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Gender and Family in the Arab World

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The Arab world is a mix of social classes, racial and ethnic groups, religious affiliations, nationalities, and linguistic communities. People live in cities, provincial towns, and rural villages. Migrations of peoples from Africa, Europe, and Asia have brought about movements of ideas, values, and structures, and a crossbreeding of peoples and cultures. The past century has been a period of intense upheaval, escalated change, and revolutionary transformation. There is no moment from the past that we can point to as a time in which Arab culture was fixed.

Given this historical social and cultural fluidity and tremendous diversity, we have to be very careful before generalizing about gender and family systems, or assuming that they are the same across ethnic, religious, racial, national, regional, or linguistic groupings in this complex region. With this caveat in mind, it is possible to suggest a framework within which to understand broad patterns of gender and family dynamics in the Arab world, without ascertaining that they all apply everywhere. In addition, with few exceptions, most of the patterns described here are not uniquely Arab.

CORE UNIT

For Arabs, the family lies at the core of society — in political, economic, social, and religious terms. This privileged position is en-

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shrined in the constitutions of many Arab states (which assert that the family is the basic unit of society), and is reproduced at almost every level of political life. Arab economies recognize the centrality of the family in many ways, including through worker recruitment and discipline, wages and benefits. Religious institutions consider themselves the guardians of family integrity and hold families responsible for safeguarding religious sanctity. People are keenly aware of each other's family memberships, identities, and status. Access to institutions, jobs, and government services is often through family connections.

I experienced this vividly for the first time when I returned to Lebanon, in 1968. While carrying out a research project for the YMCA in the southern town of Marjayoun, I was confronted by a suspicious local teacher. "Who are you?" he asked, even though we had already been introduced by mutual friends. He wanted to know my family origins. I told him I was from the Awwad family. "Are you related to As'ad Awwad?" he asked. "He is ibn 'ammi [my father's brother's son]," "Oh, I had heard that bint 'am [father's brother's daughter] of As'ad Awwad was coming here," he observed. "Welcome to you!" Once he realized that I came from a known and reputable family, he supported my research and paved the way for me to meet with numerous other people.

The centrality of family in the Arab world has profound implications for gender relations, since Arab families are generally highly patriarchal. It was not incidental, for example, that the teacher asked me about my relationship to a man in my family. My answer indicated that I had family males to protect me. A woman's patrilineal male cousin can have considerable authority over her, superseded only by her father, uncles, and brothers.

The gender system in the Arab world is shaped by and works through the institutions of patriarchy which affect much of the social order. Some Arab scholars have even argued that patriarchy is a — or the — core obstacle to equality and democracy in the Arab world.2

Patriarchy

Patriarchy privileges males and elders (including elder women in the Arab world), and justifies this privilege in kinship terms. Females are generally taught to respect and defer to their fathers, brothers, grandparents, uncles, and, at times, male cousins. Young people are taught to respect and defer to their older kin. In turn, males are taught to take responsibility for their female kin, and elders are taught to protect and take responsibility for those younger than themselves.
Gender and age privilege generally enhance the power and authority of elder males, although elder women also come to have a degree of authority over those younger than themselves. Once males reach adulthood, they generally have more authority and power than even elder females.

These patriarchal rules are widely observed in Arab families, but like all social rules, there are many exceptions and many interpretations. A younger brother can come to have more authority than an older brother, for example, if the younger is more financially or politically successful. A sister can exert authority over her brothers if she acquires independent wealth or influence. The authority of paternal uncles can readily be challenged when unsupported by economic, political, or social resources. And if elderly fathers falter in health or wealth, they can lose authority to their sons.

Patriarchy has generally fostered patrilineality, patriolocality, and endogamy. Patrilineality means that descent is established through the father. Lineage membership is passed down through sons who bear the responsibility of not only reproducing the kin group, but also of protecting its members. In the cultural ideal, a married woman remains attached to her father’s lineages, rather than her husband’s.

The reality is more complex. At times, maternal relatives are more important than paternal relatives as sources of political clout, social status, or emotional support. Paternal kin sometimes do not fulfill the duties of the cultural ideal. As a result of global economic and political pressures of the past century, the extended patrilineal family ideal has been transformed in many parts of the Arab world (particularly urban areas) into joint, nuclear, single-parent, or other family arrangements. So while the patrilineal cultural ideal is upheld, in fact there are numerous family patterns in the Arab world today.

The patriarchal privileging of males and seniors, combined with patrilineality, enhances the power of male elders in the father’s kin group. A father’s brothers can have authority over his nieces and nephews, and male cousins can have authority over their female counterparts. The intersection of patriarchy and patrilineality increases the range of men with authority nested in kinship terms.

After a couple marries, it is preferred that they live near the male’s family (patriolocality). In the contemporary world, most Arabs would perhaps not volunteer patriolocality as an ideal. Post-marital residence patterns today tend to conform more to local economic and sociological pressures than to patriolocality. Patriolocality, when practiced, can enhance the power of men over women. When combined with endogamy, it can also counterbalance the power of husbands over women by locating women near their birth families.

Endogamy refers to a cultural preference to marry within the father’s kin group, and therefore one’s own religious, ethnic, and national group. Endogamy, when practiced and when combined with patriolocality, means that both husband and wives have their families nearby and are part of the same lineage. Family elders, male and female, can exercise considerable authority over the couple. Women in this situation are subject to greater control from both families, but also have greater protection from possible in-law excesses.

Arranged marriages are still common, although much less so in urban areas and among educated, middle and upper classes. Arranged marriages are a vehicle to establish or reinforce relationships between families rather than just between couples.

Marriage patterns, in reality, vary greatly. Non-kin marriages outnumber kin marriages almost everywhere in the Arab world. In addition, inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriages are relatively common. Marriages among Arabs of different nationalities and between Arabs and non-Arabs have been common throughout the twentieth century. Patrilineal parallel cousin marriages, the ideal marriage, account for less than ten percent of marriages in any Arab country. Marriage to matrilineal extended relatives seems to be at least as common.

FAMILY RESOURCE

In most Arab countries, families generally feel obligated to take care of their members financially. Given the lack or inadequacy of government programs for unemployment compensation, health insurance, and retirement benefits, most people must look to their families for those assurances. In addition, family members often work together in the same businesses, help each other find work, own shops or land together, lend each other money, and share other economic resources.

The importance of family as the primary source of economic security has given weight to the patriarchal structuring of the family. The authority of men and elders has economic consequences for women and juniors. Many women, for example, never inherit their share of their patrimony, even through state law and Islamic custom entitles them to a share. Some women choose to leave their inheritance with their brothers as insurance, so that they can return to their birth families if their marriages dissolve.

Family is also a key political resource in most Arab countries. This is in part because of the frequent inadequacy of government social service programs, and partly because Arab governments privilege family relationships in offering access to governmental resources.
Family provides a person with his or her basic political network: family contacts are usually the starting place if one needs access to a government agency. Political leaders, in turn, want to know of a person’s family connections and whether family members support them.

Politicians and administrators often allocate resources to persons through heads of family, and privilege their own families in the process. This constant emphasis on family in the state arena turns family relationships into powerful political tools. And since family is patriarchal, politics also privileges patriarchy.

These political uses of family create kinship continuities between the state (the public sphere), civil society (the sphere of private organizations), and the family (the domestic sphere). Some have argued that for democracy to develop, civil society must be separate and autonomous from the state. This model of democracy and civil society is based on the (somewhat idealized) experiences of Western states. In Arab countries, there are often greater continuities between public, private, and domestic spheres that are linked to the centrality of the patriarchal family.

For women, these continuities between family, civil society, and state mean that they confront patriarchy in every sphere. Patriarchy is thus reproduced in multiple sites — a phenomenon not unique to Arab societies. The outcome is that women and juniors must be embedded in familial relationships to make the most effective use of the institutions in these spheres, and are therefore subject to patriarchal norms and relationships even in public spaces. Yet most women in the Arab world would argue for retention of these familial relationships because these ties also provide support.

With the exception of Tunisia, family and religion are legally intertwined. Most Arab countries defer personal status laws (also called family law) to religious institutions. Laws concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody are under the aegis of legally recognized religious institutions. There is no civil recourse for marriage, divorce, or inheritance rules. Marriages between persons of different religions require the conversion of one of the partners, usually the wife, and the permission of the clergy performing the rites. Needless to say, this acts as an impediment to inter-faith marriage, although not a total barrier since agreeable clerics can usually be found.

By placing family law in the domain of religion, most Arab states have given over control of issues that dramatically affect women to institutions that are gender-biased. Clerics in the Arab world — Muslim, Christian, or Jewish — are all male, and their hierarchy is quite patriarchal. Arab feminist activists in a number of Arab countries have lobbied for years to change family law. Though there have been small successes in countries such as Iraq and Yemen, and for a while in Egypt, activists have seen these governments retreat in recent years in the face of conservative or radical religious mobilization to undo family law reforms.

**Gender and Family Values**

Family values in the Arab world are diverse, but certain patterns are widely shared. Among these are concepts of generosity, hospitality, reciprocity, pride, dignity, valor, strength, emotional openness, indirect communication, conflict-avoidance, honor, and the use of mediators to negotiate relationships.

Perhaps the value most widely known outside the region is that of honor, which is crucial in the Arab world and Mediterranean societies more generally. Family honor implies that one’s sense of dignity, identity, status, and self, as well as public esteem, are linked to the regard with which one’s family is held by the community at large. The cultural assumption has been that a person’s actions reflect on her or his family as a whole, and the reputation of the family as a whole is borne by each of its members. Children are taught that the good of the family comes before personal good. Sacrifice by individual family members to benefit the family as a whole is expected. Family members are supposed to be responsible to and for each other.

It is the historic centrality of the family to social, political, and economic security that accords family honor a role in controlling the behavior of family members. Just as honor has offered a measure of protection to family members, it has also been a means of controlling behavior, especially women’s. The notion of family honor facilitates patriarchal power by circumscribing women’s sexuality, movement in social arenas, and, to some degree, economic opportunities. It enhances the power of fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and male cousins over women.

Though these cultural beliefs generally prevail across most of the Arab world, enactments of family honor vary considerably. In the past few decades, extended kin, particularly in urban areas and in middle and upper classes, have been less able to use honor to control the behavior of distant relatives. Even the hold of nuclear families on their members had become equivocal in certain social strata.

Much of the scholarship on personhood and family in the Arab world has been divided into two camps. Some scholars argue that the Arab world is highly individualistic, with persons strategizing for indi-
individual gain and committed to little beyond self interest. Others argue that the person is totally submerged in families and communities.

While neither view captures the totality, both capture aspects of the relationship between personhood and family. Generally, socialization practices do not support individualism — the creation of autonomous, separate selves — but neither do they entirely conflate the person with the family. Rather, persons are encouraged to view themselves as always linked with, reciprocally shaped by, and mutually responsive to family and relatives.

This relational construct of self is encouraged in both men and women. The implications for women, however, are somewhat different. Women, more than men, are expected to put others before themselves and to see their interests as embedded in those of others, especially family members. In practice, this means that women are particularly encouraged to see their interests linked to those of their male kin. This often has the effect of reinforcing patriarchal hierarchy.

As in any society, family members can be and are quite competitive with each other. Siblings, especially brothers, can compete for status or affirmation from parents or extended kin. Yet brothers and sisters are generally socialized to love, support, and sacrifice for each other. It is in the tension between competition and generosity, between love and power, that the dynamics of family are often played out. The tension provides spaces for negotiation, maneuvering, direct and indirect empowerment. While women negotiate and maneuver as much as men, they, more often than men, find themselves in the subordinate position.

**FAMILY AS IDIOM**

The centrality of family in Arab society is often expressed through the use of idiomatic kinship — acting as if a person is a relative even when they are not socially recognized kin. In using family idioms, people call up the expectations and morality of kinship.

Once embraced as idiomatic kin, persons tend to be accepted by each other’s families as part of the extended family. If my brother calls a friend his brother, I tend to see that man as my brother as well: I can call on him to do things for me that a brother might. For example, while I was doing fieldwork in the 1970s, a neighbor came to ask if I would help him obtain the government residency papers he needed. He began the conversation by calling me “ikn” (my sister), thus paving the way to making the claims of a brother. To help him, I recruited several friends with whom I had idiomatic sister and niece relations.

They in turn called upon real and idiomatic kin of theirs. In this manner, a network of *wasta* (brokerage connections) was created, mostly legitimated in kinship terms, that eventually got the job done. The use of idiomatic kinship is important not only in intimate circles, but also in political and economic spheres. Political leaders at times put themselves in the position of being family patriarchs. They expect to be treated as heads of families, with the deference and loyalties due to family elders. They use family idioms to justify the power relationships between themselves and their clients or followers. People who need each other’s services for political mediation, brokerage, or gaining access to resources will often use kin terms to identify themselves.

Idiomatic kin relationships are often found in the economy as well. Owners of businesses, particularly owners of small businesses, often use kinship terminology to create a relationship with their workers. Workers then come to expect their employers to treat them with kin-like concern.

Women as well as men use idiomatic kinship to create effective and instrumental relationships. They, like men, create short- and long-term bonds by assimilating people into the moral domain of family. For women, however, there are other consequences. In evoking kinship, women intentionally or unintentionally also call forth the values and institutional arrangements associated with patriarchy. In so far as idiomatic kinship is successful, it reinforces patriarchy in public and private arenas of social life.

The gender and family systems in Arab societies, like all aspects of social life, are continually shifting in response to dynamic transformations in culture and society, locally and globally. The diverse family patterns in the Arab world are shaped by class, ethnic, racial, religious, national, and linguistic dynamics. Yet certain patterns tend to be reproduced. Key to these patterns is the centrality of family, in its multiple forms, to one’s notion of self, social position, economic security, and political possibilities. Family relationships tend to be supported in most arenas of social life in the Arab world, including religious institutions.

Given the centrality of family, its patriarchal structure is crucial in understanding gender relationships in the Arab world. Family both supports and suppresses women. This paradox of support and suppression, love and power, generosity and competition compels both attachment to and struggle within families. Many features of these gender and family systems are found in many non-Arab cultures as well. Yet the combination expresses dynamics that are culturally and historically part and parcel of Arab societies.