

The Accreditation of Gender

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I am presenting this paper from three perspectives. One is as a faculty member who has taught at two universities in the United Arab Emirates; another is as a member of visiting committees in the accreditation process of the country; and the third is as a woman.

The UAE is a country about the size and shape of Idaho, and a hundred degrees Fahrenheit hotter. It borders the Arabian Gulf, the empty quarter of Saudi Arabia, and Oman. I live in Abu Dhabi, the capital and home to the world's newest seven star hotel. There are about two million people in the country, which is not yet 40 years old, and 85% of them are expatriates. The nationals—or the Emiratii—have established exclusive governmental schools. One of these is a federal women's university where I taught for one year, and the other is a new private University just now completing its second year of operation. The private University segregates the genders in different wings of the building, but the students are natives of many Arab countries—Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Pakistan, Palestine, Algeria, and, of course, Oman and the UAE.

The visiting committees in which I participated looked at English programs for the British University in Dubai, a master's granting institution, and at a small university in Ras Al Kaimah. The small university simply did not have the work force or strategic planning to carry off its mission, and so the English program was suspended for a time. I have also been on the receiving end of visiting committees examining the English

program at Abu Dhabi University. The members of this committee were all men, as were the committees in which I was a member, except, of course, for me.

Gender is an issue that troubles the waters when something is going on under the surface. This paper is about the relationship between gender, higher education, and accreditation in the Middle East, an issue whose troublesomeness seems to grow as its subterranean source dries up. If oil once was the prime engine of extraordinary, rapid development in many Arab countries, the region's ability to manage without oil is the central economic question. My thesis is that if accreditation is not part of the solution in the Middle East, it is part of the problem.

The 2002 Arab Human Development Report, a document that remains breathtaking in depth and clarity, asserts that a prosperous future for the Arab world depends on the total empowerment of women, "taking advantage of all opportunities to build [women's] capabilities and to enable them to exercise those abilities to the full".¹ It recognizes that in the present women are "severely marginalized in Arab political systems and broadly discriminated against in both law and custom".² It says that education is a fundamental way to fuel change.

Levity about gender is a great *American* tradition. Might I welcome you to 1970s women's lib?—or, as I often heard it—women's *lip*? As rich in difference and opportunity as the west and Middle East are, some things always seem to be the same.

The nature of sameness merits discussion, and will arise a bit later in this paper. The point that deserves mutual recognition right now is that change does not happen simply because it's wanted. It does not matter how often or how loud change is demanded if people do not pursue active strategies to go after it. Worse, without substantial gender awareness—even due diligence—to inform the strategies and the practices they lead to, the strategies themselves can block change.

Without assuming that higher education is solely responsible for ensuring women's empowerment and participation, it is my contention that higher education is particularly suited to it, not because it is any more noble (though maybe it is) than other institutions or avenues or even because it may be more “protected” from social buffeting, but because its quality can be assured in a straightforward, no-nonsense, yet adaptive manner. Indeed, there may be no more effective under-the-radar operation for restructuring systems than the endless crush of numbing detail wrought by the process of accreditation.

There is one problem, however. Quality is not synonymous with equality. Accreditation is not neutral. It can work for and support quality and quality assurance practices. It can also work against female empowerment even as it professes the opposite.

To be fair, of course, the responsibility to understand the nuances of gender equality does not fall alone to quality assurance agencies. Nor must the issues of culture, religion and tradition be somehow solved or elided in order to proceed. Yet even the Arab Report points out that tradition and culture often are not synonymous with progress, and progress

requires negotiation and trade-offs, what the report calls “the process of enlarging choices”³ to push ahead human development.

It is important to recognize that this dilemma is not somehow Middle Eastern because it exists in the Middle East nor is the Middle East some kind of undifferentiated block. However, it is also important to recognize that—in the context of this conversation—higher education in the Middle East has to say and do something different if it wants to equalize roles for women in national leadership and professional positions. Moreover, if it wants to proceed with anything like the same dispatch with which the Gulf States like the U.A.E. have put up cement towers and invested in the multiple talents of expatriate and national workers, it needs to make the educational changes now.

In the United States, you have to be at least as old as I am to remember that the end of the Vietnam War was not the only withdrawal by the U.S. in the early 1970s. Those were my first years in college—a woman’s college—and years that sealed the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, fondly known as the ERA. Not enough states—and certainly not the one in which I lived in the deep South—would ratify a simple constitutional statement that said women had equal rights in America. “So much for cultural imperialism from the communists,” said the red-white-and-blue leaders at the time. The more level headed men—at the time there was one female in the legislative branch of the government—allowed that the U.S. already supported a legal system capable of meting out equal rights. If, by chance, women wanted something equal that they didn’t already have, they could sue.

Things did not turn out quite this way, but they came close. Let me turn to how the U.S. has dealt with equal rights for women in education during the thirty-odd years since equal rights took its hardest modern blow. It is pertinent to the developing and re-developing educational systems in the Middle East, and elsewhere, because in place of a broad statement inculcated in the nation's charter, the redress took the form of a one sentence civil law directed to the system of American education. That law, which continues today to be known by its generic name "Title IX," profoundly altered the educational landscape in the U.S., especially in higher education and especially for women.

The preamble of Title IX, passed in 1972, reads as follows:

*No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any educational programs or activity receiving federal financial assistance.*⁴

There is almost no college or university in the United States that does not receive federal financial assistance. Much of the assistance comes through federal financial loans to students, but much of it also builds and develops facilities, laboratories, research, and so on. Wealthy colleges get as much if not more than poorer colleges. In a word, Title IX is everywhere.

Its effect has been unilateral, as well. The recent 30th anniversary of Title IX produced a plethora of reports (the U.S. Department of Education published a report for the 25th anniversary) that enumerate the changes ascribed to the law.

- In 1972, 44% of Bachelor's degrees went to women; in 2000, 56%⁵
- In 1972, 17% of Ph.D.'s went to women; in 2002, 51%⁶
- In 1972, 09% of medical degrees went to women;⁷ in 2000, 43%⁸
- In 1971, 7% of law degrees went to women; in 1994, 43%⁹
- In 1970, 8.7% of full professors were women; in 1999, 20.8%¹⁰
- In 1971, 30,000 women participated in college sports; in 2001, 163,000, a 403% increase¹¹

The list can go on. In business, 8% of the undergraduate degrees awarded in 1962 went to women, but 47% by 1992.¹² Today, the number of female students in high school sports is over 2.8 million;¹³ in 1971, there were only 300,000 women (7.5% of high school athletes).¹⁴ In 2001-02, women made up about 60% of undergraduates, and more women than men earned Ph.D.s for the first time in American history.¹⁵

Men, as it turns out, have not suffered. As you might imagine, Title IX focused rapt attention on athletic programs because of their bias toward men. There were initial fears that women would try out for the football team, that money for male sports would be curtailed, and that men's athletic teams would be dropped. Very little of that has happened. Men's sports have maintained their dollars and their presence over the three

decades. Today, scholarship support for men far outpaces women by \$133 million.¹⁶ Furthermore, as women's sports' teams have flourished, men have assumed the coaching positions, the percentage of female coaches a casualty of greater opportunity (and, of course, continued sexism).¹⁷ In addition, the number of male nurses has increased,¹⁸ and the salary has risen.

Is this not an extraordinary transformation? What is there not to like?

There are two things. First, as multiple observers have noted, the university is a meager employer of women in top positions. This is true even more in top research universities. The higher the prestige of the university or the position, the fewer the women.¹⁹ Job stability for women is also less; in 1998, 49.5% of all female faculty were employed part-time, and only 52% of women were tenured compared to 71% of men.²⁰ On the front end of employment, as well, women are slighted. In 2001-02, 60% of assistant professors hired at research universities were men,²¹ even in fields in which women earn more Ph.D.'s.²² These are, by and large, "elite" women, those who have matriculated through competitive schools and aspire to ambitious positions. But that is exactly the point: the smartest and most educated women in academe continue to find themselves relegated to poorer positions, prospects, and salaries. In 2003, male assistant professors at upper level institutions made \$5,687 more per year than female professors.²³ The report card concludes, "Unfortunately, the statistics show that women still lag behind men in nearly every aspect of faculty and administrative employment at educational institutions."²⁴

The second problem is discipline. The number of women in math, science, economics, engineering, technology (IT), and business is low. The percentage of women receiving bachelor's degrees in computer science actually decreased 28% between 1984 and 1998²⁵ although the proportion of female science and engineering doctoral students is increasing. For example, between 1992 and 2001, the percentage of females who got Ph.D.'s in civil engineering rose from 10.2% to 18.4%; in biology, 36.5% to 44.5%.²⁶ Furthermore, the hiring of female Ph.D.s in the science and business/IT fields is symptomatic; many more males are hired and promoted than females. For example, although 66% of psychology PhD recipients are female,²⁷ only 15% in 2002 were full professors.²⁸ The resulting gender imbalance between instructor and instructed is thus marked. In chemistry, for example, 43.1% of the BS recipients are female whereas 87.9% of the faculty is male.²⁹

In speaking to members of the U.S. Senate in 2002, the female chair of the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Duke University (a top tier school in the U.S.) said, "Like many other women engineers, I considered engineering as a career because I had an engineer—my father—in the family. We must reach a point in this country where we do not have to rely on family members to interest girls in engineering, and where we are committed as a society to the participation of girls and women in engineering."³⁰

The reason is no less clear than the pattern: not only is scientific and technological expertise the linchpin to improved global development in the 21st century, women will continue to be marginalized in these areas unless strategies to involve them are changed.

Oddly enough, the failures of Title IX have provided another source of enlightenment. Through the struggles—and up to the last wall—women and their allies have formulated ways to improve the participation and elevation of women in “nontraditional” fields within and beyond educational institutions. These ways range from the rather obvious to the technical, from equalizing pay to creating scholarship support.³¹

In all, these and other strategies rely on the notion of critical mass. Donna Nelson, who has established the first data base on academic women in the sciences, believes that an employment level of 15 to 30 per cent female faculty establishes a solid baseline from which to tackle deep rooted issues. It is at that stage—when women no longer jeopardize their careers if they speak out—that women “begin to impact their department’s culture, policy, and agenda,” Nelson says.³²

Though the law passed in 1972, schools and universities did not react with alacrity to implement the law’s principles. A long lead-in period culminated in a lawsuit (brought by men’s intercollegiate athletics) in 1984 that limited the application of Title IX to specific programs that received federal funds. It took four years for Congress to pass another act that mooted the court’s decision. During that time, implementation of Title IX proceeded haphazardly if at all.³³ It has only been in the past ten years that real progress has been made—when the numbers presented earlier in this paper began to climb. That climb was precipitated by the inclusion in the new Act (called the Civil Rights Restoration Act) of three exclusive “tests” of equal opportunity *in athletics* one of which schools could meet to demonstrate their compliance with the law. A school could

show that a) the percentages of male and female athletes were about the same as the percentages enrolled, or that b) the school has a consistent pattern of expanding opportunities for female students, or that c) the school is “fully and effectively” meeting the interests of its female students to participate in athletics.”³⁴ Whereas these tests have not liquidated inequality in university athletics, they have provided a process and an outcome to maximize compliance.

Does the phrase “continuous improvement” come to mind by any chance? It should, because the last notch in the Title IX belt is this: not only has the government office charged with Title IX’s enforcement never penalized or withheld federal money from a school for violating Title IX, accrediting organizations in the United States never mention the law or its intent in their standards. Depending on your perspective, this is an extraordinary circumstance that may ratify regulation or deregulation or some combination of both, but the U.S. perspective is little less than a throwback to ERA days. Major benchmarks in female academic progress since Title IX have been achieved through law suits brought by individuals and groups, often women’s groups, not through quality assurance, accreditation, or federal intervention.

As noted in the beginning, quality does not exist in a vacuum. In lands whose modern legal systems may be only slightly older than the idea of a critical mass of female civil engineers and university presidents, this last turn of events may seem problematic. But such is not necessarily the case.

Take for example, the circumstance of gender segregated education which persists quite broadly in Arab countries. A tremendous aspect of segregation is that it is terribly expensive, but if educational systems provide equal funds, as some Arab countries seem to do far better than other countries, then a critical mass of women already exists. In the UAE, for example, over 60% of enrolled university students are women.³⁵ Though this rate does not translate into post-secondary careers or graduate school, *it could*. These undergraduate Middle Eastern women, similar to the smaller percentage of women in top tier U.S. colleges, constitute the elite who will fill the Middle Eastern professional and leadership positions if women fill them at all (not the miniscule number of elite of women educated abroad). These women also achieve in high school. Moreover, the vast number of women in higher education—this is based entirely on my experience but I am sure the data will bear me out—major in the sciences, IT, and business.

And though it must be lonely at the top, there are Arab women in leadership positions in education in the Middle East. What they need are friends.

I am sure you were wondering when I would get back to accreditation. Although it may be slightly disingenuous, the accreditation of which I speak is purveyed by the accreditation commission that exists in the UAE, the agency with which I am intimately familiar, as I said earlier, having participated from both perspectives in its visiting processes to accredit academic programs. What I have to say is very pointed. If accreditation is to have an impact on the goals for women articulated in the Arab report, it has to be different than it is now.

With or without explicit standards for gender equality, it has to walk the talk.

Here are three examples.

1. In the U.A.E., the standard on faculty diversity virtually assures the failure to hire women. An institution “MUST employ faculty members who are from a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds and whose highest earned degree presented as the credential qualifying the faculty member to teach in the specialized discipline of the institution is from an internationally known institution broadly respected through the academic community.”³⁶ Yet the standard does not speak directly to gender, and in practice “diversity” is interpreted by the accrediting agency and by its Visiting Committees as referring to nationality and university affiliation, not gender.

2. The “Standards for Licensure and Accreditation” book that is used by the U.A.E. contains 426 MUST statements, or requirements modeled in part on the standards that were used by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges for many years. Only one of these requirements mentions women. “Institutions undertaking the obligations of providing education to female students have a special obligation of providing safety for their students, and therefore, MUST ensure that special care on a continuous basis is planned and provided for the special consideration of female students.”³⁷ I have no disagreement with the standard; I believe, however, that such “special considerations” should apply in areas of equal seriousness. After all, a remarkable 96% of all faculty teaching in higher education institutions in the U.A.E. are

men, despite the fact that female students predominate,³⁸ and many of them are studying in gender separated environments.

3. The Commission, like most quality assurance agencies, brings in visiting teams of professors to review and evaluate academic programs. In three years, 2002 – 2004, the U.A.E. Commission hosted 117 committees to review individual programs. There were 332 committee members of which 25, or 7.5%, were women.³⁹ On the one hand, some of this reflects the inequalities in the various countries from which the committee members are drawn. But even in a field such as engineering where women faculty are scarce, there are still *some*. If one looks to the U.S.—and more Visiting Committee members who review programs in the U.A.E. are drawn from U.S. institutions than any other country—is it so difficult to find female department chairs in electrical engineering? There is one at Duke whose mission is the recruitment and retention of young women in the field. There are 23 female full professors in departments of civil engineering in the U.S. That's a grand total of 4% out of all U.S. full professors in civil engineering⁴⁰ but how many does a committee need?

The fact is that recruitment by familiarity is the rule. All the members of the professional staff of the U.A.E. agency are men. The colleagues of the men the commission recruits to visit are men. The network that is built is . . . men. How or when, then, will young female Arab students see themselves in similar positions?

If things stay the same, they won't. So, the chief question is not how quality assurance agencies can re-orient their roles to improve the record on gender—those answers are as obvious and detailed and rigorous as all efforts that go into establishing and enforcing standards—but will they? U.S. accrediting agencies are not much help though U.S. examples of transcending accrediting agencies may be. What Title IX did, in fact, was provide what some economists call “little shocks” that force a system to jump. I doubt if the Arab report itself can provide the shocks. But just as women researchers in the U.S. warn that colleges that deny women equal access must “view themselves as bastions of injustice, rather than leaders of the future”⁴¹, the Arab report wonders if the region will succumb to the inertia that characterizes its “institutional structures and types of actions that have produced the substantial development challenges it currently faces,” or if it will muster an “Arab renaissance” to see the region through.⁴²

One may argue that it is not the role of accreditation to advance social change—that the issue of gender equity in higher education is not a “quality” issue. But that argument is difficult to sustain. If diversity in nationality and educational background is a quality issue, then should not gender be included as well? In addition, the leadership of the country has asserted—frequently—that women’s education and women’s roles in society must be advanced. That is one reason that the U.A.E. created a new university for women with campuses in Dubai and Abu Dhabi and a new campus under construction. And it is the role of a national quality assurance system to advance and support national priorities in higher education.

If, as the Minister of Education in the U.A.E. has said, that “knowledge conveys power—the power to shape our economy, the power to shape our society, and the power to shape our future” and if the role of national quality assurance in higher education in the U.A.E. is to “verify that the [country’s] colleges and universities operate at international standards of quality,”⁴³ then the agency has an obligation to address gender issues positively in its own staffing, in its Visiting Committees, and in its published standards. That is not a “neutral” stance but a pro-active one.

Though these remarks reference the U.A.E. specifically they can, I suggest, be applied much more generously to other countries and to other systems of quality assurance. To return to the Arab Report, “discrimination is worse,” the report says, “in the case of young females,” of which there are now more numbers in Arabia than ever before.⁴⁴ It would be doubly tragic if the institutions and agencies with the power to encourage and support young women undermine their efforts rather than help them learn to lead.

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End Notes

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³UNDP, p. 15.

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⁸CRSRC, p. 4.

⁹USDOE, “Indicators of Progress Toward Equal Educational Opportunity Since Title IX,” p. 1/2.

¹⁰CRSRC, p.4.

¹¹CRSRC, p.4.

¹²USDOE, “Achieving Success Under Title IX,” p. 4/6.

¹³CRSRC, p.4.

¹⁴USDOE, “Indicators of Progress Toward Equal Educational Opportunity Since Title IX,” p. 1/2.

¹⁵Robin Wilson, p. 1/5.

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¹⁹NCWG, “Employment,” p. 27.

²⁰NCWG, “Employment,” p. 28.

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²²Donna Nelson, “Title IX Isn’t Just a Sport’s Law,” p. 2.

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²⁷Donna Nelson, “Title IX Isn’t Just a Sports Law,” p. 2.

²⁸Donna Nelson, “Diversity in Science at Research Universities,” p. 1.

²⁹Donna Nelson, “Diversity in Science at Research Universities, p. 1.

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⁴³Sheikh Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan. “Preface.” **Standards for Licensure and Accreditation**.

⁴⁴UNDP, p. 9.