



Introduction to the Study of Adolescence in Arab Communities¹

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Our world has reached a critical stage: Children do not listen to their parents. No wonder, the end of the world is imminent.

Egyptian priest – 2000 BC²

...Young men of the Jahiliyya (pre-Islamic era) are like young men everywhere. They are not different from the others, all dolled up, and trying to show off their youth in front of girls. Young men in villages and cities... used to hang out in markets and gathering places... to jest with girls and talk to them, like any young man in this world when it comes to girls.

Jawad Ali – from different traditional sources³

Points in Methodology

Lately, significant attention has been given to adolescence throughout the world. It was as if someone suddenly discovered the existence of these adolescent boys and girls who represent a vital element in our families and communities. Addressing the issue of adolescence has thus become a top priority in world reports.⁴ Luckily, the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) had already begun preparing its second report on the Arab adolescent girl, two years prior to the publication of the UNFPA report. In doing so, CAWTAR managed

to avoid being deemed a copycat of an international trend.

Yet, the issue is not about formalities and timing. Any original work must be unique and must have a distinctive approach that wards it off from falling into the trap of projections, idea duplication and preset analyses. It must shape its own problematique and interact rationally with the original cultural productions in all parts of the world. In our approach to the subject of adolescence in our communities, three methodological issues will be addressed:

Issue one: Adolescence should not be defined as a physiological phase (sexuality). Adolescence is not synonymous with puberty. It is not a phase of sexual transformation for the adolescent girl or boy; it is much more. It is a complete phase and a lived experience. It includes, in addition to the physiological transformation, other transformations that are equally important in mental capabilities and reflection, on the emotional level and in character building; it creates new relationships within an ever-expanding sphere. It is also a phase of absorption of knowledge, skills and behaviors, of building a set of values and ideals and of setting the cornerstones of their future social roles. These can continue unaltered

throughout one's life. In most adolescence-oriented programs, adolescents are looked at from a physiological and reproductive health point of view, while other sides are overlooked.

Issue two: It is necessary to avoid projection from the Eurocentric view of adolescence, for it makes its study heavily chained to specific priorities, problems and methodologies that do not necessarily agree with national needs and with the objective and scientific requirements of knowledge. Needless to say, Eurocentrism is not a geographical concept (especially not within globalization); it rather means projecting the views of northern developed industrial centers in setting the course of research on adolescence, especially on "other" regions of the world, outside these centers.

Issue three: Defining adolescence, pinpointing its problems, studying the subject matter and writing about it, is done by "adults" and not adolescents themselves; they are often no more than 'guinea pigs' in this context. "Adults" here are not only an age group; they represent also a social role and position in the institutions and the relational system prevailing in society. They are more inclined to express the point of view of the institutionalized reality and the static roles of individuals and groups. Adults generally see themselves, in their relationship with the relation system and social roles, as the side that considers its mission is to rehabilitate and train adolescents to get integrated into society (as shaped by adults). Therefore, they basically represent a conservative attitude compared to the general changing trend represented by adolescents.

Obviously, viewing adolescence merely through the eyes of adults, who represent tradition and the social system, or through those of adolescents (or the youth), who represent the trends for change, is rather too simplified and incomplete. Needless to say, first, adults do not represent social demographic categories that are metaphysically independent from society. Considering that "adults" symbolize the values of tradition and conservatism while youth and adolescents stand for values of change and modernization is only true in very narrow scopes. Adults are not alike in attitudes towards values and political, economic and social systems; and neither are adolescents. Attitudes in this regard are not related to age but rather to a complex set of factors (opinions, attitudes, behaviors, political and intellectual choices and pro-change or pro-status quo individual and group practices...). However, in terms of social structures, institutions and their respective roles, and also in terms of the trans-historical characteristics of the relation between generations as individuals and social age groups, we can speak of different positions and divergent roles between

the two generations of adults and adolescents. This holds true at least when it comes to family relationships, to social relations implying social roles and required training to meet their requirements, and to the extent of interaction between idealism and realism, (i.e. adapting to the status quo and giving precedence to practical and utilitarian considerations). The comparison we are making between the two generations, as to the concept of the generation struggle, express factual reality. Nevertheless, they are two relative concepts upon which the above-mentioned reservations apply.

Adolescence: A Functional Definition

Adolescence can be considered as a state born of the relational interaction between the adolescent, his/her physiological, cognitive and psychological transformations spurred by the process of sexual maturity, mental and physical development, on one hand, and, on the other, the social factors with their various institutions spanning from family and school to reach the economy and labor market, as well as the overall social organization, including political and ideological institutions and value systems. Consequently, the characteristics and problems of adolescence are a dynamic state, i.e. any change in one of the active factors of the equation (individuals and society) results in a different description of the problems and characteristics of adolescence in a specific society and historical time.

In that vein, adolescence is a social and relational state understood and shaped from both its sides: the adolescent and the society. It is quite impossible to understand adolescence and its problems as a phenomenon without first understanding society itself and its characteristics and dynamisms. It is society that shapes adolescence and every world shapes its own adolescence. The aspect of crisis that always accompanied the way adolescence is viewed springs from a determined understanding and conception of what future roles should be like for adolescents and social institutions related to their current conditions and future choices. The more conventional and conservative this understanding and conception are, the more prevailing will the value of independence and liberty be among youth (and society), and the more conflictive will the adolescent-society relationship be.

Adolescence: A Result of Modernity

Generally, the problems of adolescence have developed at a turning point during the shift from a traditional to a modern society then with changes that gradually took place, namely globalization and its repercussions.

Modernity is a comprehensive historical process that includes social and economic shifts. It also entails changes represented along with the formation of mod-



ern nations, the state, the system of political relations and the change in roles of social institutions, in addition to the cultural shift. These transformations have generated the modern individual, the modern social institutions and the dynamic relations and roles among them all. The modern concept of adolescence was born in this 'incubator' which, in spite of being an enabling environment for individual entrepreneurship, accumulated the ever-expanding role of overall macro-factors (often in the form of an invisible power) that played a crucial role in shaping the picture of the contemporary world and its basic development trends.

These characteristics, however, apply specifically to modernity as an original transformation witnessed by European communities. In the European model of modernity, families developed towards a shrinking in the patriarchal role and in absolute obedience values.⁵ These values and models emerged in a period when society was evolving, when the most powerful drive was youth-motivated advancement and renewal in general. Thus, the characteristics of adolescence are defined in these circumstances, as they are considered to take place in circumstances that help the adolescent to acquire a sense of critique and to give shape to his/her personality and personal life project in a generally supportive social environment (we do not refer here either to the numerous discrepancies existing in the individual cases of adolescents themselves or the households to which they belong).

In Arab communities, the situation is different. The historical process that occurred in our Arab communities was of a nature so different that it is difficult to call our Arab communities modern societies in the same sense as mentioned above:

"During the last century, a major change occurred in the Arab society due to its friction with the modern Western civilization. Yet this change did not lead to the replacement of the old regime with a new one. It was simply a modernization of the old without radically changing it. Thus, the neo-patriarchal system emerged along with the trans-generation civilization in which we live. Therefore, no matter how "modern" external appearances - material, legal and esthetic - of the contemporary neo-patriarchal family are, its internal structures remain rooted in patriarchal values, kinships, tribes, confessions and ethnic groups... The prevailing system in Arab society today is neither a traditional system in the patrimonial sense nor a contemporary system in terms of modernity. It is rather a heterogeneous mixture of old and modern, of patrimonial and contemporary."⁶

This reality confers to the Arab communities a high

degree of schism between the institutional and juristic aspects and the effective contents. This makes the tradition/modernity duality predominantly present especially for the youths and adolescents who find themselves amidst this inter-attraction. In general, and despite the changes in Arab families (who experienced phases of turmoil during the last decades), especially the changes following political independence, they still retain a major part of the roles they had in traditional communities, including mediation between individuals, society and the state. Social relationships in Arab countries are still "characterized by personalism and the concept of the group overshadowing the individual and society... It is the group, not the individual, which forms the common unity in social relationships and commitments... all the way up to the absence of an Arabic equivalent of the word 'privacy'."⁷ We should also not forget the great number of taboos, namely the "tabooed trinity"⁸ : politics, religion and sex, as well as the aspect of the current Arab culture that is heavily male chauvinist towards women.

"Adolescence seems like a socially unplanned phase. It is not the result of any social shift nor is it linked to an acknowledged social position; it does not even have a role. This category has often been formed by banning early marriages (or because of late marriages), generalizing education and making it compulsory. Besides, society, education institutions and families, even professional dynamics, were not prepared to deal with this new phenomenon. As for families, in spite of the emergence of some aspects of modernization in their daily life, they remain traditional and conservative. Adolescents find it very difficult to draw away from them, because families are still the primary safe and secure haven for the individual. Indeed, such an environment does not encourage the individual's blending in with the modern concept."⁹

All in all, this does not create a helpful environment for Arab adolescence and adolescents. The persistence of the family's strong role in overall political, economic and social fields, outside the boundaries of the household, hampers the course of gradual self independence that adolescence represents as a transitional phase from childhood, characterized by nearly total dependency, to independence which is supposed to be complete upon reaching adulthood and achieving the personal and family project independently of the parents' household. As for the "tabooed trinity" (politics, religion and sex), it encompasses practically all fields of interest that begin to show with adolescence. Prohibiting politics puts adolescents in front of a dead end concerning the questioning of the status quo and communal organization, participation in decision-making and the harmony between what is said and what is actually done in the public life. The religious prohibition hampers critical thinking in all issues related

to values, new culture and traditions. Sexual prohibition leads to frustration and makes everything tabooed publicly permissible in secret. It also takes away the right of the adolescent boy and girl to scientifically discover their bodies and exercise their reproductive rights; let's not forget that it keeps them influenced by the common sexual myths. As for the predominant masculinity of the society, it sets, since adolescence, the different social roles for men and women and puts the adolescent girl, in particular, under more extreme pressure, thus affecting the adolescent boy in return.

From Inachieved Modernity to Globalization

Globalization, with its effects and mechanisms, forms a unified general framework and course for the development of communities, even though they might have different positions and reactions towards globalization. With the help of the communication and mass media revolution, globalization mechanisms can go beyond national borders. This enables it to influence or even create "transnational" behaviors and concepts among the youths and adolescents, making the contemporary problems – in their final version – an internal element in all communities.

This qualitative shift results in many multi-level changes in the current conditions and in the future expectations of all demographic and social categories, especially the youths and adolescents. This is shown through new phenomena emerging among them, whether in terms of size, preponderance or quality. They can be detected in particular through their extreme manifestations (like violence and delinquency), which are a result of the sensitivity of adolescents (and youth) towards the values of the society, the efficiency of its institutions and future prospects. Consequently, the problems of adolescence (globally, regionally and nationally) are directly linked to the questions and challenges put forward by the contemporary world, which are different from those the world had faced in previous phases.

The duality of the Arab society (tradition/modernity – contemporaneity) is deepening within globalization due to the attractive nature of national and global progress. Few are the people who can live the consumer society lifestyle as advocated by globalization, while most people cannot, and they refuse it as a cultural reaction and hold on to the firmest identity in facing it. Here emerges the family-religion tandem once again as the basis of this cultural reaction. We will find, however, a role change within this tandem between modernity and globalization. In the decades preceding globalization, the family was the main hub for resisting cultural and social change. Therefore, a number of authors and researchers considered the family structure to be more coherent and it used

religion to strengthen its structure and functions.¹⁰ However, this is no longer valid in the age of globalization where belonging to a family or a tribe is insufficient to protect the individual from the influences of globalization and satellite media. Hence, once again, the importance of religion emerges as a main and crucial existential factor in building personal identity among the new generation.

This paradox is highly apparent in the Arab Gulf, where most of the communities living there are socially, economically and politically based on the tribal structure, while, at the same time, they are among the countries most affected by and affiliated with economic globalization. The Arab Gulf was also a region that witnessed global and deep shifts on many levels in no more than five or six decades. As a result, the horizons of the individual and communities opened up from the limited local scope of the tribe or clan in the era of grandfathers, to the age of globalization, oil and satellite TV stations in the era of grandchildren.

The conflict lived by the new generation here is being described as a conflict between modernity and traditions: "This generation looks at itself as falling between the institutions of the past generation, those seen as "traditional" – Family and religion, and the new and modern institutions represented by the State and the market... there is a kind of virtual consensus among the members of this generation in describing the international market as a bearer of modernity, and the communities they live in as traditional communities."¹¹ However, what is interesting also is that some of those people believe that their countries have more modernity than traditions, based on what they observe, be it the increasing importance of the role of the economy and the market or the other formal aspects of "modernity". Another side of the new generation's pitfalls (in the Gulf region) is the loss of the social and economic security that accompanied the oil boom. That has pushed individuals once again to look for security in family structures and in traditions, because these institutions do not only provide the psychological security but also the social and economic security valve in communities where investing in the state and its modern institutions has not reached the level required to ensure this security.

Yet a great confusion reigns here. The market is depicted as an equivalent to modernity. This is rather a major distortion of the content of modernity as it was indicated previously. The values of globalization and the market do not entail acceptable and valid cultural and social contents, able to form an alternative referential framework on the individual or community level. Consequently, the values of globalization and the market, in contrast to the



values of modernity, lead generally to disintegrating effects in society and polarization among the youths themselves, of whom only a well-off category can find in it individual solutions, whereas the majority will find themselves shoved to embrace a more extremist interpretation of traditions.¹²

The problems raised in communities in the oil-producing Gulf countries, for example, take on a more severe aspect than in other Arab countries, and the options prevailing in them are more characterized by inner consistency (strong and coherent tribal structure, full integration in consumer market values...). In addition, the social and political history is much simpler and its main elements can be more clearly defined than in other Arab countries. Nevertheless, the same problems are brought up in all Arab countries, and sometimes at a higher degree of complication. On the one hand, there is a variety in external influences and channels of interaction, starting from the economy and media openness up to the large-scale migration and the direct interaction between the two sides of the Mediterranean, especially North African countries and Lebanon. On the other hand, there are the social and economic situations that are different from the oil-producing Gulf countries, especially when it comes to high poverty and unemployment rates in certain countries such as Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, Mauritania, and the like. This adds a very important dimension of social instability and concern about the future, directly affecting the situation of youths and adolescents. To the pre-mentioned factors, we can add the activeness of political, religious, national, socialist and liberal movements, and the situation of countries that are occupied, in a state of war, under siege or directly affected by these repercussions. All of this confirms the strong presence of globalization issues in Arab communities, which find themselves, once again, facing recent qualitative shifts, in a time where they could not, in the first place, critically cope with the first wave of global shifts represented by modernity in the last decades. Arab communities are stepping into the age of globalization from a passive position and from the position of a society that is neither traditional nor modern.

We can imagine the additional complications that adolescent boys and girls face in Arab communities following the September 11th events and amidst the "war on terrorism". They live in a region that is the eye of the globalized storm shaking the world, the value system and international relations. We must, therefore, understand why adolescents are increasingly affiliating to political movements and conflicts, why they are igniting confrontation everywhere and why they have withdrawn and retreated from public life.

Knowing the world of adolescent boys and girls well and from their own point of view is an important introduction to discovering the flaws in our communities. It is definitely an issue that goes beyond the one-sided interest in sex and sexuality, in spite of its importance.

Translated by Nadine Khoury

END NOTES

1. This text is based on the introduction of the "Arab Adolescent Girl: Reality and Perspectives" report, Center of Arab Women for Training and Research, CAWTAR, 2003
2. Diaz B. and B. Lietard-Dulac, *Contre violence et mal-être, la médiation par élèves*, Nathan, Paris, 1998, cited by Philippe Lebailly, *La violence des jeunes, comprendre et prévenir*, éditions ASH, Paris 2001.
3. Jawad Ali, *History of Arabs before Islam*, 10 volumes, Vol. 4, Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, Beirut, Al Nahda Library, Baghdad, Second Edition, 1977.
4. Refer especially to the UNFPA Report: *The State of World Population 2003 - Investing in Adolescents Health and Rights*.
5. "The expansion of middle classes and their liberal ideas on the educational level (no banning) lead to an educational model that gives a central role for individuals' self independence and personal opening up and to dialogue and free speech, since discussion and argumentation became one of the main rules of a family's work order.": *La violence des jeunes, comprendre et prévenir*, edition ASH, Paris – 2001.
6. Hisham Sharabi, *The Patriarchal System and the Problem of the Arab Society's Underdevelopment*, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, Second Edition, 1993.
7. Halim Barakat, *The Contemporary Arab Society – A Social Research*, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, Seventh Edition, 2001.
8. "Tabooed Trinity" is borrowed from a book title by Bou Ali Yassine. An indication of the same prohibition appears in the pre-mentioned reference for Halim Barakat.
9. Taken from the works of the Algerian team in preparation for the *Arab Adolescent Girl Report – CAWTAR*.
10. For instance, the contributions of Halim Barakat, Khaldoun Al Naqib and Hisham Sharabi highlight this issue. Sharabi gives supporting examples like the inability of religion to cancel out the common retaliation customs in the tribal structure.
11. Mai Al-Yamani, *Changed Identities, The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia*, RIIA, London, 2000. Translated into Arabic by Ibrahim Darwish, Riad El Rayess Books and Publishing, Beirut, 2001.
12. "The comments brought up by members of the new generation increasingly express an individual moral attitude and stress upon personal achievement, in a time where the collapse of the social solidarity is admitted and pitied. The market has become like an opposite of the family; society is now better defined for youth and the terms used for evaluation have been adjusted towards the mentality of that market instead of the society" – Mai Al-Yamani, *ibid*.