What is Success?

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A Kaleidoscope of Possibilities from Women in the World Around the World

Edited by

Rana Dajani

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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To the women of Gaza who have shown us the true meaning of success through their lived experiences of *Sumoud* and all the women suffering injustice around the world

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I would like to acknowledge all the women and men I have met and interviewed throughout the years. I also appreciate the various fellowships I have been offered that have given me the time and space to pursue my curiosity and passion in order to undertake what was necessary to write this book. Among these fellowships are the Eisenhower fellowship, The Rita Hauser fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University, the Zuzana Simoniova Cmelikova International fellowship at the Jepson School of Leadership at the University of Richmond, the Richard Von Weizsacker fellowship at the Robert Bosch Academy and my own University in Jordan, the Hashemite University. I want to thank my coauthors for their patience to get this book to see the light after many years. I want to thank my family for their support and belief in me. I specifically appreciate their advice and most importantly their critique that has made me grow and challenge my assumptions and worldviews, leading me to discover a whole new world.

1

INTRODUCTION

RANA DAJANI

> In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful
>
> O you who covers himself [with a garment], Arise and warn, And your Lord glorify, And your clothing purify, And uncleanliness avoid, And do not confer favour to acquire more, But for your Lord be patient.
>
> (1-7) Surah 74: al-Muddathir

Biliana, a young Bulgarian philosopher, told me that today—November 1st—is known in Bulgaria as the Day of the "Buditel." In Bulgarian, *Buditel* means "awakener"—someone who wakes people up to do good. That, in essence, is what this book is about: waking people up. It is about choosing to put our thoughts on paper, regardless of the consequences or what others may think.

We decided that we had the qualifications, insight, and experience to share our reflections and research with the world. It felt like an obligation—one we had carried for some time—but we were waiting for the right moment to begin.

That moment came in Ifrane, Morocco, in 2019. In a small café called La Paix, over Moroccan mint tea and sweet almond pastries, under a new moon, we sealed the deal. I had been invited by Professor Stefano Bigliardi, a philosopher, to give a series of talks at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane. Waiting at the university gates with Stefano was the remarkable Professor Biliana Popova. From the moment we met, Biliana and I realized we were kindred spirits. The connection was immediate, and it was only a matter of time before the magic began.

Morocco—especially the city of Fez, where a woman, Fatima Alfihri, founded the first university in the world in 800 AD—inspires something deep and enduring. It pulls you beyond the material world into a realm of

heritage, history, and humanity. Ifrane, high in the mountains with clear air and star-lit skies, elevates the spirit. The people we met there—humble, wise, sincere, and witty, opened doors into other worlds, offering us profound insights.

These collective experiences gave us the courage, vision, and boldness to explore ideas beyond accepted boundaries—to venture into the "familiar unknown." This book is the result of our intertwined journeys through history, culture, and religion—woven together in a tapestry of shared humanity that is, at once, complex and simple.

These ideas and reflections were a long time in the making, shaped by interviews and conversations with women and men from around the world. Putting words onto paper was not easy. I had initially planned to write these reflections while I was at Harvard. But I was met with resistance. Some responses essentially denied me the authority to write about women globally. I was advised to stick to writing only about Arab women. One excuse was that I was not a social scientist and therefore lacked the qualifications to make such claims—even though I had conducted over 100 interviews across various backgrounds and had lived in both Eastern and Western cultures since childhood.

Meanwhile, another scholar with far less cross-cultural experience and fewer academic credentials was celebrated for writing about cartoons in Egypt. No one questioned his qualifications. It seemed the bar for studying the East was much lower than the bar for studying the West. I wasn't allowed to reflect on the West, but he was allowed to reflect on the East.

Eventually, I gave in. I wrote a memoir instead, on the advice that sharing my own story would shield me from criticism about qualifications. Personal stories, I was told, were unassailable. This reflects a cultural myth—one that Serene Khader deconstructs in her book *Faux Feminism*[1], which critiques how feminism has often assigned non-Western cultures as the default sources of female oppression.

How could Rana—from an Islamic, Arab background—possibly find solutions within her own culture to help liberate women in the West? That possibility disrupts the colonizer's logic.

[1] Faux Feminism by Serene Khader 2024

I went on to publish *Five Scarves: Doing the Impossible—If We Can Reverse Cell Fate, Why Can t We Redefine Success?*[2] But I still carry stories that haven't yet been shared. With this book, I am reclaiming my voice and taking ownership of my authority. I write not only about Arab women but about women across the globe. To those who hold me to a higher standard—I rise to the challenge. I have also invited social scientists to join me in this endeavor, to satisfy those who demand academic credentials.

This isn't just my story. It's also a case study in the politics of knowledge—who gets to be an expert, and who decides what qualifies as knowledge. A Western scientist is free to study the rest of the world. But those of us from "the rest of the world" are rarely given the same freedom to study the West. Western science is seen as universal; non-Western knowledge is seen as local. This is an inequality in academia, and I call it out.

I encourage others to share similar examples and write about them so we can become aware of these blind spots—whether intentional or not. Will all of my hypotheses be correct? I don't know. But that's the essence of science. We observe, hypothesize, test, and revise, seeking truth with each iteration.

I invite you to critique this work, so we may learn together on this extraordinary journey of life.

Biliana and I have created a *Muthanna*[3]. In Arabic, *Muthanna* means "You are, therefore I am"—a declaration that our existence is formed in relation to others.

Today, I am writing my ideas and reflections in collaboration with partners who have the credentials, for those who still need reassurance. But I've also found the courage to speak my truth and learn along the way. Every great idea begins when someone sees what everyone sees but thinks what no one has thought—or dares to say what everyone knows but no one voices. Only when we share do we grow—together—as a global community striving for a better world.

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[2] Five Scarves doing the impossible By Rana Dajani Nova Publisher 2018

[3] Munir Fasheh the founder of the Arab education Forum center at Harvard in his speech at the UNESCO conference "Towards Mainstreaming Principles of Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue in Policies for Sustainable Development", Paris, May 21-23, 2007

2

WOMEN IN SCIENCE

RANA DAJANI

When I introduce myself, I like to say that I play five roles in my life—or that I wear five hats. But I don't wear hats—I wear scarves. So, I say I wear five scarves.

The first scarf I wear is that of a mother. I have four children, and I am most proud of being a mother because no one can replace me in that role.

My second scarf is that of an educator. I was a teacher for ten years, teaching biology and science from first grade to twelfth grade. I taught every curriculum you can imagine: IGCSE, ACT, SAT, IB, national curriculum—everything. You know, I deeply respect teachers. If you can stand in front of a sea of fifth graders who know everything about you and aren't afraid to challenge you, you can do anything. That's why, if I were ever the Minister of Education, I would make it compulsory for every university graduate to teach for one year. Only then would they truly appreciate the power and difficulty of teaching, especially because teachers often spend more time with children than their parents do.

My third scarf is that of a scientist. I get the same thrill from trying to understand how molecules communicate as one gets from a rollercoaster ride. I study two main topics: the genetics of diabetes in ethnic populations, specifically Circassians and Chechens, and the impact of trauma on our DNA, a field called epigenetics, which explores how we may pass trauma onto our children and grandchildren.

My fourth scarf is that of a social entrepreneur. I realized that many children don't enjoy reading for fun, and that reading for pleasure is key to building imagination and becoming future change-makers. So, I created a program called *We Love Reading*, which has now spread to more than 75 countries and continues to grow.

My fifth scarf was one I didn't choose—it was given to me. A few years ago, I received an email from a British organization that had selected me as one of the 20 most influential female scientists in the Islamic world. That's from among 1.7 billion people! I felt honored. As I scrolled through the email, I saw that each of the 20 women had been given a title—the cardiologist, the mathematician—and I was curious to see mine. Then I saw it: *the Islamic feminist*.

My immediate reaction was, "No, you can't do that!" Because when you say "Islamic," the Western world looks at you skeptically. And when you say "feminist," the Eastern world looks at you skeptically. I felt stuck in the middle. I asked them to change it—they refused. They said, "Rana, what you write, reflect, and stand for is your title." Since then, I've been on a journey to redefine what that means and to own the title, rather than let it define me.

Human beings have evolved over millennia. At some point, there were two kinds of humans: one group gathered around fires telling stories, while the other group dismissed them as wasting time. Guess which group survived? The storytellers. So, in the spirit of evolution, I will share a few stories about how I've come to define success and identity.

Imagine you are looking at Earth from Mars. You'd see different creatures crawling, walking, and talking. Naturally, you'd start categorizing them: long or short, square or round, green or blue. Human diversity is vast. You'd expect, then, that people would pursue equally diverse paths to happiness and success.

But that's not what happens. Most people seem to chase the same version of success: fame, money, and power. That doesn't make sense, given our diversity. I want to challenge this assumption.

This reminds me of Shinya Yamanaka, a Japanese scientist who revolutionized biology. When I was growing up, we believed that adult cells—like nerve or muscle cells—could never change their identity. Suggesting otherwise was considered ignorant or even crazy.

But Yamanaka asked, *why not?* He developed what we now call *induced pluripotent stem cells,* adult cells reprogrammed back into a state where they can become any cell type. This breakthrough won him the Nobel Prize in 2012.

He challenged a core assumption, and so do I: there is more than one path to success.

As a woman, I've always been interested in women's definitions of success. As a scientist, I've focused on women in STEM. The global numbers show that women are underrepresented in STEM fields compared to men. This trend spans across regions and disciplines, not only in science but also in finance, business, law, and politics.

To be clear, I am not referring to women who work out of necessity due to poverty. Their challenges are rooted in socio-economic status, not gender. That is a separate issue, and one I explore in another chapter.

I'm speaking about women who have a choice in their profession and success path. The dominant rhetoric says we must "get more women into the workplace." I chose to investigate this issue scientifically by developing hypotheses and testing them.

The first hypothesis is that there aren't enough educated women in STEM. This doesn't hold up in the Arab world. In fact, more girls than boys pursue STEM at every level. Interestingly, this trend contrasts with lower female representation in STEM in the US and Europe.

A 2018 UNESCO study[1] using 2015 data revealed:

- 39.8% of science researchers in Arab states are women
- 48.1% in Central Asia
- 32.3% in North America and Western Europe
- 18.5% in South and West Asia

This data contradicts the assumption that Western countries are the most gender-equal in STEM and suggests that global comparisons should be more nuanced.

For example:

- Tunisia: 55.4% female researchers
- Egypt: 44.1%
- Iraq: 39.7%

[1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "Women in Science," *Fact Sheet* no. 51, June 2018, http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs51-women-in-science-2018-en.pdf.

- Bahrain: 39%

Some countries, like Qatar (31.4%), Palestine (22.6%), and Jordan (20.8%), fall lower—but the broader pattern is clear: many Arab countries are succeeding where Western nations struggle[2].

What are these countries doing right?

Researchers like Ziegler, Cheryan, and Montoya point to three barriers: masculine culture, lack of early exposure, and gaps in self-efficacy. They suggest we need inclusive early experiences and a shift in cultural signals.[3]

In the Arab world, many schools are single-gender. Girls grow up without direct gender comparison in classrooms. They are expected to excel in all subjects, including math and physics—just like boys. This lack of gendered expectation encourages them to pursue STEM confidently.

As someone from a family of eight girls and a strong mother, I've often been called gender-blind. In some cultures, expectations push girls toward or away from certain roles. When those expectations disappear, people pursue what they love.

This experience isn't limited to the Arab world. As one student from Richmond University said:

> "I went to an all-girls school. Girls ran everything. I always believed girls could do anything." Bridget Bodely

And another:

> "Our teachers warned us that we might feel intimidated in co-ed college classes—but not to let that stop us. I hadn't even thought about it before." Nora Apt

Even in co-ed Arab schools, girls are often held to the same standards as boys at home. Family culture matters.

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[2] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), A Complex Formula: Girls and Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics in Asia (Paris, France: UNESCO, 2015).

[3] Psychological Bulletin © 2016 American Psychological Association 2017, Vol. 143, No. 1, 1–35

Brian Nosek's research[4], known as the gender equality paradox, found that countries with more gender equality sometimes have fewer women in STEM. Later analyses by Mastroianni and McCoy[5] showed no clear correlation between the gender gap index and science implicit bias.

This suggests that the gender gap index—often used as a global benchmark may not reflect cultural nuance. It may also be influenced by Western perspectives.

Having lived in both the Arab world and the U.S., I noticed a stark difference in how societies value women. In the West, there's a stronger emphasis on body image. This may discourage girls from seeing themselves as scientists or engineers.

In 2012, the European Research Council[6] released a video encouraging girls to pursue science. It showed women in miniskirts and heels, focusing more on appearance than intellect. The backlash from female scientists was swift. The message was clear: appearance still matters more than ability in many Western narratives.

In contrast, while the Arab world has its gender challenges, getting women into STEM education isn't one of them. Between 34% and 57% of STEM graduates in the region are women.[7]

Could the reduced emphasis on body image in some Arab cultures be helping women focus more on their intellect? Could this explain their stronger presence in STEM?

The World Bank[8] notes that 13 of the 15 countries with the lowest female workforce participation are in the Arab world. So perhaps women in those

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[4] https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.0809921106

[5] https://www.scientificamerican.com/author/adam-mastroianni-and-dakota-mccoy/

[6] European Commission, "Science: It's a Girl Thing!" YouTube, July 26, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=iuJ1zp-QT8o.

[7] https://www.scientificamerican.com/custom-media/a-new-dawn-for-innovation-in-qatar/raising-gender-equality-in-stem-careers/

[8] World Bank, "Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+) (Modeled ILO Estimate)," 2019, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS.
Reference: 2015 A Complex formula: girls and women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in Asia. UNESCO Office Bangkok and Regional

parts of the world pursue what they love—without concern for employment politics.

And that brings us to the next chapter.

Bureau for Education in Asia and the Pacific [792], Korean Women's Development Institute (Korea R) [3]
Document code: TH/EPR/14/037-200

3

WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

RANA DAJANI

Despite the growing number of educated and qualified women, female representation in the workplace remains disproportionately low. A closer look reveals a stark trend: drop-out rates among women rise significantly after marriage and childbirth. This leads to an important hypothesis—workplaces are not designed to accommodate the needs of women balancing careers with family life. There are limited or no provisions such as maternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, workplace nurseries, or flexible hours, measures that would make the workplace more inclusive and sustainable for women.

A Historical Framework

To understand why such measures are not standard, we must look back in history. In hunter-gatherer and agrarian societies, all members of the community contributed to nurturing society members. With the advent of the industrial revolution, however, factory systems emerged that employed men almost exclusively. The workplace, as we know it, was built by men for men, specifically white, Western men within a capitalist framework. Work hours were rigid, typically 9 to 5, and success was defined by income, dominance, and rank.

When women entered the workforce during the twentieth century World Wars, they adapted to the existing system instead of changing it. Success became synonymous with mimicking male patterns; continuous labor, uninterrupted careers, and full-time commitment. Yet, there's a biological difference that cannot be ignored: women can bear children, men cannot. This fundamental difference predates culture, religion, and social norms. It is biological and ancient.

Still, the workplace was never designed with this reality in mind. Measuring success using a male-centric model is like evaluating a fish by how well it climbs a tree. It simply doesn't make sense. In the Western world, we see manifestations of this bias in practices like companies offering to freeze women's eggs so they can postpone motherhood in pursuit of career success. The unspoken message: motherhood should be delayed or even denied for the sake of professional validation.

Denying Biology

This framing ignores an essential truth: reproduction is a biological requirement for the survival of our species. Instead of supporting and valuing this function, we penalize it. Women who take time off to care for their children are often seen as less professional. Men who want to do the same are similarly stigmatized. This devaluation is deeply rooted in a workplace designed without caregiving in mind. We see this in criteria for eligibility for awards and fellowships. The applicant has to be under the age of 40 to be eligible. Why? Because if you have not fulfilled a number of requirements by the age of 40, the implication is that you are not serious enough for your career because what else have you been doing? To mention that you were having children or taking care of children because of you or your partner's biological clock is not in the calculation at all. When I brought this up to the L'Oréal UNESCO fellowship prize as a criterion that discriminates against women or men who have taken time off for taking care of their children, the administrators denied intentional discrimination and later changed the criteria to allow two years extra over the age of 40 for a maximum of two children. More attempts to put band aids on a system that was built on the wrong premises.

Child-rearing, especially during the early developmental years (ages 0–5), is critically important. Yet, in the workforce, this period is considered a "gap" in a woman's resume, something to be hidden or justified. The result is a false binary: family or career. Nothing in between.

We continue to perpetuate a system that devalues nurturing, which is foundational to societal survival. Men historically outsourced this responsibility to their wives. Now, women are expected to outsource it as well.

The Science of Nurture

Scientific evidence underscores the importance of maternal and parental bonding. Dr. Martha G. Welch at Columbia University has shown through her work in developmental neuroscience that emotional regulation in children is closely tied to mother-child co-regulation. The "Calming Cycle Theory" suggests that early nurturing shapes emotional and behavioral outcomes. Welch's research shows that when a mother holds her own child, different areas of her brain light up compared to when she holds another child. This biological bonding is specific, deep, and powerful.

Similarly, Dr. Charles Nelson at Harvard studied Romanian orphans who lacked consistent caregiver interactions. Despite having access to food and shelter, these children suffered long-term neurological and emotional deficits due to the absence of human bonding. The implication is clear: parents, especially during early childhood, are irreplaceable. Substitutes may be necessary in some cases but they should not be the norm.

Flawed Definitions of Success

At a UNICEF meeting in 2020, I witnessed a celebration of how women in Rwanda were returning to work days after childbirth, facilitated by paid daycare services. I challenged this narrative, asking: is this true progress, or are we simply shifting responsibilities without valuing the act of caregiving itself?

This obsession with economic productivity ignores the foundational work of "life-making," as described by Tithi Bhattacharya. She defines social reproduction as the activities and institutions required for sustaining and regenerating human life. Yet, these contributions are absent from our economic metrics like GDP, rendering them invisible.

This leads to misguided forms of "empowerment." At a 2012 Yale World Fellows meeting, a woman proudly shared that she attended a work conference just two days after giving birth. Applause erupted. I was struck by the contrast, my own experience after childbirth was about bonding, healing, and breastfeeding. This woman's action was framed as freedom and success, but at what cost? And to whom? Serene Khader calls this the "freedom myth" and the "restriction myth." Even if one woman is "free," another (often lower-paid) woman is burdened with the caregiving. Individual freedom is not enough, we must consider collective well-being.

Institutional Failure

Some companies have taken steps; maternity leave and flexible hours, but these are often inadequate or inconsistently implemented. A New York Times article[1] reported that a woman at Glencore had to use a supply closet with recycling bins to nurse her child. Even the UN is not exempt. At a 2019 panel on women in STEM, a Bulgarian mathematician on maternity leave was told she could breastfeed her child in a hallway or bathroom. This lack of dignity in one of the world's most respected institutions is both ironic and deeply troubling.

Root of the Problem

These problems stem from pre-existing frameworks that never included women in their design. And while efforts are being made to accommodate women, most are superficial. For example, companies offering to freeze women's eggs sidestep the issue entirely. They ask women to deny their biology, rather than valuing it.

Even in progressive countries like Sweden, where legal equality exists, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles[2]. This shows that simply offering equality within a male-centric system is not enough. We need systemic change. As we embark on systemic change, we need to ensure that as we value our biology it is not being used against us as women. Actually, what we need to do is change the question: rather than asking how to get more women into the workplace, we should ask women what they truly want and respect their choices. This shift from society-imposing norms to respecting women's choices should be applied to all members of society. Not all men want to have high-powered jobs, some want to be stay-at-home dads as well. If society allows for people to pursue their passions, people will be happier and more productive. Supporting women to have the freedom of choice will result in supporting everyone having freedom of choice as well. This will result in a kaleidoscope of paths of success to inspire future generations of both women and men. Not to mention that people can change their mind as well. We are not destined to one path of success but actually can embark on a zig zag path of success depending on our biological clocks, our curiosity and passions, and where women and

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/15/business/pregnancy-discrimination.html
[2] https://www.bbc.com/news/business-39900449

men may choose to pursue their passions after their childbearing and rearing years.

The Global Spread of Western Norms

While much of this critique is Western-centric, Western norms are rapidly globalizing. This leads to cultural colonization. In Bulgaria, a post-communist initiative aimed at empowering women to work misunderstood that many women wanted the freedom to stay home after being forced to work under previous regimes. In the Arab world, one businessman told women they could never succeed unless they emulated American work habits; staying late and prioritizing career over family. This mindset is dangerous.

Not all cultures define success in the same way. Arab women, as noted by Jane Fonda, often feel no need to "prove" themselves by male standards. They embrace their femininity with pride. This self-acceptance is powerful and deserves exploration.

Looking Forward

Future chapters will examine how women and the concept of success have evolved in different regions—Eastern Europe, India, China, Africa, and South America. We will also explore how materialism, capitalism, and colonization have reshaped cultural values about women's roles.

We must begin to value caregiving, count it in economic terms, and redefine success to include the labor that sustains human life. Only then can we offer women and men real choices and create a truly inclusive and humane society.

4

WHY DO ARAB FEMALES FEEL PROUD OF BEING WOMEN?

RANA DAJANI

I attended a conference in the Gulf organized by a local university in 2008. Jane Fonda observed that Arab women did not have an inferiority complex. Instead, they were proud of their womanhood and did not feel the need to constantly prove themselves equal to men.

Her observation prompted me to reflect more deeply on Arab women, especially as one myself. Her words resonated, they captured something I've long felt and observed. Arab women certainly face challenges, but this deep-rooted pride in their identity made me wonder: where does it come from?

Jane Fonda, coming from a Western heritage where women have long struggled with inequality, saw something different. As late as 1871, debates in England questioned whether women even possessed souls. Intelligent or outspoken women were branded as witches and burned at the stake. This historical backdrop has shaped generations of Western women who have fought for basic rights. Since the Western model of a "complete human" was male, women were often compelled to emulate men to claim equality.

But when Jane encountered Arab women who didn't feel the need to measure up to men, it stood out. In Arab culture, men were not seen as the sole ideal or the epitome of human perfection. Instead, both men and women were regarded as fully human, each with distinct strengths and unique roles. This mindset was evident in how Arab women carried themselves, interacted with men, and were perceived within their communities.

While Arab women face other challenges, they do not generally feel inferior to men or pressured to prove their worth by denying their femininity. This pride is visible in how Arab societies value aspects of womanhood like pregnancy and childbirth. Historically, Arab women haven't had to hide

their pregnancies or choose between motherhood and career. Breastfeeding is respected and encouraged. Though not financially compensated, these aspects are culturally valued.

This is not to suggest that child-rearing should fall solely on women; in any healthy society, caregiving is a shared responsibility.

I interviewed Hanan, an accomplished professional from the Gulf, who explained that women in the Gulf are proud to be female and feel balanced in relation to men. In Gulf societies, gender differences are acknowledged, but both contributions are equally respected.

There's a strong sense of pride in identity, culture, and heritage among both men and women. When I asked Hanan about the source of this pride, she credited leadership within families and government, which actively promotes respect for women. This is also reflected in institutional frameworks. According to Hanan, families raise boys and girls with mutual respect and equal expectations.

She expressed pride in being Arab, citing the cultural and historical richness of the region. In the Gulf, female role models are selected based on merit not gender or class. Women don't face the same career-or-family dilemma; their choices are more natural and organic. Gulf women tend to be confident, curious, assertive, and unafraid to speak their minds—traits typically associated with empowerment in the West.

Western portrayals often depict Arab women as oppressed. But in reality, they are often treated with greater respect than their Western counterparts. While Western societies have formal equality policies, the lived experience often lags behind.

Another perspective came from Biliana, a friend from Bulgaria who lived in the Gulf for many years. She described Gulf women as occupying public spaces with confidence. "They walked at their own pace, and no one questioned it," she said. To her, this was a subtle yet powerful signal of equality.

She also noticed that social rituals—like politely insisting that someone on the right walk through the door first—reflected deeper cultural civility. These seemingly small acts fostered social harmony and mutual respect.

Tracing the roots of this pride in biology and identity leads us to Islamic civilization. Across the Islamic world, regardless of religion, many women

share a sense of self-worth rooted in Islamic philosophy. Introduced 1,400 years ago, Islam recognized both men and women as fully human, with dignity and value.

Evidence of this lies in the Quran, which openly discusses menstruation, pregnancy, menopause, and breastfeeding. These are not taboo topics—they are normalized. In Islamic societies, these verses are studied by both men and women, fostering a shared understanding of human biology. Even sexuality, marriage, and divorce are addressed, bringing private matters into respectful public discourse.

This inclusive philosophy stood in stark contrast to both pre-Islamic patriarchy and to Christian civilizations that often viewed women as inferior.

Biliana shared another testimonial: in the Gulf, pregnant women or those with young children were never perceived as less competent. No one rolled their eyes when a colleague left to care for a child. Both male and female parents were respected for their caregiving roles.

She also noted that in Arab society, caring for elderly parents wasn't seen as burdensome or shameful. It was simply a natural part of life. While some might label this as "traditional," Biliana saw it as a sign of true civilization—respect, dignity, and community.

She added that she never felt judged for asking a man for help with something like parking. There was no tension—just a shared understanding of humanity, unburdened by competition or ego.

This contrasts sharply with the West, where women only began fighting for equal rights in the 20th century. Jean Said Makdisi's *Teta, Mother and Me*[1] offers evidence of a parallel reality. Makdisi documents how, in 19th-century Ottoman society, women enjoyed education, freedom of movement, and political participation. Her grandmother led a tribe and rode horses.

However, when missionary schools were introduced, they imported Victorian values that restricted women's roles to the private sphere. Educated Arab women from elite families began experiencing similar struggles as their Western counterparts—silenced voices, limited mobility, and internalized inferiority.

[1] Teta, mother and me by Jean Said Makkdisi

Makdisi's mother, raised in a nun-run school, suffered from this suppression. Jean herself became part of a new middle class shaped by Western ideals, disconnected from Islamic heritage.

This reversal was especially stark in British-occupied regions. While British women were still fighting for basic rights, Arab women had already attained many of them. Yet colonial powers claimed they were "saving" Arab women—when in fact, they were dismantling existing equality.

The film *Enola Holmes* highlights this contrast: Sherlock's sister struggles to be seen in Victorian England—a struggle many Arab women of that era were largely free from. The notion that the East was more advanced in gender equality remains uncomfortable for Western narratives, as it undermines the myth of Western superiority.

The lack of historical documentation about Arab women does not imply oppression—just as the absence of stories about common men does not imply they lacked worth. To assume otherwise reveals its own bias.

On the Role of Women in Islamic History and Science

Women in early Islamic civilizations were often religious scholars rather than natural scientists. This raises important questions: Why did women gravitate toward religious scholarship? How did their contributions compare with those in other civilizations?

First, even among men, religious scholars far outnumbered natural scientists. The smaller number of women in science may simply reflect broader societal patterns. Additionally, it's likely that women did contribute to scientific work, but their efforts went unrecorded or have been lost.

The preference for the humanities and religious studies may reflect societal values. In cultures that prioritized care, empathy, and communal cohesion, moral and spiritual disciplines often held greater prestige. These values influenced women's roles.

If we apply this lens today, it may explain women's continued underrepresentation in some scientific fields—not due to exclusion, but because different value systems shape choices. It was a different system with different priorities.

There are historical records of Muslim women practicing medicine in Europe. Muslim and Jewish women were active medical practitioners

before the forced conversions in Spain between 1500 and 1526. They treated both men and women, including nobility and King Philip II. But by 1329, Alfonso IV of Valencia prohibited Christian women from practicing medicine, except for caring for women and children without using potions.[2]

John Esposito[3] notes that early Islamic centuries offered women significant freedoms, which declined over time due to events like Mongol invasions and the rise of feudalism. Lebanese anthropologist Nejla Izzeddin[4] observed: "When Arab society was productive, creative women participated. When vitality ebbed, women suffered with their communities."

One may want to explore how the decline in scientific innovation may be related to diminishing female participation. Interestingly, Asma Afsaruddin challenges the notion that women's public roles declined after the ninth century. Through biographical dictionaries, she offers a more nuanced view.[5]

Her study of *Kitāb al-Nis'ā* by Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (1428–1497) reveals the lives of 1,075 women in the Mamluk period. These women were active socially, economically, and educationally.

Al-Sakhāwī documented not just their piety but also their scholarly credentials. Women often studied alongside men and went on to teach both genders. Afsaruddin concludes there were no gender-based restrictions on acquiring knowledge during the Mamluk era. Al-Sakhāwī himself studied with about sixty-eight women and received teaching licenses from forty-six of them.

Esposito argues that as Islam spread, new cultural customs diluted Qur'anic reforms. Persian, Syrian, Egyptian, and Byzantine influences marginalized women over time.

As women's mobility diminished, so did access to mosque-centered learning, travel, and mentorship—prerequisites for scientific work. This

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[2] Muslim Women in Science, Past and Present by Elmira Akhmatova
Published online by Cambridge University Press: 17 February 2025
[3] Esposito, John L. (1999). The Oxford history of Islam / edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press
[4] The Arab World: Past, Present and Future. By Nejla Izzeddin with an Introduction by William E. Hocking (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co. 1953)
[5] Asma Afsaruddin, The First Muslims: History and Memory, Cambridge University Press 2009

supports Esposito's claim that restricted mobility relegated women to dependent domestic roles.

In summary, restrictions on women weren't intrinsic to Islam but developed over centuries due to cultural integration. The Qur'an's revolutionary gender perspective originally promoted education and public engagement for women.

Most restrictive practices that came to define women's roles in Muslim societies stemmed not from Islam, but from pre-Islamic cultural traditions. Once absorbed into Islamic contexts, these were mistakenly treated as religious mandates.

Colonial influence still lingers in how Arab women in formerly colonized areas perceive themselves. The Gulf, largely untouched by colonization, retains a purer reflection of Islamic civilization. I grew up in Jordan, with a Syrian mother and Palestinian father. My mother, educated in a nun-run school, discouraged discussions about menstruation and sex. This contradicted what I read in the Quran. Many women from that generation were unfamiliar with Islamic teachings.

Even attitudes toward homosexuality changed under colonialism. Disdain common today was adopted from Christian influences in the 19th century.

Where did this shift come from? We'll explore that in the next chapter.

Through interviews and cross-cultural encounters, I've observed similar patterns in non-Christian societies such as Eastern Europe, China, Africa, India and Indigenous South American communities. Feminism, like an onion, has many layers; each one peeled reveals something richer, though not without tears.