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Research article

# Policies affecting Arab family formation

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## ABSTRACT

Marriage is in decline in many Arab countries, and this is particularly evident in the 35–39 year age group of women. This study used qualitative interviews with diplomats to the United Nations from Arab countries to help understand the decline, or delay, in family formation, and the resulting increase of single women in the 35–39 year age group. Quantitative research was also used to provide background on the twenty-two countries in the League of Arab States, and give perspective to societal conditions that could be contributing to the declining percentage of marriages among both men and women. Several factors which seemed significant in reducing or delaying family formation are: higher rates of tertiary (college) education among women, reduced job availability for men, worry about the potential of divorce and the modernization or globalization of society. Family laws and policies were studied, and compared with information gained through the personal interviews, to determine if some policies could be helpful to slow the decline of marriage in Arab countries.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/difi.2015.8>

Submitted: 11 June 2015  
Accepted: 5 August 2015  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The authors of this study have been actively involved in policy issues related to the family for over thirty years—beginning with the IWY (International Women’s Year) conferences in 1977, the conferences leading up to and including the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and continuing through over forty international conferences in the past thirty-eight years. They have noted, with appreciation, the strong support for pro-family policies from the delegates representing Arab countries. Therefore, it was a surprise, and perhaps even a shock, to note that the marriage rates in some Arab countries are steadily declining, which contributes to an equal reduction in fertility rates. We thought the Arab countries were immune to this devastating trend occurring in Western countries, partly because of their strong religious orientation and the perception of strong support for the family.

In an evaluation of demographic statistics for Arab countries, we noted the high number of single women in the 35-39 years age group in some countries. This study was born in an attempt to understand the social and cultural changes that are occurring in Arab countries that might contribute to this demographic shift in family formation.

Our original hypothesis stated:

*Modernization, women’s rights, family equality, media access, and family pride have contributed to an increasing choice of women for higher education and empowerment, and a decreasing choice for marriage and child-rearing. As the marriage age for women has increased the fertility rate has decreased. New factors influencing marriage decisions include marriage equality and work/family balance. The future stability of Arab families is dependent upon the work of governments, NGOs and civil society to promote family strengthening policies and programs amongst both men and women.*

Nicholas Eberstadt (2012) stated: “There remains a widely perceived notion . . . that ‘Muslim’ societies are especially resistant to embarking upon the path of demographic and familial change that has transformed population profiles in Europe.” However, new demographic data shows a similar trajectory in some Arab countries. This study will attempt to understand how family law and policies either contribute to, or deter, the marriage decline.

A UN delegate from the country of Tunisia said: “It is a tiny, tiny minority of people who would reject marriage. Marriage is a dream. It is very important to people—but that means a successful marriage.” If successful marriage is the dream, what is happening in some Arab countries that would lead women to believe that a marriage might not be successful?

### 1.1. Limitations

1. Some of the data is old. While the interview information is current (conducted in 2014 and 2015), some background data is old. In Figure 1, the lowest percentage of single females is Comoros, but the data is from 1995. Much could have changed since then. However, the data is the latest available through “World Marriage Data 2012” from the World Bank, released in 2013.
2. Data is not consistently available for Somalia and Palestine. Also, we did not include South Sudan.
3. Unrest, turmoil and war have impacted the culture in some of the Arab countries. This makes it difficult to produce comparable results for a study of marriage.

### 1.2. Increases in the percentage of single women

Figure 1 demonstrates that all countries, except Sudan (2008), Mauritania (2000) and Egypt (2008) have had significant increases in the percentage of single women—with the greatest increases in Libya (2006), Kuwait (2005), Lebanon (2007), Morocco (2004), Bahrain (2001), Algeria (2002), Tunisia (2004), and Jordan (2009). The data comes from World Marriage Data 2012 (released in 2013). While much of the data is old, it is the latest compilation of data that could be used for this study.

### 1.3. Percent married for both women and men

In a first review of Figure 1, it might appear as if it is only the women that are remaining single. But Figure 2 shows that the percentage married, of both women and men, is decreasing. However, a higher percentage of men are married in Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, and Palestine. Interestingly, there are more women married than men in Lebanon, Bahrain, Tunisia, Sudan and Comoros. We did not investigate this phenomenon. This would be a good focus for a future study.

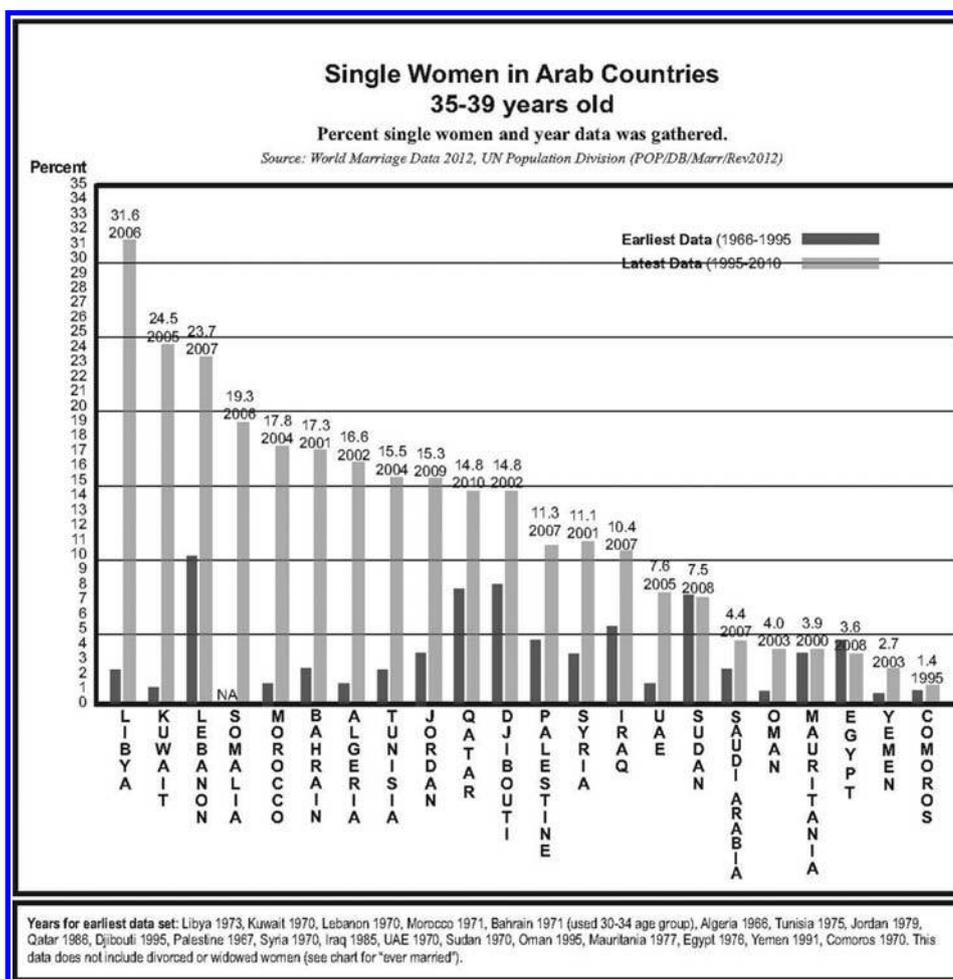


Figure 1. Single women in Arab countries aged 35–39 years old.

#### 1.4. Delayed marriage

Most of the decrease in marriage is delayed marriage, as shown in Figure 3. The lighter grey bars are the percent of women married (as in Figure 2), and the darker bar shows the singulate mean age of marriage (SMAM) of both men and women. While this data is not an exact correlation, it is clear that the higher age of marriage corresponds with the lower percent married in the first six countries (Libya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Djibouti, Algeria and Bahrain). Tunisia is an exception, with a higher age of marriage, but still 85% of women married. All of these countries show the average marriage age of women above 26. A corresponding delayed age of marriage is shown in the men, with the average age of men over 30 in seven of the same countries. However, once again, notice the date of the data—some as early as 2001. With the many changes occurring in Arab countries, since 2011, the average age of marriage could have changed.

In the small box above the SMAM line, we decided to include the date that the data was obtained, as listed in the World Marriage Data 2012, as well as the average age of both women and men, to provide clarity in an effort to understand the similarities and differences.

#### 1.5. Focus on women 35–39 years of age

In the initial review of the marriage data in Arab countries, it seemed curious that there would be such a large percentage of women in the 35–39 year age group that were not married. This is the age when most women are married women and raising children. Figure 4 shows the percentage of women that are divorced and widowed. While the divorce rates are not as high as in most Western countries, this is a concern that was raised in many of our interviews with UN country delegates.

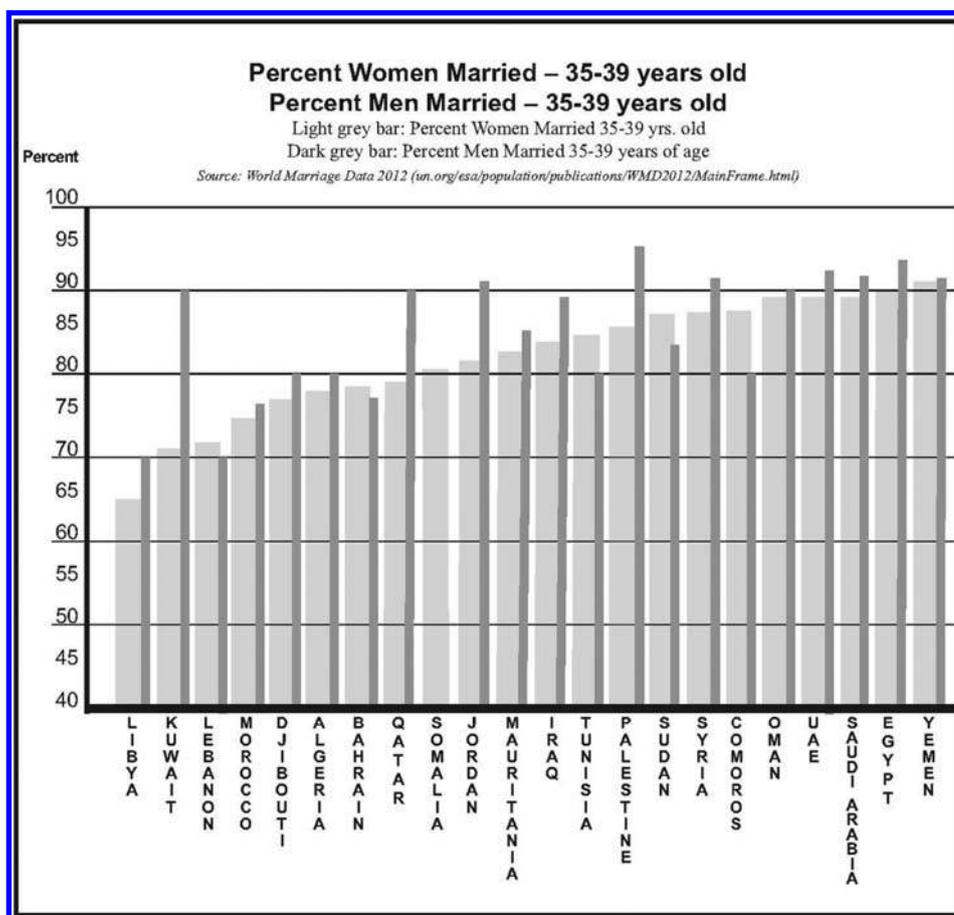


Figure 2. Percent men and women aged 35–39 who are married.

### 1.6. Marriage after the age of 40

We noted that women did continue to get married after the age of 40. In the 8 countries of focus, the percentage of single females at the age of 60 was: Libya – 2.2% (32% widowed, 2.6% divorced), Kuwait 3.4% (35.4% widowed, 3.4% divorced), Lebanon 7.8% (27.3% widowed, 1.6% divorced), Algeria 0.6% (30% widowed, 3.1% divorced), Tunisia 1.2% – (only gives ever married 98.9%), Jordan (no data – 8.5% at age of 50), Qatar 2.0% at 66 yrs. (widowed 53% and divorced 4.1%), and Djibouti 1.6% (widowed 52.8% and divorced 2.1%). The biggest effect to society, with marriage after the age of 40, is the decreased fertility rates (Figure 5).

### 1.7. The knowledge gap—in light of existing literature

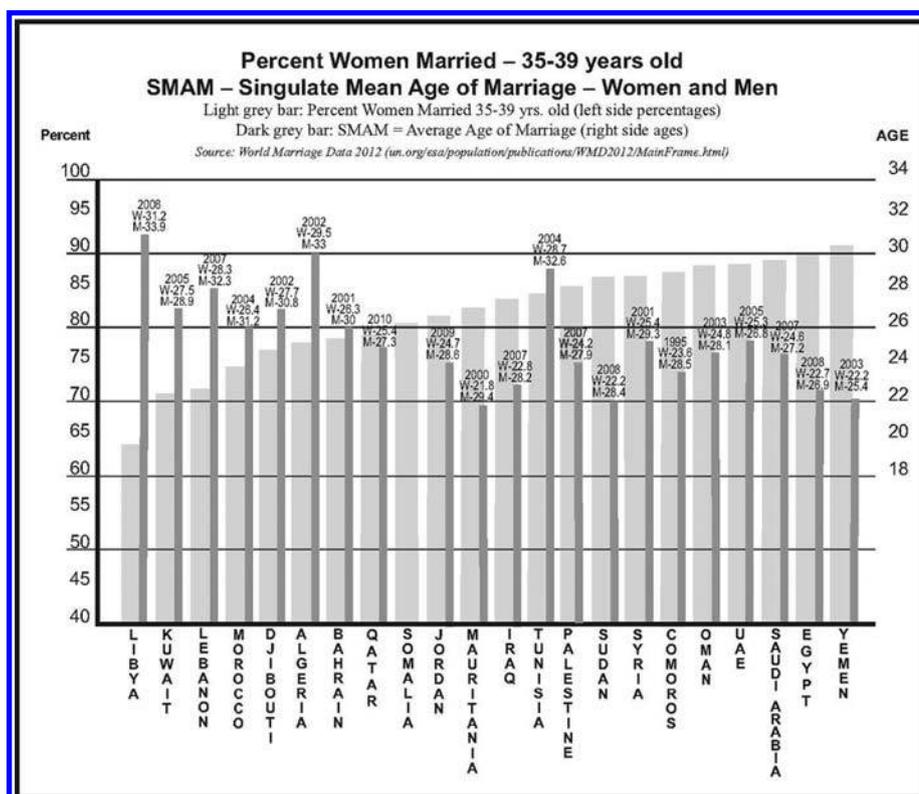
Several previous studies theorized as to the reason marriage is declining in Arab countries. These include: increased urbanization, advancement of women's education, rising aspiration for women who seek employment, media access, changing family ideals, and the introduction of effective contraception (Basten, et al. 2013).

Dr. Paul Pushmann (2012), stated that:

*Qualitative research about the postponement of marriage in the Arab world is needed to reveal the individual reasons for postponing marriage. Since cultural elements are hard to quantify, interviews can lead to a deeper understanding of some of the cultural backgrounds of marriage regimes.*

## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This was a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with experienced family-policy delegates to the United Nations from Arab countries—both in Geneva and New York City.



**Figure 3.** Singulate mean age of marriage for women and men plotted against percent of women 35–39 who are married.

The sources of comparative data, for background purposes, are (1) World Marriage Data 2012, compiled by the Population Division of the United Nations, (2) the World Development Indicators of the World Bank, and (3) census information from the individual countries.

### 2.1. Countries included

Data was gathered for all twenty-two countries included in the League of Arab States. We prepared country reports for each country, and compiled graphs with data available through the World Marriage Data 2012 report from the World Bank. Initially, interviews were requested with delegates from all countries to the United Nations in Geneva and New York for each of the twenty-two Arab countries. We interviewed delegates from Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen. For the countries of Lebanon and United Arab Emirates, we interviewed other people who were familiar with public policy related to family issues. We were unable to interview anyone from Bahrain, Morocco, Palestine and Somalia, although we did prepare country reports for each country.

After compiling the information from the interviews, we realized that we didn't need to report the findings from countries with high marriage rates, as our purpose was to understand why the marriage rates were low in some of the countries. Therefore, we chose to only report comments from eight countries—all with 15% or more single women in the 35–39 year old age group. We also included Qatar and Djibouti, as the percentage of single women was 14.8% in each country. Thus, excluding Somalia, Morocco and Bahrain, the comments from eight countries are included in this report (in order of highest percentage of single women): Libya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan, Qatar and Djibouti.

### 2.2. Policies considered

After studying many compilations of family laws and policies, we chose to focus on ten areas: (1) education (particularly higher or tertiary education), (2) the role and responsibility of men in providing for the family, (3) marriage policies and laws, (4) women's equality, (5) taxes, (6) children – as related to work/family balance and childcare, (7) divorce, (8) elder family-care, (9) media and globalization, and (10) migration.

### 2.3. Interview methods

We chose to interview United Nations delegates that were particularly involved in negotiations in the Third Committee – the U.N. Committee that deals with family issues. We attempted to interview delegates from all twenty-two Arab countries, but some countries were unwilling to give us an interview (as explained earlier). A list of thirty-four questions was prepared, and sent to country delegates at the United Nations in Geneva and New York. We soon discovered that the list was too comprehensive, and it actually deterred delegates from accepting our request for interviews. In our trip to the United Nations in Geneva, we were only successful in getting two interviews: Algeria and Qatar. The Mission of Qatar forwarded the questions to their Capitol, and we received official answers from the government. Later, other delegates said they would provide information from their Capitol, but this is the only official response received. All other comments are gleaned from personal interviews with delegates. The interviews usually lasted about an hour. Some were held at the Mission offices, others in the lounge at the United Nations. The following are excerpts from the interviews. We do not include the country name associated with the interview, to preserve the privacy of the person interviewed.

### 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS—RESPONSES TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following response seems to sum up the reasons why some women are delaying marriage:

*I don't think there is only one reason—it is more complex than that: (1) The fact that society is more modern and the sense that more and more women are working—independent from parents or other relatives. Through the years, women have acquired autonomy. Not just money or decisions. They do not wait for a parent to do this or that. (2) We have a high rate of divorce. I feel it is high. In that sense many women, or even men, will say "why should I say I will marry in summer and be back in court by winter." (3) Many more women are embracing the modern way of life. "I didn't find my second half; so I will be satisfied living in my own apartment—my own comfort inside."*

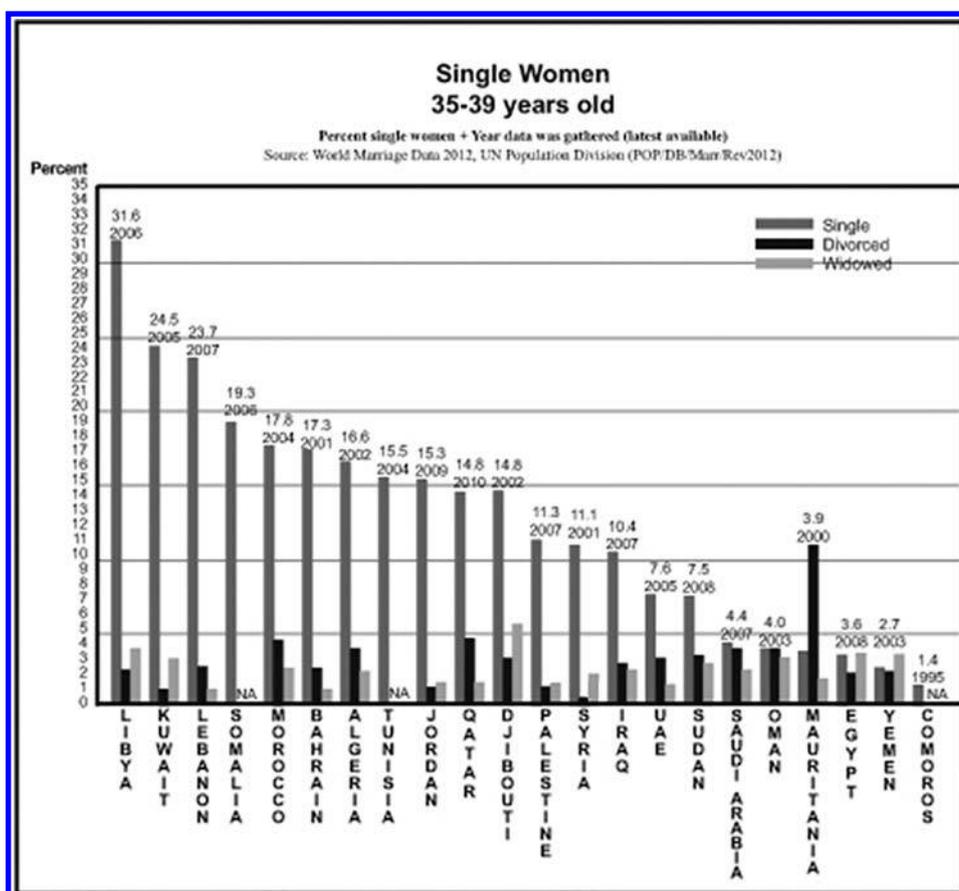


Figure 4. Single women aged 35–39 years.

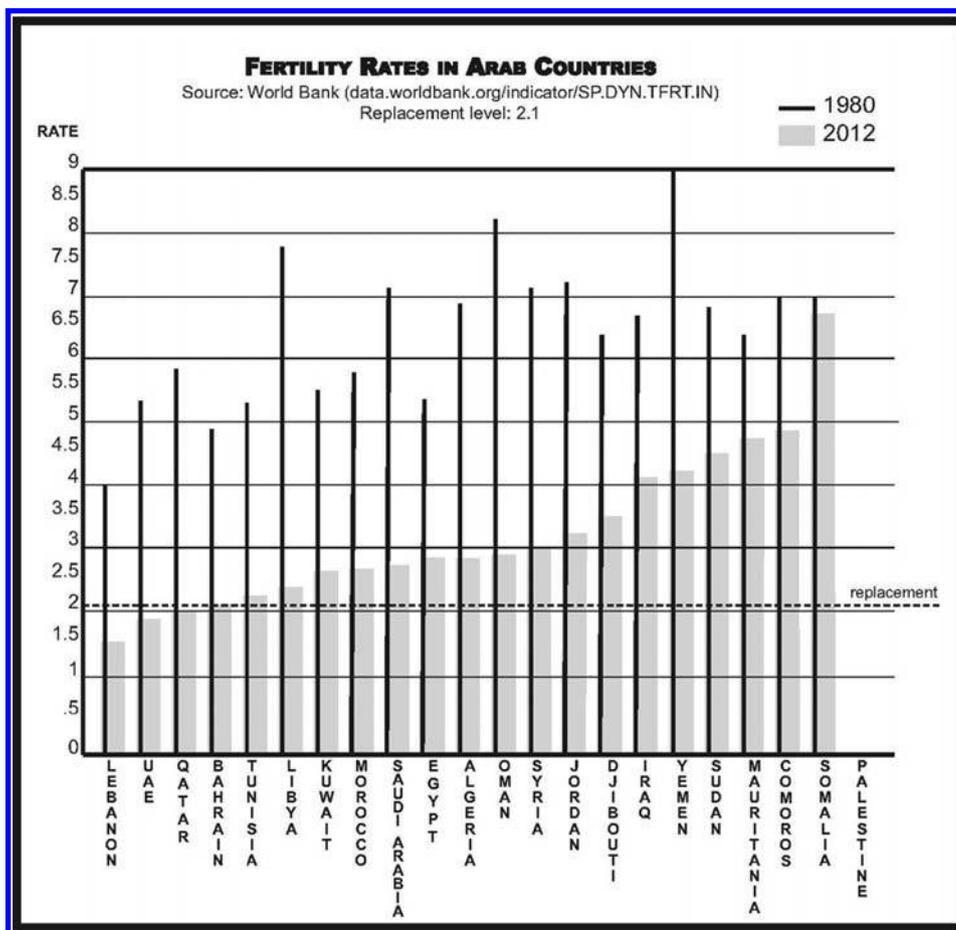


Figure 5. Fertility rates in Arab countries: 1980 vs. 2012.

### 3.1. Education

*Does the level of education of women impact their decision to marry? (Interview responses follow)*

- Women are going to school, making their own choices, working so they have the money. No dependency anymore. They have a sense of self.
- The education of women impacts the decision to marry. The more the woman is educated the less she will be tempted to get married.
- Families are proud to have their daughters graduate from college, especially with a Masters degree or a PhD. It is the “honor of the family” that pushes the girl to achieve the degree.
- The age of marriage is raising more in the urban areas, compared to the rural areas. Education is a big part. It gives women access to employment. They can take care of themselves.
- Education is not the only reason for not finding an educated partner. It is freedom and mistrust – at the same time. Women are fearful of entering into a commitment that will end in divorce.
- Some couples move in with their parents, but more now refuse to do that. It is financial/economic reasons. Women are more educated and more career-oriented. They don’t mind, they’re fine with getting married later.

*Is the education of men an influence in the decision to marry (good job)?*

- When a woman is more educated in developing countries, she will be more selective and picky and narrow her choices. That’s why marriage age rises among women in some developing countries. For men, there is an unemployment crisis—that is why the marriage age rises—because they don’t have the money yet. They can’t afford a family. Some men will reach age 40 and still cannot afford to marry.

- Education contributes to delayed age of marriage and celibacy. A woman with a University degree might not want to marry a man who is not as educated.
- More women are graduating from college. Women are more empowered. Women are choosing different careers (woman's choice). Many men need to work. Many men choose to work in the military sector, instead of going to college. Educated women want more in a husband.

### **3.2. Men and the family**

#### ***What percentage of men is able to find employment sufficient to support a family?***

- The education of men influences the decision to marry—to find employment sufficient to support a family. This is one of the problems contributing to delayed marriage. It is becoming more necessary for both the woman and the man to work.
- Competition drives the desire to get the education and get a career to survive. They don't have a choice. They have to live and eat. They might have to leave the country. It is not that they don't want to get married, but they are in a situation where they say: "why should I jump in to it now. I cannot support myself right now." Even if men took the path not to get education, still they face being able to afford a wife/honeymoon/house/family.
- The man in Libya is obliged to provide a dowry for the bride, an amount of money to be agreed upon between the groom's family and the family of the bride. The groom should also take care of providing the entire matrimonial home, taking into account the physical conditions of the home. Amid the rise of the life requirements, the two parties share the cost of living together.
- If the man has a good job, it helps and encourages him to be engaged much more than if he is in a difficult financial situation. Nowadays, it is necessary for both the woman and the man to work to provide necessities . . . about half of women go to work. There are many women who just like to work.
- Many men choose to work in the military sector, instead of going to college. Educated women want more in a husband. The man is responsible for the care of the family. That is his main role.

### **3.3. Marriage policies and laws**

#### ***What percentage of marriages are religious ceremonies?***

- We are a Muslim country and there are religious and cultural traditions. All marriages are religious.
- In some Arab countries there are three types of marriages: 1) Two citizens are married, legal paper (person accredited by the government—most probably a religious person) prepares papers and is legal. The religious ceremony is separate. 2) A foreigner will marry a local, they will not go through a government office/person (an office); it would be legal. 3) Legal, but not preferable. A couple, with two witnesses, writes their own marriage contract. The couple holds the papers, each has a copy. All three cases have to have a witness.
- In the past, marriage was traditionally organized between the families of the bride and the groom. Nowadays, the consent and agreement of both parties involved (a man and a woman) is the basis for any marriage, taking into account the opinion and consent of the parents, especially (the bride's) to approve the groom. The bridal father, in this stage, has the final say after all.
- Arranged marriage used to be the main way of getting married. Changing this custom has had quite a dramatic impact on whether or not people marry at all—let alone the age of marriage. Early marriage is somehow contained—not allowed—it is because we don't have arranged marriage. It is correct to say that the change in arranged marriage has driven up the age of marriage and even how many women (and men) even marry at all.

#### ***Are all marriages recorded as legal marriages?***

- Marriage is ratified by a religious man. He will come to the house and approve the marriage. The marriage is legally registered with a man that is chosen by the Ministry of Justice. All marriages are recorded as legal marriages.

- In some countries, a lower percentage of the marriages are religious ceremonies. The family wants the legal protection of a civil marriage.
- If they want a civil marriage they will go abroad and get a civil marriage. If they want to divorce, no one can ask them to remain together.

***Is there a cost associated with marriage? To the man? To the woman?***

- The cost is not for a marriage license—but the cost of the family party and the dowry. From the religious perspective, it is called “mahr.” It is something that the husband is supposed to give to the wife. It can be a big amount when they are married, but it can be kept and even given to the wife in case of divorce.
- The man is obliged to provide a dowry for the bride, an amount of money to be agreed upon between the groom’s family and the family of the bride. The groom should also take care of providing the entire matrimonial home, taking into account the physical conditions of the home. Amid the rise of the life requirements, the two parties share the cost of living together.

**3.4. Women’s equality**

***Do women have equality within the family?***

- Do women have equality within the family? “Yes. See the 2005 Family Law.”
- Our society is a patriarchal society. That’s what it is supposed to be. But the reality now is different, depending on the situation with the wife. If she works, it is handled differently. If she is from a wealthy family, she has more power—especially if she is working. However, even if she is working and earning, the husband is responsible. We have a Muslim society. Men have to provide—it is an obligation for them to provide for the family.
- In the past, marriage was being traditionally organized between the families of the bride and the groom. Nowadays, the consent and agreement of both parties involved (a man and a woman) is the basis for any marriage, taking into account the opinion and consent of the parents, especially (the bride’s) to approve the groom. The bridal father, in this stage, has the final say after all.
- A few years back we decided to have women specialize in religious issues, and become women judges—so women would know their rights. There was resistance from men, but women are holding to what Islam says about their rights. In the custody of children in case of divorce, there is a feeling that the women judges are addressing the cases more fairly.

***Do many mothers with children work outside the home?***

- Education is the crucial point of difference. They want to take care of the kids as much as they can, but they want to work – they don’t have to. They were working when single and kept going.
- Many girls in rich family get education, just as a safety for her life. They don’t necessarily work. But most women are working because they need money.

**3.5. Taxes**

Policy questions related to taxes were mostly directed toward tax advantages or disadvantages for marriage. Since most of the countries with lower marriage rates do not have an income tax, the responses to the questions about taxes are not particularly useful for this study.

**3.6. Children**

***Are there any government child-care policies for mothers who work?***

- Do mothers with children work outside home? “Yes. They will leave them with grandmother or family members or with a domestic nanny/maid who lives with them. There are daycare centers.”

- Mothers who work – who takes care of children? “That is the big headache in Tunisia. Women are extremely tired. They are steadfast, but tired. They finish work at 6 pm—start between 8:30-9am. They are helped by their husbands. The children . . . she has to manage with her husband. The headache is caused by the couple having to stop and go get the children and then return back to work. Over 90 percent of mothers work outside the home.”

#### ***Is the best interest of the child considered in custody after divorce?***

- What happens to children in divorce? Who gets them? “It seems that whoever can afford them. Very few mothers raise their children – they have maids, or tutors, to care for them. The mothers work.”

### **3.7. Divorce**

#### ***What are the acceptable grounds for divorce?***

- What are the acceptable grounds for divorce? “It is very different between religions. A Muslim can easily get divorce when the Christian has to file a case in the religious courts . . . marriage counseling varies as well—between religions.”
- Generally, the man can divorce his wife without going to the court. The woman, however, will need to go to the court if she wants to initiate her divorce on a number of acceptable grounds listed in the family law. Normally, the family courts require that the couple get family counseling but this applies only to divorce through the courts. Men who unilaterally divorce their wives are not required to get family counseling.

#### ***Does your country require marriage counseling before a divorce?***

- Our religious leader would encourage us to not divorce. We would meet with him and he would tell us to work on things for three months and then come back. He would do that several times. If the marriage isn't to be saved, our parents and the witnesses would come before the religious person and we would then be divorced. Divorce is legally allowed, but our religious leader would encourage us to solve the problems.
- We do have divorce, but not that high. The family is involved. They would go to the husband and say what's wrong. The family is in to solve the problem so there is no divorce that will happen.

### **3.8. Elder family-care**

#### ***Do family policies consider the need to care for the elderly, or extended family members living with the family?***

- The elderly are cared for by their families. The government does have an infrastructure for them, but it is not a very big issue because most of the older parents are taken care of by their children.
- Most churches have a place for the elderly. They do it full time; this is where the elderly live. There is nothing in the government in our country. The homes for the elderly are run by churches and NGOs.
- What characterizes the family of Libya is probably the respect towards the rights of the elderly, the attention paid and the care provided to them by the family members. In case an elderly has no one to provide him with care, the community will sponsor them. The State provides the elderly with all necessities of living. Laws and national legislation guarantee shelters, feeding and clothing for the elderly in Libya, as well as health care and social services, in addition to disbursing monthly salaries to the needy to help facilitate their well-being.

**3.9. Media and globalization**

***Does the media (TV, internet) or globalization affect the decision to marry?***

- We are talking about why some women are not getting married. Globalization is a huge factor. Westernism has affected the Arab world. We see there is another option; another path – not just getting married early, staying home and raising kids. Some women see being a mother as part of oppression. They think that if they get rid of it they get rid of oppression.
- People say, “I want to live in comfort – like westerners. I want a proper house, well furnished, a car in front of the house and the kids in good schools.”

**3.10. Migration**

***Does migration from rural to urban affect family structure?***

- When you get far from relatives and families your ability to get married is harder. When people move to the city they lose connection with family in the countryside. If they don’t have sufficient amount of money it will be harder for them to get married. Sometimes it is related to the religious backgrounds – a mixture of religions and sects within Islam. Majority of people prefer to stay in their same sect – won’t marry outside their sect. When you go from countryside to city it is harder to find someone from your sect. It is harder for women; the family decides things for them.
- It is a strategy to place children with family members who live in urban areas – so they can get education and have an urban life. There are climate changes that drive them into the cities too. Slums around the big cities, though.

**3.11. Countries with high marriage rates**

The following responses (Figure 6) are from a group of ten women in Yemen—where they have a high marriage rate. Notice that (1) nine of the women felt that the education of women affected the delay of marriage, (2) all ten women felt that the employment of men affected marriage rates, and (3) all ten women felt that urban migration was having an effect on the family structure.

Other comments from countries with higher marriage rates:

	Age	Marriage Status	Working?	Children?	Education of Women Affects	Men Employment (good job)	Working Mothers	Women Equality in Family	Domestic Violence	Urban Migration Affects Family	Custody of Children At Divorce	Counseling Before Divorce?
1.	34	M at 17	working	Children	yes	yes 40%	yes	no	yes	yes	father	sometimes
2.	33	unmarried	working	no	if she is educated	yes (most unemployed)	more now	sometimes	sometimes	yes	father	yes
3.	33	married	not working	1 child	yes	yes	a lot	never	yes	yes	father	don't know
4.	37	M at 24	working	children	yes	yes (60%)	a little	yes	yes	yes	father	yes
5.	37	M at 19	working	children	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	father	yes
6.	34	M at 18	working	children	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	father's mother either	no
7.	35	M at 18	working	children	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	father	yes
8.	35	M at 20	working	children	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	father	yes
9.	35	unmarried	working	no	no	yes	yes	yes	maybe	yes	father	no
10.	42	married	not working	6 children	yes	yes (50%)	yes	yes	women	yes	father	yes

**Figure 6. Overview of responses from ten Yemeni women.**

- Different traditions, many in our region, but they all end up at the same point. It is necessary to marry. The family/father is involved to make sure the girl is safe. The family looks into the boy and his family – we know him! The girl is more safe. That is why our marriage lasts because there is so much care given to who the boy and his family is. Is the family OK, inquire of his history, is he a serious person that will care for his wife to be. It is safe – some traditions make it safe.

- The men go to the woman's house in our culture. That's why every father has to build a house for his daughter. The man can never kick the woman out of the house – she has the power. The men work to bring money to the house. But the woman is the one with the money – she manages the money. All the money is earned for the wife. All the capital stays with her.
- Because of poverty we have more children. We want a new generation.
- Most of the marriages are agreements between two families. You marry the family. So the family makes the effort to keep the couple together.
- We increased the number of training centers where people could be certified for technical jobs. ("If you join one of these training programs – if you can't perform well in the university – if you join one of these vocational programs, we will assure you get a job.") This has helped with marriage because it takes less time to be out and working at a good job. You then have a stable income by the age of 21 or 22, which would increase the marriage rate. This policy is working. It's not perfect. We aren't saying the government prefers vocational, but we want everyone to have an opportunity.

#### 4. SUMMARY STATEMENTS AND POLICIES TO CONSIDER

We began this study with a completely open mind, and very little understanding of the official constitutions or marriage laws of the various Arab countries. In retrospect, we see that tertiary education, women's equality and modernization (including globalization and Western influence) are the dominant factors impacting the delay of marriage. In light of the comments received, we offer the following summary statements and policy suggestions in the ten areas of inquiry. Bullet points with policy suggestions follow the discussion paragraphs.

**Education:** Women attend college (or universities) for various reasons: (1) freedom to pursue personal goals, (2) to obtain a good job, (3) desire for a higher standard of living, and (4) to honor their family. After graduation, it seems more difficult to find a man that is equally educated and able to provide the desired living arrangements for a family.

- Provide more opportunities for men to attend higher education, or obtain technical training to help the man obtain a job to provide sufficiently for his family.

**Men and the family:** The high cost of marriage for the man (dowry, home, honeymoon, etc.) makes it difficult to earn enough money to marry at an earlier age.

- Develop training programs to help men get higher paying jobs at an earlier age (youth training programs).
- See Qatari program of pre-marital counseling and financial assistance to Qatari couples – to encourage marriage (Fenton, 2013). See also [UAE Marriage Fund \(online\)](#).

**Marriage policies and laws:** The high percentage of marriages ending in divorce seems to be discouraging both women and men from marriage. Policies or programs to encourage the following might be helpful:

- Counseling before marriage, to help the couple prepare for marriage.
- Instruction in preparing the marriage contracts—to give a feeling of security for the future.
- Consider the impact polygamy is having on the duration of marriage, as women might choose a divorce rather than consent to her husband marrying a second wife. (In some countries polygamy has been discontinued).

**Women's equality:** Concerns were expressed about the lack of equality for women, if the marriage fails, and who will care for the children in case of a divorce. While we are not recommending no-fault divorce, which led to a rapid increase in divorce rates in Western countries, we do recommend equal protection of women, and their right to a fair hearing in a court of law.

- Adjust divorce laws to give women greater equality before a judge in cases of abuse, or marital infidelity on the part of the husband, and allow her to retain the care of minor children (if she chooses).
- Provide religious training for women to better understand their rights within Sharia law, and encourage women to become judges.

**Taxes:** Few Arab countries have tax laws that encourage marriage. Income tax laws are sometimes used to provide deductions or incentives for marriage, but most Arab countries do not have an income tax. Some Arab countries are providing cash transfers for families for education and healthcare.

- Provide financial incentives for marriage – either through income tax deductions or cash transfers.

**Children:** Some women must also work to provide the basic necessities for the family. Caring for the children is a big concern.

- Provide cash transfers to families below a certain income level to help with childcare. This money could be used for family care (preferably), a nanny in the home, a child-care center, or for a mother who chooses to stay home with her child(ren).
- Encourage work/family balance—to allow for nursing mothers, caring for ill children, etc.

**Divorce:** See suggestions above with “Marriage Policies and Laws” and “Women’s Equality.”

**Elder family care:** Most families care for the elderly within their homes. The problems occur when both the husband and wife are working, and there isn’t another family member to care for their elderly parents. Migration to urban areas contributes to the lack of family members available for elder care.

- Encourage savings plans to prepare for elder care—both for the individual and for the parents.

**Media and globalization:** We received many comments regarding the impact of globalization and the impact of the western media toward delayed marriage—desire for more comforts of life (as seen on TV), or a desire for a modern career. The global feminist movement has discouraged the positive presentation of woman as wives and mothers, and many women are searching for a different path in life.

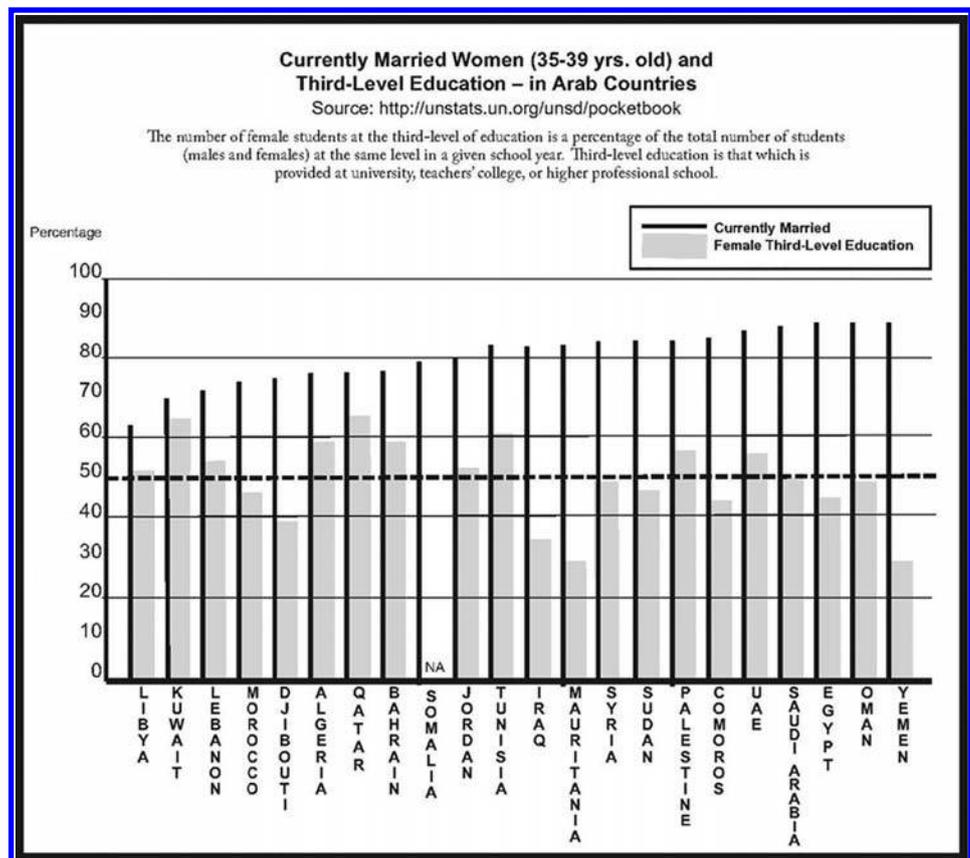


Figure 7. Relationship between tertiary education and marriage for 35–39 year old women.

- Encourage churches, communities and NGOs to promote an awareness-raising campaign on the benefits and joys of marriage and family. Present motherhood as a great service to the future of the country, and all of mankind. The future of the Arab world is in the hands of the mothers.
- See “Marriage Comes First” campaign in Kuwait (Westall, 2012).

**Migration:** Women who migrate into the cities to live have a harder time getting married – different social groups, religious sects, and less support of parents.

- Encourage financial development in the rural areas, to provide more jobs for people near their rural homes. And, increase educational opportunities in rural areas.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

A predominant reason given for the delay in marriage is the increased education of women, particularly tertiary, or third-level, education. However, Figure 7 shows little correlation between the percent of currently married 35–39 year old women and the third-level education of women.

In the Western world, there has been a continuous onslaught, over the last fifty years, against the role of a woman as a wife and mother. The United Nations treaty on women, the Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1980), has been used to oppose the “negative stereotypes” of women – portraying women as wives and mothers, instead of successful career women. The world, including Arab countries, needs leaders who promote the value of strong families and good mothers, while also recognizing the value of women in economic and political endeavors.

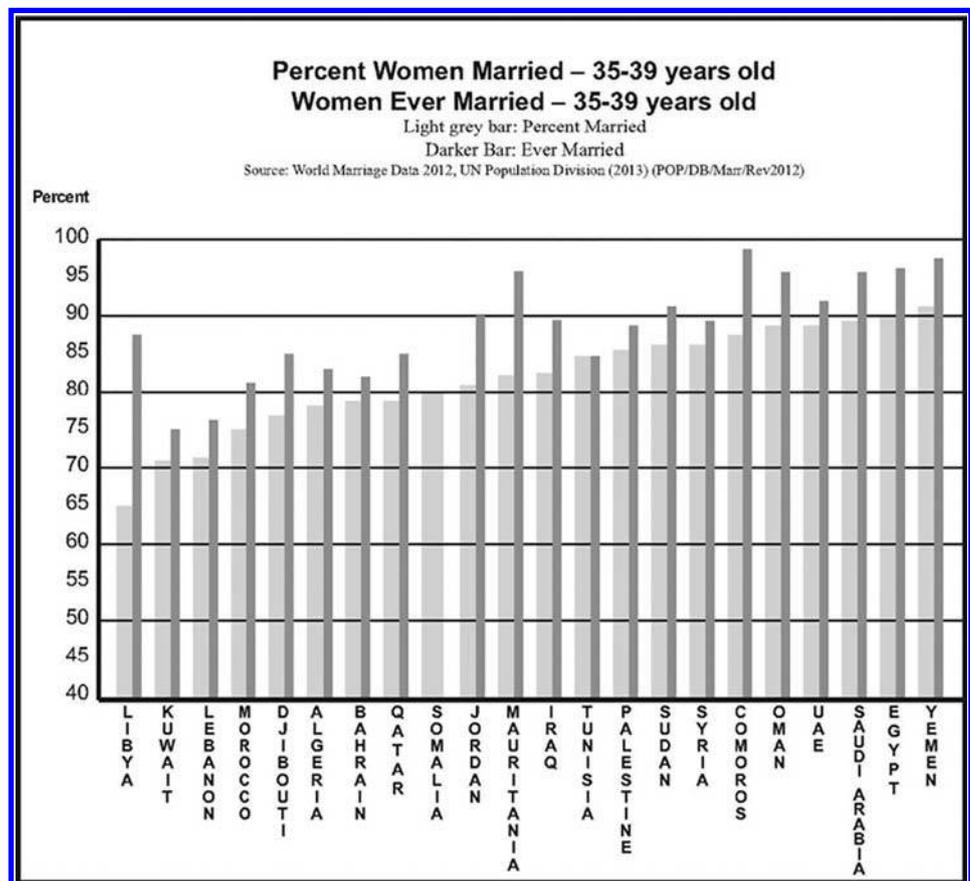


Figure 8. Percent women married and percent women ever married (35–39 years old).

The Family Research Council (2003) stated that government can legitimately privilege marriage and seek to strengthen it through public policy, because marriage serves public purposes: namely, procreation and the benefit of children and society.

*Family policy is seen as a domain, covering four core family functions: (a) family creation policy aimed toward marriage, divorce, adoption and foster care are important in facilitating development of human capital and not necessarily consumption; (b) the provision of basic economic support and infrastructure enabling families to take care of their members; (c) supporting families to secure attachment relationships, supports that are crucial in raising caring and committed citizens; (d) means of promoting positive child and youth development.*

### 5.1. Suggestions for future research

Three areas need further evaluation:

1. What happens with marriage for women between the ages of forty and sixty, that so many women are no longer single? And, why such a high rate of widows? (War?)
2. Why are there more women married than men in Lebanon, Bahrain, Tunisia, Sudan and Comoros (see Figure 2). We did not investigate this phenomenon.
3. In some countries there is a significant difference between the “currently married” and the “ever married” – see Figure 8. What is happening to the previously married women in the 35-39 year old age group? Are they divorced or widowed? Are they raising children?

## 6. CONCLUSION

After evaluating the responses by individuals from various Arab countries, the authors have concluded that the biggest contributor to a decline, or delay, in marriage is a change of attitude about the importance of the family, and the value of a woman as a mother in society—created through modernization or globalization. The global focus on women’s rights has tarnished the image of women as wives and mothers, and created a desire for an occupation and to escape from the considered “oppression” of the past generations. Other significant contributors to delayed marriage are the improved education of women, and depressed economies causing the lack of good employment for men. An educated Arab woman is now more interested in marrying a man who is better educated and can provide well for a family. The authors laud the improvement of education for women in Arab countries, and believe that better educated men and women are key to the wellbeing of Arab societies. However, an educated mother is a special contributor toward raising children better equipped for the future. We conclude this study with a challenge to the leaders of Arab countries to re-awaken a focus on the importance of women as mothers, and show greater appreciation for the vital role they play in the society – vital to the future of individual families and the country as a whole.

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