

Democracy, Education and Equality in Arab Countries: Tackling Structured Inequality in Access to Higher Education in Egypt

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Since 2011, many Arab countries have experienced unrest in the form of uprisings, demonstrations and clashes. Some argue that these revolts -often referred to as the “Arab Spring”-were neither coincidental, nor the result of a “domino effect” of collective actions by oppressed people against autocratic regimes in several countries. Rather, these revolts were the result of mobilization efforts made over decades by several activist groups, as well as national and international non-governmental organizations. Contrary to this view, others claim that state education reform initiatives supported by international agencies have created proactive citizens capable of demanding change in the areas of democracy, freedom and justice for all.

With a focus on democracy, education development and educational equity and equality, the study begins by defining the meaning of and the relationship between democracy, education development and educational equity and equality. It identifies and discusses the position of Arab countries in the global democracy index and gender gap index as well as their different ranks in the Arab democracy index (Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2012; Arab Democracy Index 2010 & 2011). This is achieved through a comparative review of international, regional and national documents and scholarly publications.

Following the conceptual and global-regional contexts, Egypt's educational system and its journey of reforms over the past decade are examined, with a special attention given to the current status of educational equality for both females and males from different social classes. This examination helps in articulating the concept of "structured inequality" and its role in the reproduction and perpetuation of social stratification and gender-educational inequality in Egypt.

In addition and in order to determine different socioeconomic and cultural factors that continue to hinder the achievement of educational equity and equality, the study analyzes secondary quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Population Council-Egypt (2015) in two governorates/provinces (Alexandria and Sohag), representing the north and south regions of Egypt. The qualitative data included a total of 12 Focus groups (8 focus groups with 63 female and male university students and 4 focus groups with parents), plus 26 individual interviews.

The findings of this study reveal the status of democracy and education development in Egypt and other Arab countries and uncover the existing structured inequality (in terms of gender and social class), explaining its impact on access to higher education and its related socioeconomic and cultural factors. The study concludes by offering recommendations for education policy reforms in order to achieve educational equity and equality in Egypt and similar Arab countries (Megahed 2015).

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