

# **A Reputation to Maintain: Myths and Truths About Women's Rights in Egypt and Morocco**

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## ***Abstract***

*This article looks at gender inequality in Egypt and Morocco, which is interesting because both countries have historically been “progressive” Arabic countries in regards to attitudes towards women. However, Egypt currently has a very low availability of contraceptive methods and next to zero female participation in government. Meanwhile, Morocco has experienced significant increases in the access rate to contraception, in the ratio of college educated women and the percentage of women seats in parliament. This article analyzes the causes of Egypt’s precipitous drop and Morocco’s more steady increases.*

## **I. Introduction**

In December 2010, a wave of discontent swept across the Middle East and Islamic North Africa, culminating in the famed “Arab Spring” of 2011 which overthrew the dictatorial regimes present in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen, brought about civil war in Syria, and led to constitutional reforms in Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Oman. Whereas common knowledge suggests that power being placed in the hands of the people after decades of oppression under totalitarian regimes would lead to advancement of democratic ideals and equality, there has been considerable evidence to suggest that women in most of the North African Islamic nations have seen a decrease in the amount of policymakers’ attempting to improve the standing of women.

According to Dawoud (2012, p. 160), in Egypt, “a backlash against women’s rights emerged in the form of attempts and/or concrete steps to repeal the laws pertaining to women that were introduced or amended by Mubarak regime.” On the other hand, as detailed in Elliott (2014, p. 2), Morocco has been praised as modernized, moderate, progressive and liberal, especially for its “professedly model legal reforms in the realm of women’s rights, its liberalizing economic and political agenda, and its reformist king Mohammed VI”. However, Elliott (2014, p. 3) has challenged that assessment, suggesting that “Morocco fails to live up to its reputation as a progressive and liberalizing state and society.”

This article will first examine the availability of contraceptives and family planning materials in each nation before and after the Arab Spring. Then, it will draw comparisons between the two

country's literacy rates and education among women. Finally, it will review the evolution of the proportion of women in parliamentary seats as a powerful indicator of women's political participation.

## II. Literature Review

When researching gender inequality in Egypt and Morocco, the three issues that stand out the most are a) the availability of family planning materials, b) women's education and literacy, and c) the ability of women to participate in politics. Brown, Tyane, Bertrand, Lauro, Abou-ouakil and deMaria (1995), Elliot (2014), and Marrakchi (2008) focus on women's rights in Morocco, while Awadalla (2012), Dawoud (2012) and Megahed and Lack (2011) focus on Egypt.

- Awadalla (2012) provides insights into the current state of contraceptive use in Egypt. She discovers that there has been a decrease in population growth, but not a corresponding increase in contraceptive use in Egypt. She discovered that women across all levels of economic class and education believed that both sexes were responsible for family planning, but that the majority of women using contraceptives were well-educated, employed, upper class women aged 30-39 years. No clear explanation was discovered for Egypt's decreasing population growth.
- Brown, Tyane, Bertrand, Lauro, Abou-ouakil and deMaria (1995) provide a look into the historic data that supports Morocco's reputation abroad as a progressive state for women in the Islamic world, at least in the past. The study finds that while the availability of family planning services varies across the country, most of the existing health care facilities are well-stocked and prepared for emergency treatment. While service personnel were trained and regularly supervised, the study that notable shortcomings included a dearth of materials for counseling and a widespread unavailability of the *Ovrette* pill (which is a relatively wide-spread oral progestin contraceptive around the world).
- Dawoud (2012) analyzes the reasons for why women's rights have been regressing in Egypt since the turn of the Arab Spring in 2011. The author suggests that President Mubarak's wife and children were major proponents of women's rights and that the rebels who seized power have been working to actively distance themselves from the previous regime and thus have been stripping women of their rights, in the political and family planning spheres.
- Elliott (2014) discusses Morocco's much touted Family Code, which promises to do justice to women and protect men's dignity. She finds it lacking in attempting to advance women's rights in the nation. She argues that women are still expected to fulfill certain cultural expectations before they are protected under the law.
- Marrakchi (2008) examines Morocco's current attempts to advance women's place in society. She provides a description of the effects that efforts to improve women's education in Morocco have had and analyzes whether the various efforts have been successful. Marrakchi describes the struggle for women's education within historical, religious and socio-political contexts specific to Morocco and helps to establish what Morocco's long-term goals in regards to women's education issues are.
- Megahed and Lack (2011) argue that three cultural and ideological forces have influenced the development of women's education in Islamic North Africa: Islam, colonialism, and

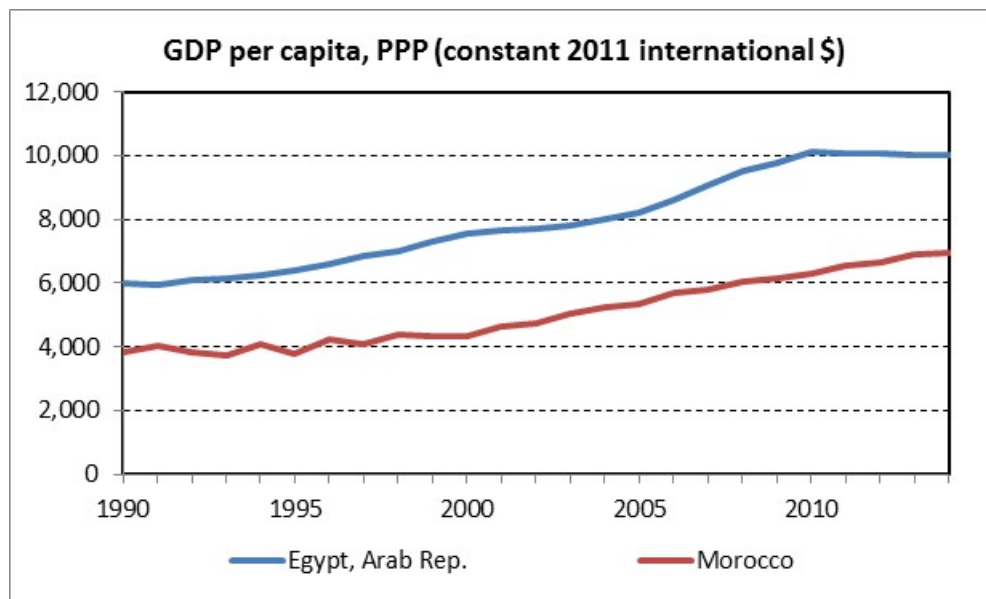
dictatorial governments. They include an in-depth analysis of Egypt’s (as well as of Tunisia’s) reform policies regarding gender disparity. They also measure the effect the liberal versus conservative ideological split had on reforms. Given that this article was published just before the Arab Spring of 2011, it provides valuable background into how Mubarak’s government faced gender issues.

### III. Empirical Background

Both the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Kingdom of Morocco are Arabic-speaking North African nations in which the majority of the population practices Islam. In most Islamic societies, women are generally heavily restricted in their access to contraceptives, education and political participation; we will see how relevant these restrictions are in Egypt and Morocco.

Egypt’s population totals some 89.5 million people, while Morocco holds around 33.9 million.<sup>1</sup> Geographically speaking, Egypt is an extremely arid country, consisting mostly of desert lands, save for the Nile River, which runs from the southern border with Sudan north into the Mediterranean Sea. Urban centers such as Alexandria, Luxor and Cairo have sprung up along the river banks, fed by the Nile’s yearly floods, which deposit arable soil along the delta lands, making farming possible.<sup>2</sup> Morocco is largely mountainous, but also has some desert lands.

**Figure 1: Egypt and Morocco’s GDP per capita (PPP), 1990-2014**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

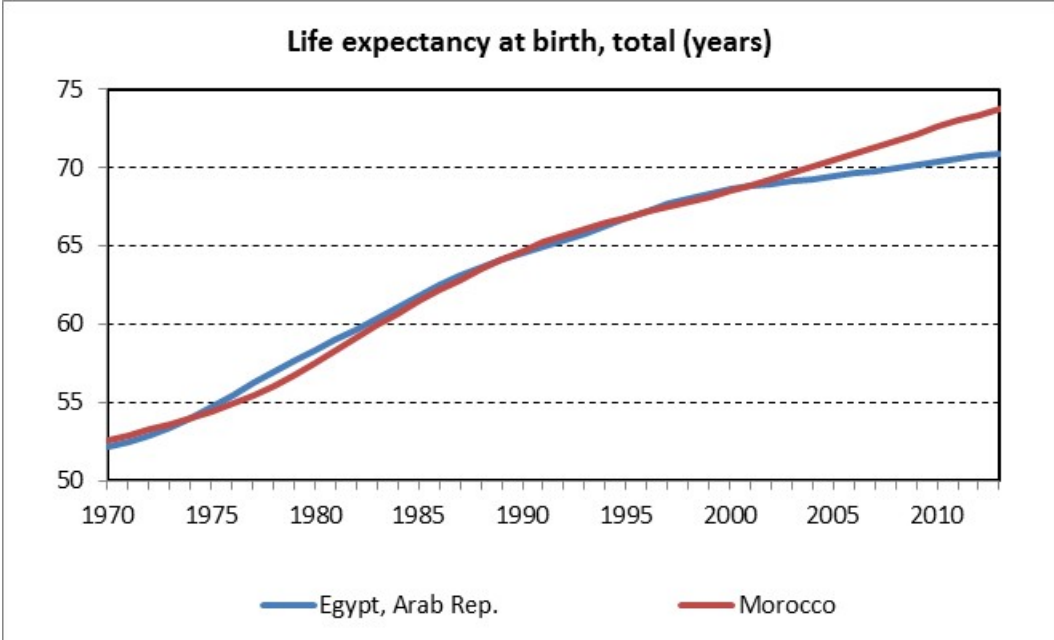
<sup>1</sup> World Bank (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Megahed and Lack (2011), p. 160.

Based on Figure 1 above, we can see that both countries experienced a relatively steady increase in their GDP per capita (in constant 2011\$ and adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP)) since 1990, though it started to stagnate in the case of Egypt since 2010, which is just before the Arab Spring. As of 2014, Egypt’s GDP per capita was \$10,446, while that of Morocco was \$6,958. The World Bank classifies both as lower middle-income nations.

Another important indicator of a nation’s development is its life expectancy. Having an increasing life expectancy is indicative of many things, such as improving health and better quality medical care. Despite Morocco’s considerably lower GDP per capita, both countries have very similar levels and trends of life expectancy. Life expectancy in both Egypt and Morocco has steadily increased over the course of the past 43 years. Both countries had an average life expectancy of about 52 years in 1970. By 2013, Morocco’s life expectancy reached 73.7 years, while that of Egypt stood at 70.9 years. Starting in the early 2000s, Egypt appears to be making far less progress than Morocco as well as Egypt made in previous decades. The data does not show yet any major impact on Egypt’s life expectancy due to the Arab Spring revolution and the subsequent destabilization of cultural and political (and therefore also medical) infrastructure of Egypt. Morocco’s life expectancy remains on a more stable upward trend.

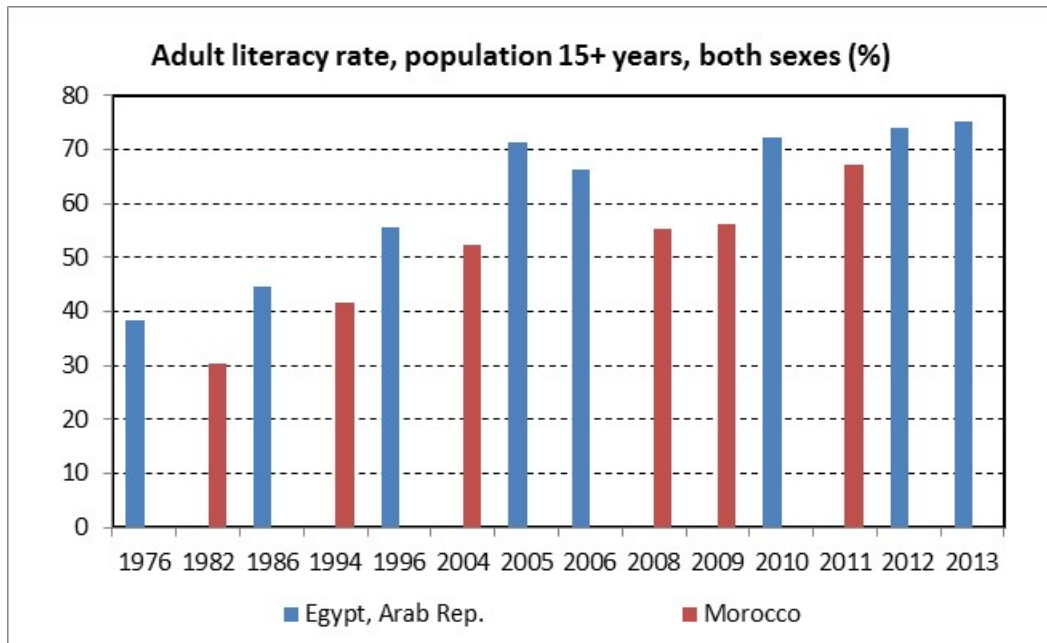
**Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth in Egypt and Morocco from 1970 to 2013**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

A third key determinant of human development is knowledge, which typically is measured by school enrolment ratios and literacy rates. A high literacy rate indicates more and higher quality education institutions and vice versa. As is shown in Figure 3, both nations have seen significant increases in their adult literacy rates. Egypt’s adult literacy rate nearly doubled from 38.2 percent in 1976 to 75.1 percent in 2013, while that of Morocco more than doubled from 30.3 percent in 1982 to 67.1 percent in 2011.

**Figure 3: Adult Literacy Rate in Egypt and Morocco, all available years**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

## IV. Discussion

This discussion section will focus on examining women’s issues in four areas: the availability of contraceptives and family planning services, gender differences in literacy rates, gender differences in school enrolment ratios, and gender differences in terms of political participation.

### IV.1. Availability of Contraceptives and Family Planning Services

The availability of contraceptives and family planning services is the first crucial step in closing the gap between male and female members of society. This is particularly the case in Islamic societies wherein religious interpretations of law condemn abortion and birth control as murder and place severe restrictions on both activities. However, in the late 1990s, while Morocco still enjoyed the title of “most progressive Arab country” in the international press, steps were taken to provide access to neonatal and pediatric healthcare to women across Morocco. To begin this process a system of medical infrastructure was built across Morocco, consisting mostly of clinics that provided everything from contraceptives, family counseling, and other forms of healthcare. As documented by Brown et al. (1995, p. 165), to ensure that family planning services were spread across Morocco, “family planning services are fully integrated with other maternal-child health-care services.”

As Figure 4 shows, while the contraceptive prevalence has increased in both countries, Morocco’s increase has not only been larger but overall also more steady than Egypt’s increase. Egypt’s contraceptive prevalence increased from 24.9 percent in 1975 to 60 percent in 2003, after which it stagnated at that level until at least 2008. While there is no official data available for Egypt beyond 2008, Awadalla (2012) reports that the number has slipped to 57.5 percent after the Arab Spring.

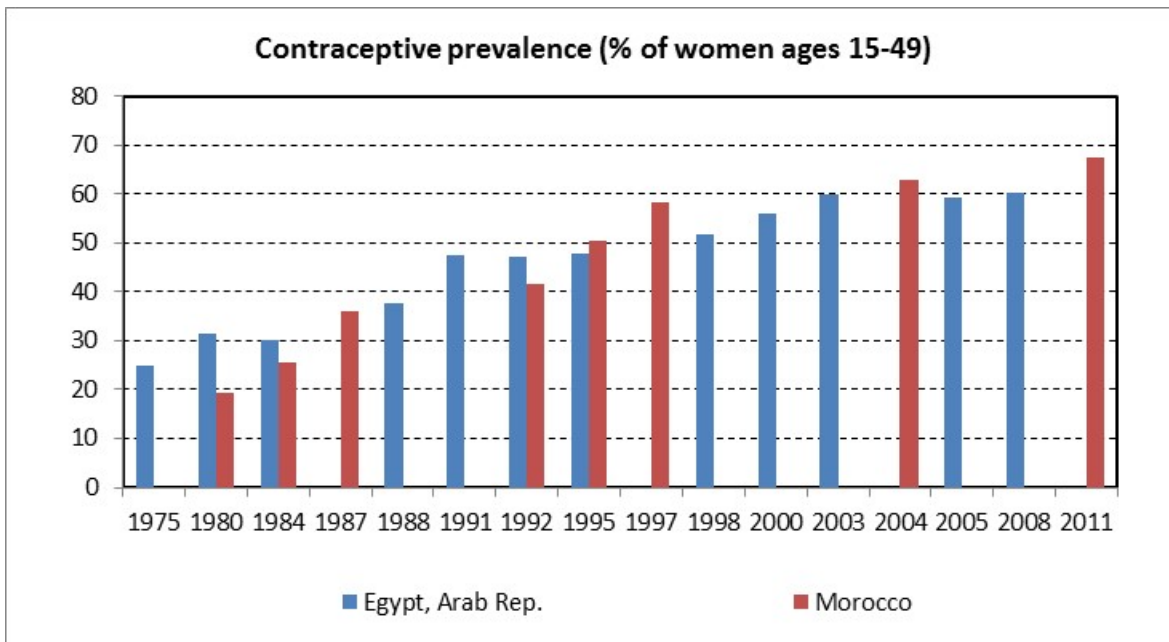
Morocco’s contraceptive prevalence increased from 19.4 percent in 1980 to 76.4 percent in 2011, which implies a more than threefold increase in 31 years.

Whereas Awadalla (2012) could not account for the decrease in contraceptive prevalence, she did provide a short sketch of the types of contraceptives used and the quality of the medical care patients receive. She writes:

“Clinical methods such as IUDs and sterilization are generally administered at healthcare facilities where there are necessary equipment, supplies, hygienic conditions, and staff with technical capacity. In contrast, methods such as oral contraceptives and condoms are typically obtained from private pharmacies and mobile units.”<sup>3</sup>

Even after the overthrow of President Mubarak’s government, Egyptian women still had reliable, efficient access to reproductive healthcare and over half of the participants in Awadalla’s study used them to the best of their ability. Awadalla also polled women across the boundaries of class and education in rural Egypt to determine their feelings about family planning and the responsibility of men and women to work together to make such decisions. Awadalla (2012, p. 172) states that “the majority of participants (60.4 percent) thought family planning decisions should be made by both partners.”

**Figure 4: Contraceptive Prevalence in Egypt and Morocco, all available years**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

While in theory Morocco’s Family Code guarantees reproductive rights to all women, in practice the availability of such services vary throughout the country. According Brown et al. (1995, p. 164), “all four provinces [of Morocco] were actively implementing efforts to improve the quality of their family planning services. Although the efforts differ from province to province, improved

<sup>3</sup> Awadalla (2012), p. 170; IUDs stands for intrauterine devices.

counseling of clients was identified as an important dimension in all provinces, and training of providers in counseling skills is currently under way in several provinces.”

The study by Brown et al. (1995) strongly supports that the government of Morocco was taking steps to address women’s rights. However, with the amendments made to the Family Code in 2004, Morocco would begin a slow reversal that chipped away at women’s abilities to guarantee their reproductive safety, and ultimately their ability to receive and education and participate in politics. The reversal is however not clearly visible in Figure 4, as the contraceptive prevalence continued to increase in Morocco from 63.0 percent in 2004, to 67.4 percent in 2011.

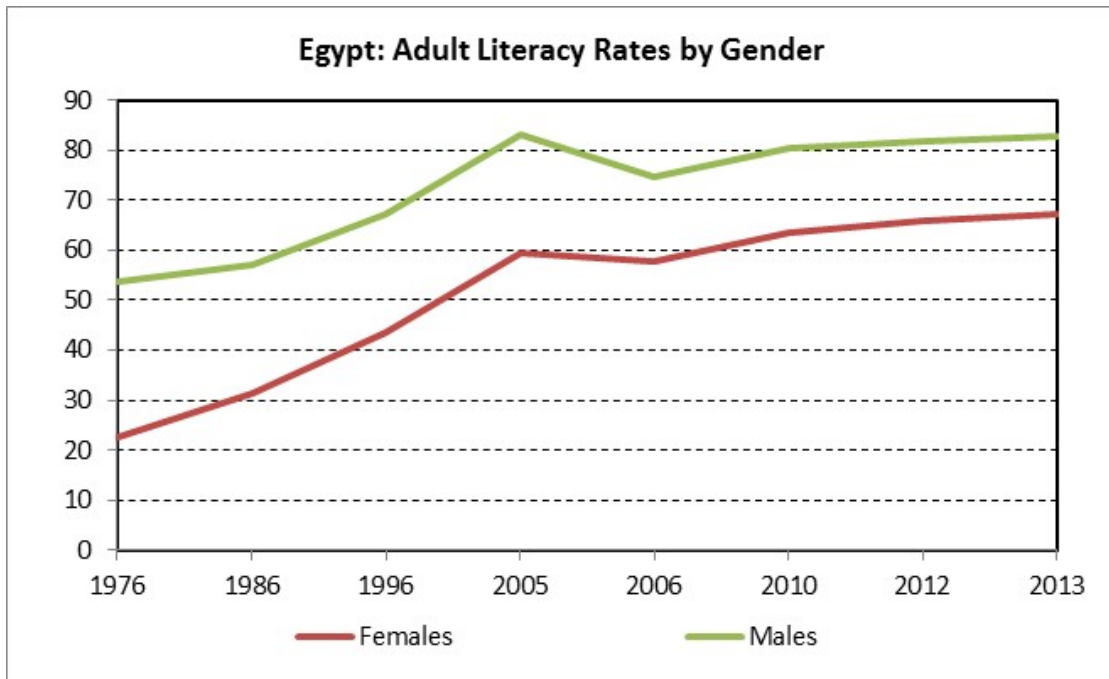
The availability of contraceptives is important in closing the gender gap because it helps to lower the fertility rate of a given geographical area. Lowering the fertility rate in turn allows women in societies such as Egypt and Morocco—where child-rearing activity mostly falls onto women’s shoulders—the freedom to pursue other interests, such as education. By providing contraceptives, governmental agencies symbolically free women from the cultural obligation of child care, allowing them to pursue educational opportunities that will allow the women to secure better employment opportunities. This in turn leads to greater social mobility and ultimately allows women to pursue political agendas and participate in politics.

#### **IV.2. Gender Differences in Literacy Rates**

The most visible indicator of a population’s education is the literacy rate. Figures 5 and 6 clearly illustrate the gender disparity in literacy rates, respectively for Egypt and Morocco.

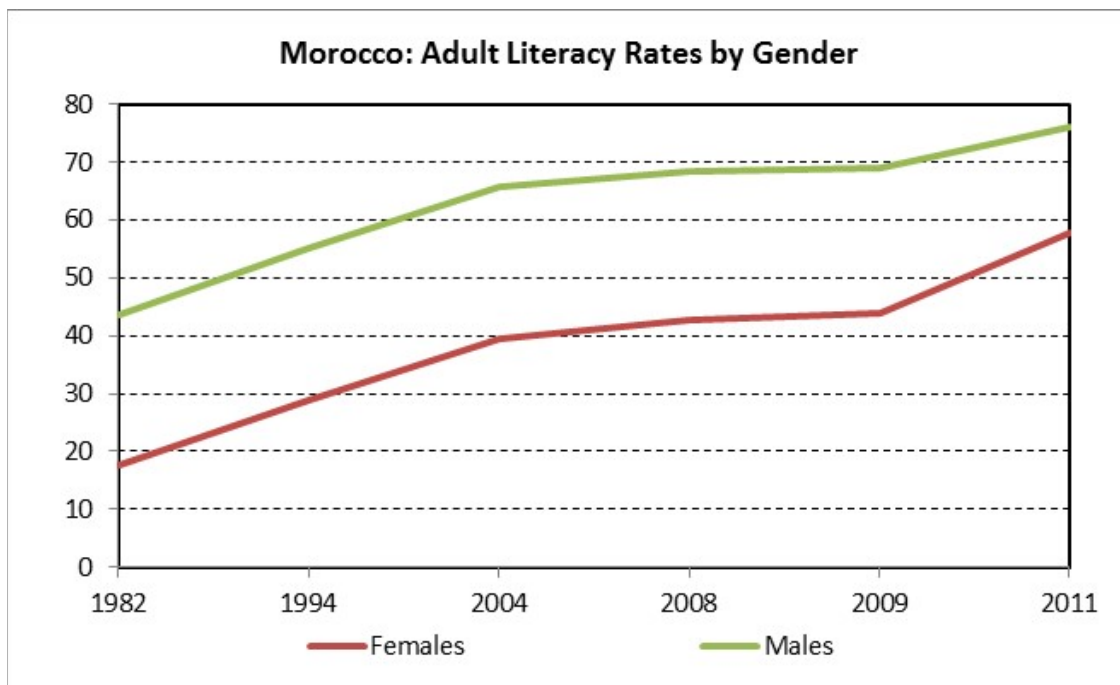
- In the case of Egypt, while both sexes have experienced growth in the past four decades, women have consistently lagged behind men, with 82.6 percent of men being literate in 2013 while only 67.2 percent of women were literate. According to Megahed and Lack (2011, p. 412), a push by the Egyptian government in 2005 to expand literacy caused a sharp rise in literacy rates in both sexes, but women remained behind men. This initiative was abandoned following the Arab Spring, but according to Figure 5, any possible repercussions of the legislative repeal on the literacy rates have been minimal as the upward trend continues even after the overthrow of Mubarak’s presidency.
- Using the same data for Morocco reveals an even larger disparity. In 2011, 76.1 percent of Morocco’s men were literate, while only 57.6 percent of women were. Not only does this reveal that literacy rates are lower for both, men and women in Morocco than in Egypt, it also shows that the gender gap is with 18.5 percent about 3 percent larger than in Egypt (where the gender gap was 15.4 percent in 2013). This illustrates Morocco’s difficulty in maintaining its reputation abroad as a heaven for women in the Arab world. If women cannot read and write, how can they be expected to work and serve in governmental positions as Morocco touts itself on?

**Figure 5: Adult Literacy Rate in Egypt Among Men and Women, 1976-2013**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

**Figure 6: Adult Literacy Rates in Morocco Among Men and Women, 1982-2011**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).



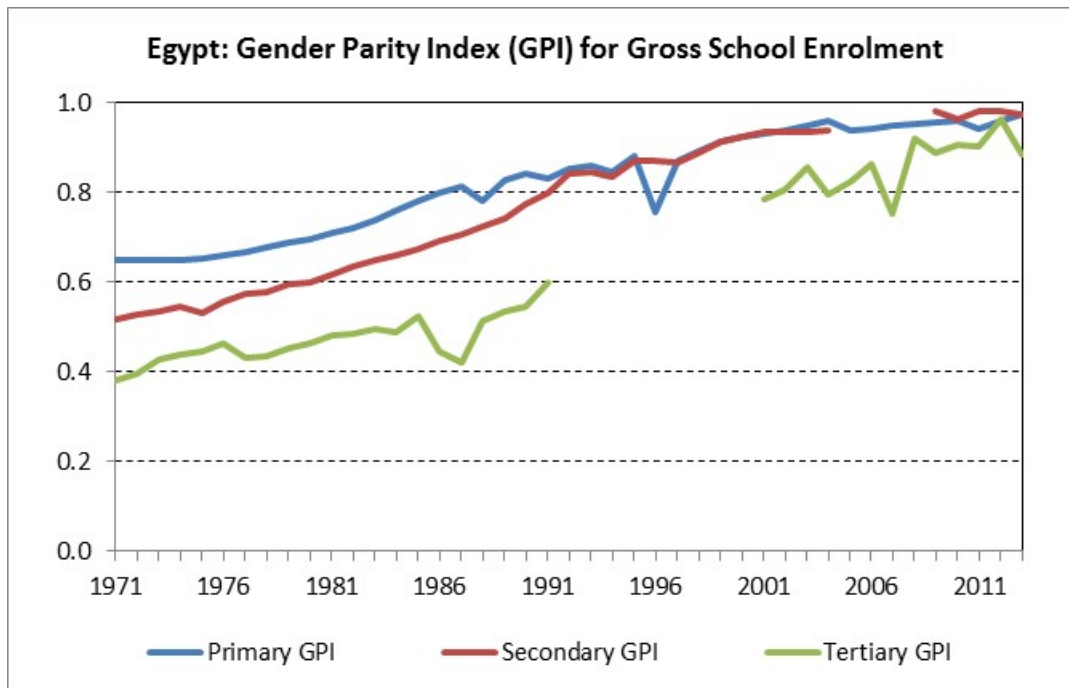
### IV.3. Gender Differences in School Enrolment Ratios

While literacy is a definite marker of availability of education to the general public, the enrollment ratio allows development economists to see how many women take advantage of educational opportunities. However, to paint an even clearer picture of the availability of education to women in developing nations, development economists examine enrollment rates in primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions.

Figures 7 and 8 shows the gender parity index (GPI) for gross school enrolment ratios at the primary, secondary and tertiary level, respectively for Egypt and Morocco. A GPI of 1.0 would indicate zero gender gap, while a GPI of, for example, 0.5 would indicate that twice as many males attend school than females.

In the case of Egypt, the score for primary schools for 1971 was 0.65, indicating that for every male in the school there was 0.65 females. For secondary schools, the 1971 score was 0.52, indicating a nearly 2:1 male to female ratio. Unsurprisingly, the tertiary institutions (universities) had the highest gender disparity, receiving a score of 0.38 in 1971. However, over the forty-year period, enrollment rates for women have risen exponentially, with the gender parity index in all three types of institutions in Egypt being higher than 0.96 in 2010, indicating nearly equal enrollment rates among men and women. However, after 2011, the GPI for tertiary institutions slipped sharply to 0.88. This is most likely a response to the Arab Spring, where after the overthrow of Mubarak, women's rights saw a decline in Egypt as the provisional government instituted Sharia law and abandoned the women's initiatives proposed by Mubarak's wife and their son Gamal.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 7: Gender Parity Index of Education Institutions in Egypt, 1970-2013**

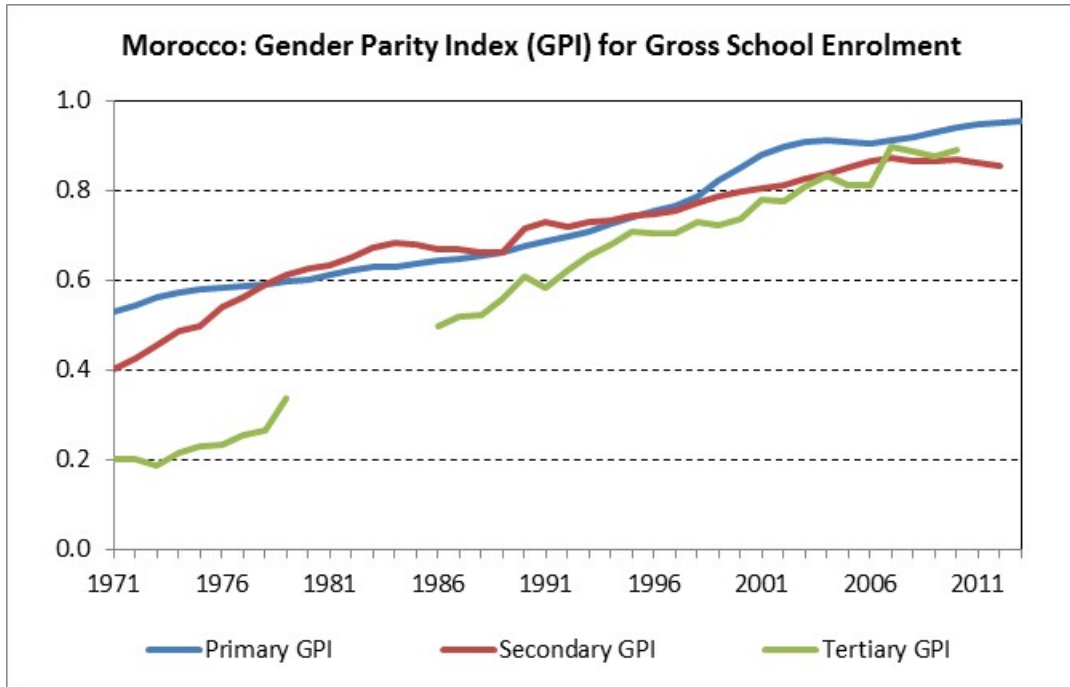


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Dawoud (2012), p. 168.

A similar picture emerges for Morocco, where the 1971 scores were 0.53 for primary education, 0.40 for secondary education, and 0.20 for tertiary education. However, the gender parity index for primary education increased to 0.95 by 2013, to 0.86 for secondary education as of 2012, and to for tertiary education by 2010. We also see a slight decrease in the secondary GPI from 2008 to 2012, and in the tertiary GPI from 2008 to 2010, even though the primary GPI continued to increase from 2008 to 2013.

**Figure 8: Gender Parity Index of Educational Institutions in Morocco, 1971-2013**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

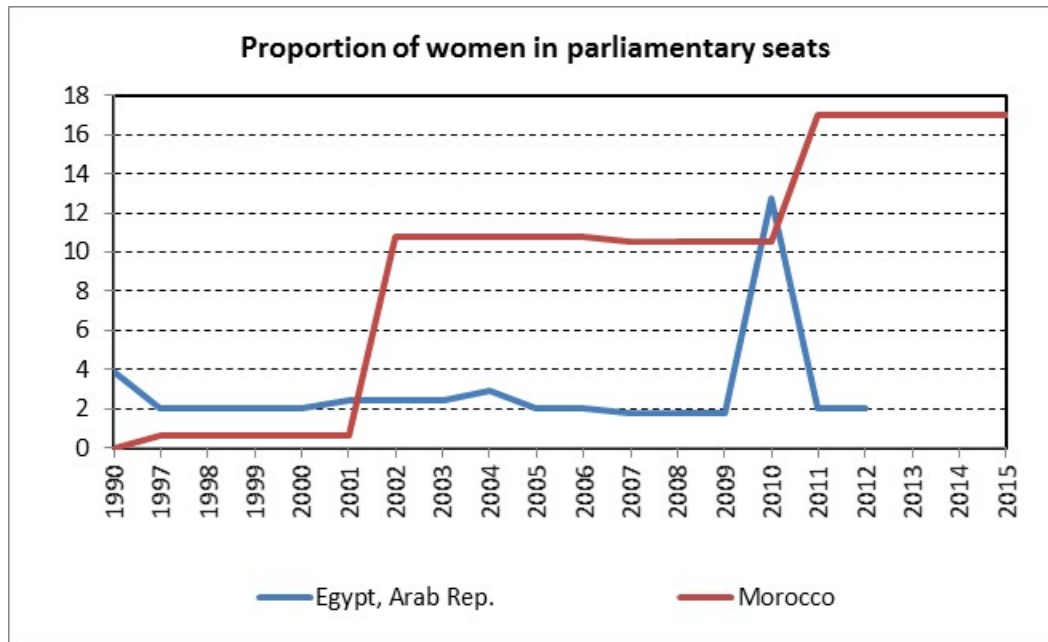
In both Egypt and Morocco, the literacy rate greatly favors men, but the amount of women pursuing higher education at secondary and tertiary institutions are roughly equivalent, with a small bias towards men. This primes women in both Arab nations for participation in politics, another indicator of whether or not women and men stand on equal footing in a given society.

#### **IV.4. Political Participation**

The most telling factor that gives researchers clues into women's inclusion in their society is their ability to participate in politics. Figure 9 paints a clear picture of women's participation in government in Egypt and Morocco. While both nations never have had a very high percentage of women in their parliaments, Morocco has (with the exception of the years before 2002 and year 2010) consistently outperformed Egypt. While Egypt had a sharp increase in 2010, following the Arab Spring, the newly voted-in woman politicians were immediately ousted from their seats and the percentage has regressed to the pre-2010 level. Currently, about 17 percent of Morocco's parliamentary seats are occupied by women, compared to only two percent in Egypt. While

Morocco continues to enjoy increases in the ability of women to participate in government, Egypt is struggling in a post-Arab Spring world to find a place for its women in government.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 9: Proportion of Women in Parliamentary Seats in Egypt and Morocco, 1990-2015**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2015).

## V. Conclusion

Though accessibility of contraceptive methods is increasing in both countries, about 40 percent of women in each country have no reliable access to family planning services. In order for women to be relieved from the cultural obligation of “motherly work” and therefore free to pursue other opportunities such as education and professional work, the two governments must expand the availability of birth control in their own borders.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, in both Egypt and Morocco, women have been lagging behind men in literacy rates consistently since 1970. Only about 67 percent of Egyptian women can read, versus 83 percent of men, while in Morocco 58 percent of women can read while 76 percent of men can. While Morocco has maintained relatively equal access to higher education to both men and women, Egypt has seen a slight decrease in women’s enrollment in higher institutions since the Arab Spring. While the Family Code in both nations ensures a woman’s right to education, the large gender gap in literacy rates should be improved in order for women to continue their path upward to achieve equal footing with men.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Morocco has consistently maintained a higher proportion of parliamentary seats held by women than Egypt. While Egypt had taken steps to increase the amount of women in parliament,

<sup>5</sup> Dawoud (2012), p. 161.

<sup>6</sup> Elliott (2014), p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Megahed and Lack (2011), p. 410; and Marrakchi (2008), p. 72.

with a sharp rise from 2 percent to 12 percent in 2010, the Arab Spring of 2011 thwarted those efforts. Egypt's provisional government is still struggling to maintain power in a country devastated by the overthrow of President Mubarak and nationwide protests and there is no way to provide policy suggestions until the dust has settled and the government is regularized once more. While both countries have very low female political participation, there are promising signs that the steps that Morocco is taking to increase women's standings are achieving their goals and improving women's standings in Morocco.

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