

More than a Pretty Face: Gender Discrimination and Women in Academia

Dr. Roula Maria Dib

Females in academia may have come a long way during the past century, but the fight to overcome socially and economically constructed gender biases is still ongoing. What kinds of obstacles are they facing? What are some examples of injustice, both apparent and discreet? This article will shed light on how women in higher academia, specifically in the Middle East, struggle to climb the scholarly and professional ladder, especially when it comes to competence perception, motherhood, and discipline bias. The journey starts even before the attainment of the PhD, and carries on into the workplace, where women often discover, to their dismay, that the juice is not worth the squeeze. And while they've come a long way, women in academia are still fighting for equality, acknowledgment, and respect. Their challenges are physical, social, and psychological, taking toll on both body and mind, especially when it comes to scholars who are mothers; for them, double the effort is exerted but rewarded with half the pay, facilitations are slashed (including maternity leaves and research accommodation), and certain academic positions and disciplines, such as STEM and theology, remain reserved for men. First, there still is the problem of competence perception. Because of a genuine belief, whether conscious or unconscious, that females are intellectually inferior and incompetent to men, many male colleagues may not accept the fact that their female colleagues are academically

talented and would try to sabotage some projects by including less females in their initiatives. For example, many academic governing bodies and committee members are solely comprised of men. More generally, colleagues or students do not always start from the assumption that female academics are qualified for the positions they hold. There is a constant pressure to prove her competence, to prove that she belongs, to prove that she is serious about her scholarship (and not just interested in having a job in teaching), to prove that she can be a good leader. Young females especially are unjustly perceived as incompetent with the excuse that they are either less experienced because of their age or less productive because of the possibility of motherhood. Even addressing a professor can be determined by gender. It's funny how, in formal settings such as faculty meetings and even classrooms, male faculty members tend to be addressed as "Dr." more commonly than female professors, or even female deans and provosts, who are either addressed by their first names, or simply as "Ms." and "Mrs." Moreover, scholarly women are stereotyped as being nonchalant about their appearances, so fashionable female professors are out of the norm and as a result, are either looked down on as "unscholarly" or even harassed. The problem of harassment among faculty members, is, surprisingly, very much alive. Academic environments are no different than other workplaces when it comes

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to this issue—in fact, women can be harassed in academic environments in more subtle ways than other workplaces. For example, they can be the subject of creative works of male colleagues, who claim that their work is nothing but harmless, well-intentioned writing, music, or art. Sometimes scholarly discussions that revolve around sex (such as in psychology, biology, or even literary criticism), become perfect mediums for men to harass their female colleagues.

Another significant issue faced by female academics around the MENA region, is that of ridiculous maternity leaves, if any, making it difficult for them to maintain full time positions and get promoted over the years. Many academic institutions do not help women plan their childcare by reducing the number of office hours (or shifting them to online format), or by having nurseries and daycares on site. Institutions are constantly worried about mothers being “distracted” because their children are nearby, without taking into consideration that this would actually alleviate so much anxiety of mothers. One cannot deny the biological factors in play: A woman’s body needs time to rest and heal after childbirth—and ridiculously insufficient maternity leaves of 2 weeks or the typical “40 days” at the most will only exacerbate the physical and psychological conditions mothers can be in after returning to their jobs. I have witnessed mothers whose post-natal depression became alarmingly worse because they had no time to rest or get special care, and they had no choice (due to financial reasons) but to leave the baby and go to work. Some ended up quitting despite dire financial situations, others remained miserable, anxious, and depressed, and were not

able to perform as well as they would have if they were allowed some more rest. Moreover, another physical factor is that new mothers who choose to breastfeed are often forced to give up or undergo the discomfort of expressing milk at work, trying to keep it as discrete as possible. For mothers working in academia and not in corporate positions, their teaching hours are no more than 3-4 hours a day, and their office hours can easily be conducted online, in the comfort of their homes where they can tend to their young. However, the majority are forced to remain at work from 8-6 pm if they were to retain their full-time positions. This takes its toll both on the mother’s body and mind, although it can easily be avoided with a few modifications. As a matter of fact, mothers will be able to work more efficiently that way.

Furthermore, an especially important challenge facing women in academia today is the issue of the gender pay gap. Many statistics have shown that instead of narrowing, the salary gap between men and women faculty members has actually increased, especially at early stages in academic jobs such as the level of assistant professor in the MENA region. Many institutions attempt to conceal this, however, by not showing it through the basic salary, but through the differences in “benefits”, such as housing allowances and educational assistance. In many places, female professors –despite the fact of contributing to education—do not get the benefit of their children’s tuition. The excuse oftentimes is that married women’s husbands’ jobs would surely grant them this benefit (a concept taken for granted). However, male professors are hardly ever questioned about their marital statuses to determine the

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financial benefits they are entitled to. Perhaps employers tend to assume by default that their wives do not receive such perks—without even asking, as this tends to be the culture. Yet, many women in higher academia are still not given equal financial benefits as their male colleagues, even when their husbands don't get these benefits either. Unfortunately, in many places in the region, higher education has adopted a hyper-capitalist, corporate model for academic institutions. This has resulted in an exploitation of female employees for cutting costs and improving profit. But in the dire conditions of many areas, however, women often accept what they're offered while men have the chance to negotiate better salaries for their academic positions. What's even more shocking is that this is all still happening today and affecting many families at large. It is not only about women's rights, but this is also about a crisis of having economic models that do not support or nurture families nor recognize their important roles in the development of societies.

Another important issue that female academics go through in the Levant is the lack of opportunities—if not an almost shunning—for women to teach or become active researchers and leading entities in certain academic disciplines such as STEM and Theology. Starting with the issue of the lack of women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), although the scene has significantly improved with seeing more female engineers in the region, the percentage of women scholars is still significantly low in this field. The "masculine image" tied to STEM subjects is still quite there, and it is affecting the career aspirations of young girls in high school and university. Besides the

stereotyping of the field as a "masculine" one, another factor affecting the pursuing of this discipline by females is the job market factor. Academics in this field, whether they choose to work in academia as university professors or in Research and Development institutions usually take into consideration how this will affect their lives as mothers in the future. With the poor accommodation of proper maternity leaves and a flexible work-home balance, a female at the crossroads of choices may need to think twice before going further down the STEM road. And those who choose to do so usually suffer from the difficulties along the way.

Moreover, rummaging through the faculty member listings among Archimandrites and Fathers of theology departments in many universities in the region, there is a clear deficiency—if not a complete absence—of female academics in the field. Moreover, from what I've noticed, most (or even all) of the students of theology were male, mostly because they wanted to pursue pastoral roles in the near future, and all of their teachers were also male theologians and academics. Perhaps this is to provide not only mentorship, teaching, and guidance, but also to be a model, or an embodiment of the pastoral office they are preparing for. And the pastoral leadership, of course, is held by men. This affects the number of highly qualified and competent women who are theologian scholars and researchers to share their knowledge and further contribute to the academic field. Interestingly, it is not a question of competence or skill but a question of eligibility. The struggle of women in theological academia, therefore, lies in the question of whether they can model and mentor

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the discipline that they are teaching, which is actually a preparation for a social and spiritual role designed for men. When asking about the reasons why, the answer I either usually get the typical “because that’s what God said” or a biblical reference to 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35, “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.” Although this doesn’t really state the banishing of female academics from the discipline of theology, the priority (or rather, exclusivity) given to men for the roles in pastorship do not give much leeway to female professors as “role models”. The inclusion of women in theological education can only enhance the understanding of egalitarianism.

Finally, both a woman’s career and her job are important (and they are not both the same thing). Hierarchically, her career is the most important factor here, so she must not let the rules set by her job stand in the way of her career progression. In all the pressures women in academia face, there are so many rules they need to set for themselves in the face of imposed injustice. For example, it is essential to prioritize what matters most—like family, and the rest will follow. More women, especially mothers, should make this clear to the people in their academic jobs. If a woman needs to bring her child with her to meetings, office hours, or even classes sometimes, then they should make this clear. If she needs to leave early to attend her child’s school play or

drive her child to the doctor’s checkup, then she should by all means, do it. Women should stop looking for alternatives in their lives to serve corrupt or rigid systems. They should stop breaking their wallets to hire babysitters or nannies when they can manage without this added expense (especially when most of the family income is gone because of the gender pay gap anyway). Women can do this without breaking any laws or lagging behind in their work or hurting/annoying anyone by disrupting anything. They can do this without downplaying their families. Systems that are yet to support families as the most important social molecule need to be reminded that women, with their many responsibilities, are important members of society not just because they work for them, but also because they are bringing up a family and displaying family values in institutions that must prioritize this as well. Men do not face the same “parental prejudice” if they bring their children to work or if they need to miss classes to tend to their young. Women, however, are always regarded as displaying a weak or soft spot when their families are involved. They still do not see it for the unique strength that it is. If women do not create their own work/life balance, no job or institution will do it for them. The key is to keep fighting—to not give up, to keep asking for their rights, even if they know that they will not get them. It is also important to collaborate. There are many women out there who are facing the same discriminatory issues. In togetherness is support and strength. It helps one to find her voice and speak up among the many, even if no one is listening.