Agendas: Research To Policy on Arab Families

An Arab Families Working Group Brief

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Family has been and is central to most popular and scholarly conversations about the Arab world for the past century. Woven into the fabric of almost every aspect of social life, family has been critical to social projects of all sorts – colonialist, anti-colonialist, nationalist, pan-Arabist, socialist, modernist, religious, and feminist. Relationships, ethics, and idioms nested in family discourse have been mobilized to justify and moralize cultural, social, religious, economic, and political processes in all Arab states and across the spectrum of political/religious ideologies. Arab families help shape (and are shaped by) processes related to all aspects of society, including economic development, citizenship, human rights, and the production of local, state, and regional social and political cultures.

The muscular emergence of the concept and concrete realities of family/families in

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the Arab world must be studied in the context of post-colonial turmoil, in the face of domestic and international wars, in the realities produced by forced migration and social upheaval, in the abysmal outcomes of modern statist projects, and in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab revolutions.

Yet, much of the scholarly analysis of the Arab family of the past several decades has been informed by highly problematical assumptions. Many scholars within gender and women's studies have focused on ways in which to "identify" and "empower" the individual gendered subject from a web of complex social and cultural ties and networks, often situated within "the family". Within the context of the study of the non-Euro-American world, the family is furthermore burdened by a colonial geographical imaginary. Women and indigenous family structures not only served as core tropes within colonial discourse, but also became the subject wherein anti-colonial politics embedded its production of cultural authenticity. Navigating the treacherous terrain of the tradition and modernity binary, and the postcolonial indigeneity discourses it authorizes, the study of local family structures in postcolonial gender studies continues to struggle against and with these complex historical inscriptions.

Feminist research in the 1960s and 1970s shifted the terms of conversation to "women" and "gender studies", neglecting the family as a set of relationships, or positioning the family as a frame from which women had to liberate themselves in order to find their agency. Several decades of privileging gender has atomized "the social" into individuals in much of feminist scholarship. It appeared that social structures could only

be viewed from the frame of "the individual", "the subject", and "the subject's subjectivity". Lost often were the nuanced and profound contextualizations of social relations; and lost often was a concerted focus on men and their social relationships with women.

For the past forty years liberal feminist theory has used the cultural construct of the "prison house" of the Arab family as an ahistorical organization of norms and relations through which individuals variously need to be liberated (women and children) or reformed (men). The Arab family is reproduced, in these scholarly, journalistic, public and political sites, as an institution that one has to fight against to gain rights, rather than an institution within which members have rights.

In recent attempts to revisit core colonial tropes such as the harem, Arab feminist scholars and artists critically confront modern liberatory narratives of institutional normalization of the family. As postcolonial gendered texts, these pieces furthermore question the inherent authorial voice of the post-Enlightenment subject, yet the location from which these texts interrogate their various subjects remains that of the forever emancipating individual subject. This is both the strength but also the limitation for studying local familial arrangements from within a "gender studies" perspective.

Family talk, however, saturates the public sphere in the Arab world. The textual outputs of statecraft practices, from constitutions to labor laws, are entangled with family. In the constitutions of most Arab states, the family is identified as the unit of society. In that sense, Arab statist projects constituted family projects as sites for the production of

national desires – dreams, ideals, visions, and wishes of what "the people" and "the nation" could be. Towards that end, statist projects instituted family legislation, labor laws, industrial and agricultural development plans, educational programs and the like. Consequently, in most Arab states, family legislation (marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance) became contested among groups with different political aspirations (e.g. nationalists, Islamists, and feminists).   The volatile tug of war around family law and the continual changes in legislation itself reflects the uncertain stability of statist projects.

Critical to this seeming "returning" to families are the failures of Arab state-building projects and the contradictory deployment of family structures, within these processes, in the crises of modernity. Statist projects, in general, construct family projects designed to confirm and augment the social, economic, and political arrangements envisioned for the state. The failure of many of these state-building projects in the Arab world has intensified the need for families as well as creating further stress and crises as families attempt to adapt their dynamic and structures to pressing realities.

The density of social value packed onto the site of family makes Arab family studies a strategic point of departure for research on social arrangements in Arab societies.   In Palestine, house demolitions, deportations based on family relations, and collective punishment based on family meted by the Israeli state has brought the Palestinian family violently into politics. In Lebanon, as the state fell apart during the Civil War (1975-1990) and remains largely stalemated over two decades later, civilians and activists alike have turned to their families and family networks for basic resources

and security. In Egypt, people repeatedly used the family system to gain security in the face of the neoliberal dislocations instituted by the repressive Mubarak regime and in the face of post-revolution instability. The marketing of specific concepts of family and state created a paradox in Arab culture. The family's purpose and place in Arab culture has been elevated to an almost sacred domain. The family is often a haven from the state (and the market). Yet, so much of what constitutes family is shaped by states.

In contrast to a growing body of recent historical literature, there is very little new critical work on contemporary Arab families that situates families within state-building projects. Despite the centrality of Arab families in political and cultural talk, Arab family studies are among the least theoretically and empirically developed arenas of scholarly investigation of the contemporary Arab world. The neglect of family studies is particularly striking given the centrality of Arab families to Arab societies. Relationships, values and idioms based on family weave together political, economic, social, religious and cultural institutions and processes. Analyses of these (and other) aspects of Arab societies almost always lead back to analyses of family structures and processes. Arab families both produce and are produced by transformations in their societies, and thus critical changes in families both trigger and signal changes in other social arenas.

New research is needed that takes into account the modernity of the family as an institution, discourse and everyday lived reality in its complex contemporary articulations.