

DIFI First Annual Conference on Family Research and Policy

Opening Remarks

Ms. Noor Al-Malki Al-Jehani

Executive Director, DIFI

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to welcome you to the Doha International Family Institute's first annual conference on Family Research and Policy.

Her Highness Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser, Chairperson of Qatar Foundation, established DIFI in 2006 to "encourage collaborative efforts to research, coordinate and implement effective family policies at the national, regional and international levels".

As a member of Qatar Foundation, which aims to unlock human potential and promote the creation of a cohesive and progressive society, DIFI focuses on society's fundamental and basic unit and the agent for social and cultural development – the family.

The annual conference will focus solely on family research and policy and we hope that it will help in stimulating more research on the Arab family in the coming years, in particular research that can generate evidence to inform new and more effective family policies, evaluate the current policies or assess the impact of all other policies which affect the family as a unit in this region.

This year's conference is focused on the theme of (the Arab family in an age of transition: challenges and resilience) and we are pleased to organize it with the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute in Qatar University. The choice of this theme as a starting point for this series of conferences is logical given the stage of multifaceted transition through which Arab societies are passing and their impacts and the challenges they pose to the processes of family formation and dissolution as well as the responses, or lack thereof, of states to these changing environments and the various ways in which they affect different family structures..

We are aware that most research on the Arab family, including research that will be presented in this conference, focuses on individual family members, not on the family unit or those individuals in the context of the family. But, this can change when more research organizations, research groups and individual researchers start to pay more attention to the importance and need for more research on the family unit. It has happened in other regions and it can happen in this part of the world.

The call for papers for this conference resulted in a remarkable response, yielding more than 400 abstract submissions from all around the world. The papers that will be presented today and tomorrow have undergone a very rigorous screening and peer reviewing process. Out of these, 8 papers have been selected for a second round of reviewing by independent peer reviewers of which three were selected to receive the best paper award under each of the conference themes, namely;

- The political, economic, and cultural challenges facing the Arab family in the different countries and regions of the Arab world,
- Marriage and divorce in the Arab world; and
- The role of state policies in family formation and stability.

The Best paper awards will be announced tomorrow in the Conference closing session.

In addition to the Conference, DIFI recently launched the OSRA Research Grant, a joint research funding initiative with Qatar National Research Fund. OSRA is intended to support innovative and high quality research on the Arab family and to provide policy-makers in the region with evidence-based research and analysis that supports the design and implementation of new or more effective family-related policies and programs. OSRA is focused on four topics: Marriage, parenting, family work balance and family law and practice in the Arab world and the research can be conducted in any of the 22 Arab countries. We look forward to showcasing the research that will be funded by OSRA in the next conferences.

Besides promoting and supporting research, the Doha Institute is in the process of establishing its in-house research program and three members of our team will be presenting their papers in this Conference. To ensure full objectivity, these papers were excluded from the Best Paper Awards.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Despite the central character of the family in Arab societies, research on the family is underdeveloped in this region and most of the literature on families is found in the pieces of research on other issues, such as gender, labor and migration. For this reason, DIFI reached out to Dr. Saud Joseph, a distinguished Research Professor of Anthropology, Women and Gender Study at the University of California, Davis and the founder of the Arab Families Working Group to carry out a systematic review of the literature on the Arab family and produce an edited book on the subject. 26 scholars are cooperating on this three-year project, which includes thematic reviews as well as country-by-country review.

Significant research has been developed around the world in the past few decades to prove the importance of the role of family in individual, social and cultural development, along with research that exposes the importance of stable and well-functioning families for the wellbeing of children and adults. Similar research is needed in the Arab region, especially research on the strengths of Arab families.

In addition, public discourse and literature on the family in this region are focused on an “ideal and homogenous Arab family” discounting the diversity of existing family structures that call for the attention of policy makers such as female-headed families, reconstituted families and families living apart because of migration and other factors. To improve family wellbeing in our region, we need research that reveals the lived realities of families and talks about “what families are actually doing” not only “what families should be doing.”

Moreover, policy makers and implementers in Arab states should be encouraged to take the evidence that research provides into consideration in the process of policy making. Without this approach, we have seen policies that affect families in our region being made, changed or completely altered without knowing how they affected families. This calls for a focus on policy impact assessment and evaluation studies. Such research should help Arab states to devise policies that work and contribute to strengthening the Arab family. We hope that DIFI will play a key role in conducting and promoting this kind of research in the Arab region.

Finally, I would like reiterate our commitment to making this Conference the platform of choice for all professionals in social and human sciences, policy analysts and practitioners who are interested in understanding and promoting the wellbeing of Arab families everywhere.

Thank you.