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ARTICLE



## Under western eyes: A transnational and postcolonial perspective of gender and HRD

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### ABSTRACT

Much of the critical research on human resource development (HRD) is positioned within Western constructions of knowledge and orthodoxy. Barring a few exceptions (e.g. there is little critique of the 'colonial boundaries' for how HRD is theorized and practiced. Global practice is dominated by neoliberal approaches that do not reflect the realities of human development in diverse geopolitical contexts. In this paper, we advance contemporary theorizing by providing a transnational and postcolonial critique of HRD. We highlight the importance of this lens by evaluating gender and difference in the Middle East (ME). We argue that HRD scholarship should reimagine colonial boundaries, and encourage critical inquiry that reflects the contextual and social complexities of space and place. Our arguments illustrate the importance of Islamic feminism in supporting HRD in the ME, and the intersecting dynamics of gender and employment, considering religious, ethnic, and political contestations.

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## Introduction

Research on human resource development (HRD) has generally focused on globalization in line with neoliberal ideologies and international organizations' priorities (Kay 2008; Syed 2010). This perspective underplays the importance of cultural values and the politics of difference. There is a need to integrate critical transnational and postcolonial literatures, not only bringing together the global south with the global north but also promoting multilayered and contextual insights of HRD, particularly with respect to gender, ethnicity, and employment. Our aim in this paper is to advance HRD theorizing and encourage future researchers to incorporate transnational and postcolonial critiques. The paper first explains the need for a transnational and postcolonial perspective. It then illustrates this perspective by reviewing the state of gender and HRD in the Middle East (ME). It highlights how Islamic feminism is reclaiming feminist and development agendas from the neoliberal state, and is writing a script that is underpinned by a philosophy that incorporates both men and women. Our critical insights show that women's place in the current Islamic revival challenges colonial logic, and is central to the crafting of a transnational and postcolonial imagination.

## Transnational and postcolonial insights

Transnationalism is defined as a condition in which, despite international borders and distances, certain kinds of relationships are globally intensified (Vertovec 1999). A transnational lens enables us to identify multiple ties and interactions linking HRD theorizations and practices across nation states. However, there is also a caveat. HRD in the West has been conceptualized as organizational development activities whereas in postcolonial and developing states, it is constituted at the level of national legislation, ministries, and departments responsible for HRD, thus representing an institutional approach where systems and cultural processes govern how a state builds human capacity and development (Garavan, McCarthy, and Morley 2016). Within transnational debate therefore, there is a commitment to questioning the rationality of neoliberalism.

Similarly, postcolonialism is concerned with the critical analysis, and response to the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. A postcolonial lens is helpful in understanding and confronting the Western hegemony of the discourses of development, and neoliberal frames which include HRD (Syed and Ali 2011).

A transnational perspective points towards networked and information-based societies in the current globalized era where fixed territories are less influential or relevant, and there is a cultural flow of ideas from West to East and vice versa (Metcalf and Woodhams 2012; Mir Hosseini 2011). However, such flows do not often appear in Western scholarship. Increasingly, critical and postcolonial scholars are questioning neoliberal and universalist approaches often associated with Western institutions and scholarship, and now there is a greater move to social democracy, governmental intervention, and national HRD for vocational, educational, and technological development (Badran 2005; Syed and Ali 2011).

With a focus on human geography and culture, transnationalism considers the heightened interconnectivity between people across the world and the loosening of boundaries between countries (Vertovec 1999). It considers social, political, and economic events that affect people and development. Examples of transnational entities are revolutionary movements, multinational business enterprises, trade unions and scientific networks, social media networks, and communications activities (Loomba 2015). Transnational social movements are the broad tendencies that often manifest themselves in particular international non-governmental organizations (Cohen 2011).

While there is much valuable work published on HRD and globalization, including comparative scholarship, issues of transnational significance such as gender, ethnicity/migration and equality are not at the forefront of such scholarship. This gap may be addressed through a focus on labour and social movements within transnational scholarship. Moreover, barring a few notable exceptions (e.g. Carling 2008; Vertovec 1999), studies and practices in development implicitly assume and promote neoliberal perspectives. A usual emphasis is on developed countries in the West while theoretical insights and empirical data from Asia, Africa, and Latin America are often ignored, devalued, or misinterpreted. Indeed, the very classification of national HRD into usual categories of developed, developing, and transitional countries may be problematic because such categorization does not consider the role of political economy, nor does it consider contextual differences and dynamism in approaches to gender and development.

Feminist scholars reveal that dominant globalization discourses create false and unequal comparisons such as East vs. West, or first, second, and third world (Dhamoon 2015; Metcalfe 2011a). Consequently, globalization is often understood as an expression of Euro-American hegemony, and research on third world women is evaluated based on that reference. This view underplays the heterogeneous and plural formations of economies, cultures, and identities. Gender is premised on universalistic theorizing with its preconceived notions of patriarchy and nuclear family and distorts the ways in which gender relations and identities have been historically formed and continue to evolve (Metcalfe and Rees 2010). Feminist scholars of the ME emphasize that a *difference* politics, i.e. different but a complementary role of women and men, is necessary in the pursuit of social and legal rights in that region (Krause 2009).

We argue that a transnational and postcolonial perspective is essential to equal out the tensions between global south and global north or between the West and the East. Such a perspective challenges the neoliberal and ethnocentric dominance of the global north. In utilizing this perspective, we recognize and value different cultures, experiences, and ideologies across nation state boundaries as well as appreciate the marginalized voices of labour and social movements.

Garavan and colleagues (2016) highlight the need to explore how context affects HRD, to more effectively account for national, cultural, institutional, and regional influences, particularly in non-Western countries. There are, however, still embedded ideas, such as the hegemony of Islam as a single authority, and other unilateral and linear ways of understanding HRD in a neoliberal paradigm. Internal heterogeneity of Islam across numerous Muslim-majority countries and indeed within a single country, based on cultural, historical, or denominational differences, is almost completely ignored (Syed and Metcalfe 2015).

The neoliberal emphasis on HRD gained momentum after the Washington Consensus – a set of 10 economic policy prescriptions considered to constitute the ‘standard’ reform package promoted for crisis-racked developing countries by Washington, D.C.–based institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the US Treasury Department (Williamson 1990).

For postcolonialists and most nationalists, Western notion of feminism, i.e. advocacy of women’s rights, is a colonial project and should be resisted. The usual Oriental view of the ‘East in need of reformation’ has been critiqued by scholars. Said (1979) suggests that the Orient is a ‘discursive creation’, rather than a place which one can travel to. The Orient serves as dual fiction. It affirms the superiority of the West and defines the West as normality by regulating the abnormal and the forbidden (Clarke 2002). Orient was Europe’s ‘silent other’ (Said 2001). An Oriental or colonial view presents Western women as secular, liberated, and in control of their life. A postcolonial view challenges such highly exaggerated and linear projection. In the context of the ME, it challenges homogeneity of Islamic female identity and the view that third world women are always powerless and oppressed (Syed and Ali 2011).

### **Illustrative context: HRD in the Middle East and beyond**

To illustrate the transnational and postcolonial perspective, we consider the state of national HRD, the religious, ethnic, and political terrain, and the dynamism associated

with agency, and gender in the ME. The migration to Europe from the ME and the refugee crisis are recent events that are of special relevance in terms of the development and utilization of these people as productive members of host societies. Our choice of this example is to recognize the crisis facing tens of thousands of individuals, ongoing conflict and crisis, and an expression of our commitment as members of the HRD community to the development of individuals, organizations, and nations (Elliott 2016). Illustrating through this region, a transnational perspective may steer HRD's focus on multiplicity, feminism, diversity, and organizing of working.

In the context of HRD in Gulf countries, Achoui (2009) notes that the main challenges are: high dependence on oil industry, high dependence on foreign labour, low rate of female participation in employment, and a weak link between the educational system output and the needs of the economic sectors. There is also an issue of governance and the limited education of men, but increasing literacy rate and higher unemployment of women.

Female labour force participation in the ME and North Africa (MENA) remains lower than anywhere else in the world at just 20%, compared to 73% for males. This is despite some progress in recent decades in the area of education. Today, 67% of university graduates in Kuwait are women, along with 63% in Qatar and 57% in Saudi Arabia. Yet only 4% of all firms in MENA region are majority owned by women and only 5% of firms are led by women (Makhlouf 2016). There is an inconsistency between women's education and skills and their limited employment opportunities (Tlaiss and Dirani 2015).

### ***National HRD, skill shortages, and unemployment***

Supported by HRD plans and ministries, national HRD in the ME is quite specific with a focus on education, health, and measures for women's development through employment skills and political participation. The Middle Eastern countries have national HRD plans that originate from the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. These gender plans have been affirmed by the UN on 26 September 2016 and focus on gender equality within its Sustainable Development Goals.

While governments have national HRD plans in many countries in the ME, governance in the region is based on family rule (monarchy or sheikhdom) with only superficial structure of parliament and democratic representation (Metcalf 2011a; 2011b). As a result, national governments design and implement the development agenda in line with the political and ideological interests of the monarch/rulers. However, international pressures for development and democratization do have a role. In recent years, the amount of regulation governing the employment relationship in the ME, as in other parts of the world, has increased markedly. Areas of employment which were free of regulation prior to this period, such as gender discrimination, sexual harassment and migrant workers' rights, are now increasingly regulated, though their enforcement in practice remains sketchy.

Increasingly in recent years, demand for labour has been focused on highly paid, highly skilled professional, technical and managerial jobs. However, despite an increasing number of university graduates, many of them women, there are sociocultural barriers as well as issues of skill mismatch. As a result, there are skills shortages in many industries and dominate the human resource agenda.

There is also an emphasis on localization (e.g. Emiratisation or Saudization) to replace skilled foreign workers with skilled citizens. Unemployment rates are high which are also exacerbated by the high ratio of young people (25 and below) in the population. There is a related issue of ethnic discrimination given that a local employee is paid a much higher salary than a foreign worker even though the foreign worker may have a superior qualification, professional experience or job position.

In 2012, the total number of higher education students in Gulf countries exceeded 1.45 million, of whom 60% were women (WB 2012). In Qatar and UAE, unemployment rate for women was 8% and 12% respectively but for men it was only 2% in both countries. In Saudi Arabia, unemployment among nationals increased from 10.5% in 2009 to 11.5% in 2013 and is concentrated in highly educated women and less educated men. The unemployment rate for women in Saudi Arabia is particularly high, i.e. 30% (Alhejji and Garavan 2016).

### ***Religious, ethnic and political contestations***

In most countries in the ME, development is often interlinked with Islamic economic development as well as the notion of Islamic philanthropy and service. For example, there are international institutions and centres of Islamic thought based in Riyadh, Doha and Dubai as well as in the non-ME countries such as Pakistan and Malaysia. These institutions use or refer to the principles of Islamic sharia and seek to apply them to social development.

Thus, HRD is also linked with the Islamic sharia paradigm. The focus is not only on social development at the individual, community and state levels but also on spiritual development. Islamic models of development, both economic development and HRD, are therefore relevant and influential in the ME. However, it is a fact that Islamic interpretation and practice is highly variable across Muslim-majority countries and has a different impact on HRD, such as in terms of gender and democratization (Mernissi 2001; Metcalfe 2011a; Syed 2008).

The ME is a contested terrain in terms of political ideology, ethnicity, and power. The so called Arab Spring and the ensuing conflicts in Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria and elsewhere have shown that these countries and societies are divided on the basis of political ideology, ethnic and tribal identity, religion, sect and other factors. There are also regional and international rivalries, such as between Saudi Arabia and Iran, US and Russia as well as there are different visions of future for the role of women and ethnic and religious minorities. In recent years, the rise of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) has also highlighted the danger posed by radical Salafi and Wahhabi militants not only to non-Muslims such as Christians and Yezidis but also to Sunni Sufis, Sunni Kurds and Shias. At the same time, states themselves are faced with internal contestations and unrest such as Muslim Brotherhood's protests against el-Sisi in Egypt, the Shia unrest in Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia, the green revolution movement in Iran and the sectarian and ethnic fissures in Iraq.

In recent years, the ME has suffered and also impacted Europe due to the refugee crisis. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), at least 17% of the more than 1 million migrants and refugees who arrived in Europe last year were adult women (Symons-Brown 2016). This number does not include

female children. Hudson (2016) notes that women, children, elderly and sick form the bulk of refugee camps in the ME. In particular, women and children are vulnerable due to their exposure to harassment and abuse in addition to usual needs for food, health, education and employment. Their participation in the labour force remains low due to legal issues of work rights and lack of relevant skills.

The region is quite heterogeneous in terms of ideology, for example, dominance of Salafi or Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, Ibadis in Oman, Shias in Iran, and Hanafi version of Sunni Islam in Egypt and Turkey. There are also ethnic differences, such as Arab, Persian, Kurd, Turk and Copt, with different levels and issues of HRD because of economic, cultural and political reasons.

These ethnic and political contestations and the related conflicts have immense implications for economies and HRD in ME. Indeed, wars in Syria, Libya and Iraq have caused irreparable damage to these countries' economies and resources and their ability to develop their people. At the same time, there are possibilities for dialogue, not only between Arabs, Turks and Persians but also between Sunni and Shia, Muslims and Christians, and East and West. There are indeed fluid ideologies across ideological or physical boundaries, and continuous ebb and flow of interactions. Relatedly, there is heterogeneity of Islamic interpretations and practices as well as cultural, ideological and political differences. Taken as a whole, these factors affect the current shape and future possibilities of HRD in the East.

### ***Dynamism and agency***

Civil society is a key player for change and reforms in ME. Civil society activism in ME is generally linked with the state society relations and the extent to which NGOs can operate and support development, including women's development, in consultation with the government. In order to exist, NGOs have to align with government agendas and an Islamic framework and need formal governmental permission.

There is an increasing role of social media in the current global and digital era. There is an amplified social, political, legal, and ethical awareness due to social media. Increasingly, nationals of the Gulf countries, previously indifferent to or suppressed due to restricting regimes have started voicing their opinion as well as expanding their knowledge through their interactions and exchange on media such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and the internet in general.

In terms of time and space of gender, one may consider women's active participation in pro-democracy movement in Egypt that was successful in removing Hosni Mubarak from power. However, in subsequent years, the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power and the promulgation of an Islamic patriarchal agenda resulted in further curtailment of women's rights (Nagaty 2013). Thus, in the context of gendered processes of Arab Spring, there is a need to incorporate interconnections between social movements, revolutionary pressures, and identify positions in diverse geographic spaces. At the same time, within MENA and other Muslim-majority countries, it is important to acknowledge a brand of feminism that takes Islam as a source of legitimacy challenges the hegemony of patriarchal interpretations of the sharia. The focus of Islamic feminism is on reinterpretation of Islamic jurisprudence – a process of rejuvenating egalitarian ethics (Badran 2005; Mir Hosseini 2011).

### ***Women's development and Islamic feminism***

Status of women, particularly in employment and political empowerment, remains a sore area in ME. Owing to greater use of national wealth and enhanced health infrastructure, both women and men have access to health facilities which may be compared to those in the West. However, when it comes to economic and political empowerment, patriarchal and cultural restrictions of women's mobility, visibility, and power seem to be at play.

Islamic approach to gender is generally premised on physical differences between men and women, and suggests that men and women have complementary but different family responsibilities. Although there are no religious restrictions on women's participation in employment or entrepreneurship, cultural processes assume that a woman's usual contribution to the family will be as homemaker; that the household will be headed by a man who will provide financially for his spouse and children (Metcalf 2011b).

Stalker and Mavin (2011) suggest that there are significant cultural, political, and legal processes framing women's experiences of working in ME and specifically their access to learning and development to support current and future professional aspirations. A transnational focus may enable attention to a myriad of discursive strategies to navigate the dominant discourses of women's empowerment and development. In countries across the region, Arab women are creating new role models and examples, forged with links through transnational social movements, and acquiring a radical agency for real material change. Specifically, women's organizations are creating a space for education in many fields including inter alia: medicine, public management, and political advocacy, and are leading the way for social rejuvenation, but one premised on an Islamic egalitarian framework (Metcalf 2008). HRD scholars may therefore focus on embodied reflective practice to unveil the diversity and dynamism of identities in ME and other regions. In particular, there is a need to understand the educational and development nuances of a sociocultural context to illustrate how global discourses are represented, resisted, and materialized, and written on the body in very different ways to that understood in Western scholarship. Within HRD, this may provide an opportunity to rejuvenate theorizing of development scholarship and practice, so as to nurture a transnational postcolonial development ethics that appreciates the ebb and flow of cultural practices and knowledge (see Castells 2011; Fraser 2013), and thus harness a commitment to social justice and equity advocated by the global development community.

To understand trajectories of development and social reforms in ME, scholars may examine women's organizations in that region or governments who are aiming to enhance women's knowledge and education. Positioning the debate within broader critiques of gender, ethnicity, and development, it is important to unravel what we call embodied reflective practice. Drawing on social constructionist frames, scholars may see development as an embodied, relational process, which can aid us in exploring the importance of situated practice. This may be useful to show how Western-centric or global theoretical frames are inadequate for unravelling the power and politics of development and the dimensions of time and place, and underplay the everyday individual material experiences in diverse communities and regions.

HRD scholars may view Islamic feminism as a grass roots social movement that is reconfiguring power relations and providing opportunities for women's development, empowerment, and self-transformation. An Islamic feminist lens brings to fore multiple possibilities of cultural difference, bringing body aesthetics to centre stage. The dominant discourses that abound about bodyliness representations of ME culture themselves position ME women as oppressed and disempowered. The usual colonialist lens is inaccurate for explaining the lived socio-materialities and experiences of women in ME. In materializing the social practices of how women navigate the myriad discursive territories in ME, one is exposed to new emancipatory frames that are underwritten with a social and relational ethic.

In recent decades, globalization has increased opportunities for women's transnational network organizing (Castells 2011; Moghadam 2010), although it is recognized that often these coalitions are restricted via class, tribe, and political affiliations (Metcalf and Rees 2010; Metcalf 2011a; 2011b). The growth of women's NGOs especially in fields of education, employment, and social welfare has contributed to feminist consciousness raising efforts, although there is inconsistency across the region in terms of NGO legitimacy and ability to act independently from political authorities (Metcalf and Mutlaq 2011).

There are several businesswomen's networks in many countries in ME. These networks or NGOs are working to facilitate and develop women's awareness and knowledge in fields as diverse as employment, family rights, law, leadership, and communication. Organizations such as the Dubai Businesswomen Council, the Qatari Businesswomen's Forum, the Tunisian Women's Entrepreneurs Union, the Egyptian Businesswomen Association, and the Arab Businesswomen Council help female employees and entrepreneurs.

From a transnational perspective, Islamic feminism may be seen as an empowering phenomenon that has aided social rejuvenation and ignited a liberatory fervour in many institutions in ME. Such perspective is useful to bring to fore the ME women's voices and encourage others to reimagine development, pedagogies and their potential radicalizing effects. By claiming Islam for themselves, Arab women are rewriting themselves into the history of the ME by forging connections with transnational organizations and directly challenging colonial and global Western-centric discourses.

There is also an issue of intersectionality of gender with other dimensions of identity, such as class, age, ethnic or national background, and faith/sect. The notion of intersectionality suggests that women's experiences within and outside the workplace are shaped not only by their gender but also simultaneously by their ethnicity and other dimensions of identity (Crenshaw 1989). Puar (2005) explains the notion of intersectionality through her notion of assemblage, i.e. interwoven forces of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and religion that 'merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherence, and permanency' (pp. 127–128).

Opportunities for leadership roles are usually limited to women of powerful families who have more access to power and resources and may relatively easily sociocultural and patriarchal restrictions. Women's opportunities are also shaped by their nationality such as those from local, Arab, British, or American backgrounds are given precedence over those from South Asian, Southeast Asian, and African backgrounds. Opportunities are also shaped by religion, and usually women and men of minority faiths or sects such

as Christians, Hindus or Sunni Sufi or Shia Muslims may face discrimination or marginalization in Salafi-dominated countries in the Gulf region.

### Concluding remarks

Postcolonial and transnational views of feminism focus on social justice, rights-based ethos as well as relations of the global to the local, and recommend to adopt contextual and multilayered approaches to social enquiry and development (Spivak 1988; Syed 2009; Syed and Ali 2011). In connecting global–local linkages, they capture the complexity of grass roots activists, social movements and diverse stakeholders, and relations of power, thus addressing an important gap in international HRD research.

Since neither global colonial agendas nor historically entrenched patriarchal interpretations of Islam support a genuinely liberating or egalitarian Islamic culture, the feminist project in the ME is challenged with the task of reimagining both orthodoxies (Majid, 1988; Metcalfe and Woodhams 2012). Neoliberal feminism associated with United Nations, World Economic Forum and World Bank promotes Western-centric framing of human rights, individualism, and development. In contrast, in Islamic egalitarian and well-being oriented interpretation, the notion of the individual is inextricably linked to socio-economic welfare of the community so that the self cannot be abstracted from the social and political context (Ramadan 2010). Space and geographies of power are salient in authentic Islamic writings and cultural practices. However, in the mainstream theorization of development and equality, there is limited concern about ‘positioning’ of space and place in constituting identities, the geographies of power and how territorialization affects one’s ability to navigate discursive realms.

As Lee (2004) has argued, HRD is an ontology of becoming, encouraging an openness to critical inquiry, and is socially and historically constituted. This paper has shown that there is a need to incorporate transnational and postcolonial perspectives into HRD and that critical insight from interdisciplinary literatures can provide a more nuanced and richer picture of the complexities of HRD theory and practice. In terms of academic scholarship, the *HRDI* journal can play a role in incorporating transnational and post-colonial approaches to HRD by reimagining colonial boundaries, and encouraging critical inquiries that reflect the contextual and social complexities of space and place.

Political economic interventions in the ME and the increased participation of women in employment and political institutions may gradually reform adverse sociocultural perceptions and stereotypes about women’s role (Al-Lamky 2007). This may lead to women’s greater visibility and acceptability in public roles and generate new role models in politics and business.

To support these efforts, it is vital to recognize that women are ‘agents of change’ in the development process (Luke and Munshi 2011) and to offer them legitimate assistance from global NGOs (Breneman-Pennas & Catry, 2008). Thus, developing a nuanced understanding of transnational gender relations and the way these relations may be formed in line with Islamic egalitarian interpretations is an important aspect of development in the ME. Underlying our argument is that Muslim women speak and ‘reconstruct’, in their own terms, social characteristics of equality and empowerment, without recourse to colonial legacies and prescriptions.

This paper has used a transnational and postcolonial lens to engage with social, cultural, and political economic factors that shape HRD systems in the ME and how they are linked to issues of gender, ethnicity/migration, and equality. It reveals that through engagement with Islamic feminism and social well-being, there are shared areas of mutual interests that can unite opportunities for development goals.

In sum, it is important to acknowledge that governments, organizations, and activists in the ME generally advocate the interface between the Islamic and universal construction of human rights and development (Badran 2005). Different cultural and political economic contexts require us to rethink the challenges and approaches to how we frame and research HRD, women's agency, rights, and opportunities in the global political economy (Mazur 2013). The analysis presented in this paper suggests that we cannot understand the complexity of HRD without engaging with broader literature in transnational and postcolonial studies.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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