional collectivities of individuals who are beginning to mobilise in order to improve the opportunities for women in the professional sphere in the region. We, therefore, invite scholars to further reflect about the myths we have debunked in this chapter and to join us in our journey in crafting meaningful research that is of relevance to the scholarly community, that

resonates well with women's lived experiences and on-going struggles, and that strives to make meaningful impact on women's employment- and career-related realities.

The implications of these debunked assumptions on the career guidance of girls and young women in the region are considerable, especially when we consider career guidance as a tool to enhance social justice (Sultana, 2014). In fact, when we consider career guidance as a socially transformative and emancipatory tool rather than one that reproduces oppression (Hooley & Sultana, 2016), we can begin to identify key avenues for action by mobilising knowledge to develop targeted services towards vulnerable groups such as young women in the region, easing their transition to economic independence and dignified living (Sultana, 2014).

Considering our debunked assumptions in the context of career guidance, we need to be careful not to blindly transpose career guidance in the west, as it distils within itself the fundamental premises that underpin our often unexamined, taken-for-granted views that prioritises notions of a free, autonomous, independent individual seeking to fulfil him/herself through choices made, and to design life projects for oneself (Hooley & Sultana, 2016). Our debunked assumptions indicate that this is not necessarily true in the region, and therefore a contextualised view is needed to understand idiosyncratic factors shaping and binding women's careers in the region (Afiouni, 2014), considering career guidance as embedded in, and respectful of local epistemologies (Hooley & Sultana, 2016).

As a final note, we want to acknowledge the series of shocks and profound changes that the Arab word has experienced over the past few years. As these shocks and changes are continuing, it is particularly important to document women's experiences and to continue the struggle towards gender parity and equity. Recent popular uprisings, coupled with political instabilities and the refugee crises have caused political tensions and clashes, resulting in the "chronic institutional paralysis" of some states and in the de-prioritisation of gender-based agenda items (ESCWA, 2016, p. 2). This is a dangerous area for the millions of Arab women and for their future career and economic prospects.

It should not be ignored that the highest gender unemployment gaps in the world are found in North Africa and the Arab states (ILO, 2016), and that the political and economic instabilities have had profound consequences on women in terms of possibilities for careers but also in terms of reinforcing traditional notions of gender based division that relegate women to the private sphere (ESCWA, 2016). Evidence for change in the near future are weak, with the female youth unemployment rate being almost double that of young men, reaching as high as 44.3% and 44.1% (ILO, 2016), which reiterates the need to transformative career guidance practices specifically targeted towards young women in the region.

The challenges faced by women in the region are further exacerbated with increasing radical interpretations of religious rules in come contexts. Indeed, the continuous struggle between various ideologies ranging from radical Islam embodied in the Salafi movement and radical liberalism emulating the west, pose protracted

complications for women in the region. The current struggle between dictatorship and the quest for democracy, between radical Islam and liberalism, between the forces of change and the quest for stability is creating a double standard of norms and taken-for-grantedness regarding women's role in society and the possibilities for women's careers.

It is in this context that more concerted efforts are needed for positive change for the gender agenda in the region (Karam & Jamali, 2013). Indeed, as the region is faced with political and economic challenges, there is space and indeed need for mobilisation and change. Moghadam (2013, p. 17) noted that within: "the context of democratic transitions, the challenges of the new governments include the integration of an increasingly educated female population and women's claims for economic participation in the new policy frameworks" (Moghadam, 2013, p. 17). This context, while presenting particularly stark challenges for local women, is a context that may spark a future of change.

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