

The Inevitability of Changing Gender Roles in the Arab Family!

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The Arab family is changing and so are the women and men who constitute it. The demographic changes in all Arab populations have had significant impacts on family formation and dynamics. Changes in labor markets, educational attainments, mobility and technologies will without doubt have an impact on gender roles within the family. Observers have already noted the changing situation and status of women especially in countries that have seen significant delays in age of marriage for both men and women (nuptiality transition). The timing of marriage, the increased rates of female education and the higher rates of female participation in the labor force must surely have implications of the nature of the marriage contract or the so called patriarchal bargain itself. This 'bargain' that is the reference for enacted gender roles reflects values and norms rooted in tradition, religious interpretations and in social practices.

This paper will place the idea of Qiwanah or male provision in the context of changing demographic, economic and social changes. The paper will reference the work of Musawah, the group of Muslim Feminist scholars who are advocates of latter day interpretations of Muslim Fiqh that reveal the rights based approach of religious instructions. The paper will look at trends of female employment, education, fertility and marriage practices with a focus on Egypt so as to comment on the reality of family inscribed gender roles and their idealized norms.

The paper examines the implications of these changing roles by also looking at youth and children within the family and uses this theoretically informed empirical approach to question the existing policies and programs that are both stifling inevitable change but also forgoing the potentials and opportunities of such changes. Families are ideological inventions and social necessities without which human society would be difficult to organize. It is therefore important to revisit the taken for granted ideological and moral foundations of the Arab family and place families in their behavioral and social contexts