

## Why an Issue on Young Arab Women?

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Adolescence is considered one of the most essential phases in the life of a person; it separates between two extremely vital phases in one's life, namely childhood and adulthood. Most studies all over the Arab world show that the average percentage of youth below the age of 20 has reached one third of the population. This implies that attention to this age group is highly essential because of the demographic weight it represents – over and above the fact that adolescents are going to be responsible for the future of the Arab world in the coming years. Herein lies the importance of concentrating on this category in order to examine its characteristics, attributes and problems. Moreover, focusing on the youth is of essence given that UNESCO's 2003 report indicates that the number of illiterate people in the Arab world added up to 70 million, of whom two thirds are women and girls. Not to mention the 40 million unemployed individuals who mostly belong to the youth category. Thus, there is an urgent need to work with and for youth (particularly girls/women) in order to improve their status. This will reflect positively on the future of the region. How are teenagers faring in the Arab world? What do they think of and what are their aspirations? Who are their role models? What is their position vis-à-vis marriage, work and reproduction? Researchers will benefit from the data collected during the fieldwork for the study on *Arab Adolescent Girls* prepared by the Center for Arab Women for Training and Research in Tunis. Below are several of the findings arrived at:

### Late Marriage Age

Numerous changes are taking place all over the Arab world, especially regarding the status of women. Several reports from various Arab countries unanimously indicate a delay in the age of marriage. In Morocco, and based on the reports of the demographic survey conducted, one can conclude: "The first age of marriage is mounting. In 1960 it was 18 years but nowadays it is 27 years. Moreover, the use of contraception rose from 8% in the sixties to 60% at present." Late marriage is on the rise in Tunisia; it amounted to 29.2 years for women and 32.5 years for men, i.e. marriages are contracted at an average of 16 years after puberty. Late marriage is also increasing in Lebanon where the average age of marriage is 29 years based on the official statistics yielded in the 1996

study conducted by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

It is worth noting that Yemen is the only country in the sample where an early marriage age among men and women is abundant. Despite the fact that a qualitative improvement has occurred in the average age at first marriage, namely 23.73 years for both sexes (25.35 for males and 21.94 for females). Yet, the reality of the matter is that early marriage is still a problem within Yemeni families. Furthermore, an early marriage age is still a problem in the Gulf countries. Even though Bahrain managed to attain an increase in the average age of marriage, the improvement is a slight one, namely 21.9 for the year 1990 and 22.3 for the year 2000. One of the explanations why early marriage age is required and sustained is the fact that the countries of the Gulf in general are still in favor of segregation between the sexes.

Celibacy is no longer viewed as something out of the ordinary in the Arab world. Hence, if someone is celibate that does not necessarily imply that he/she is a homosexual. Nowadays, there is a new trend that views marriage in a critical and speculative manner. This is due to the fact that many of the family problems surrounding marriage have started to surface. Not to mention the latest developments that have altered the role of the family on the one hand and the requirements of the individual within the family on the other.

### The Meaning of Marriage and Securing the Parents' Approval

Over and above the delay that has occurred in the age of marriage, the Tunisian survey indicates a change in the patterns of marriage and the way it is now contracted. We notice that endogamous marriages are lessening with each coming decade. This signifies a decrease in the matchmaking efforts exerted by family members eager to marry off girls. In 1971, 89% of marriages were endogamous whereas in the last decade the number fell to 72%. This implies that the new generation is more inclined to view marriage as a personal matter rather than a communal affair where the final decision is in the hands of the family. This trend also highlights the emergence of the individual who is an independent entity and relies on his/her judgment and opinion in his/her personal

decisions. Love and understanding between the couple are the determinants in such marriages and not the interest of the family. Yet, it is worth mentioning that marriage, in traditional societies, is usually viewed as a communal and social matter determined by the interests of the two families involved.

Based on the findings one could conclude that there are some who oppose the concept of marriage and others who impose conditions prior to getting married. Many girls refuse the idea of marriage all together if these conditions are not fulfilled. Moreover, marital and familial problems might discourage girls from getting married or fantasizing about marriage – something that is expected from teenagers. Yet, most of them think that marriage is inevitable and “nice,” especially when love is involved. What becomes apparent is that love is of essence. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, girls nowadays have certain conditions that ought to be fulfilled if they are to accept the suitor. Among the requirements are reaching an agreement on who is in charge, and on the level of freedom and independence the girl will enjoy especially if she was raised within an educated or urban family or sometimes both. Some girls require their future husbands to be cooperative. One of the respondents refused to follow in the footsteps of her mother who used to exhaust herself due to her double burden, namely working inside and outside the home. These questions remain: Are women less eager to compromise given that they no longer fear remaining spinsters? Besides, how does that affect demographic growth? How does this affect the family?

### **Motherhood**

Opinions differ among teenagers when discussing the issue of motherhood. Yet, none of the girls in the sample was as affirmative in their refusal to conceive as Ashraf who fails to see himself as a father. Even though Rafif used to see eye to eye with Ashraf when she was younger, she recently started contemplating the idea. She has no idea how many children she wants; all she knows is that she wants a lot of them. Reem, who was barely 15 when she was interviewed, admitted that the idea did not even cross her mind. She asserts: “Every young person, when asked, might tell you they don’t want to get married and have children. Yet, at the end of the day they all do it. As far as I am concerned I really don’t know.” Motherhood is still viewed, in poor environments, as an absolute necessity. Zeinab affirms: “Motherhood transforms a woman into a mature and balanced individual.” However, there were girls among the respondents who knew beforehand exactly how many children they wanted to have: “I do not want many children, one or two is enough.”

### **Work Inside and Outside the Home**

The contrast is striking when talking about domestic work, especially among youth of different social and educational backgrounds. No differences were detected on the basis of religion or place and area of residence (urban/rural). Girls coming from poor families accept the traditional division of labor between the sexes. They rarely question the unfairness and only one of the respondents asked: “Why doesn’t he serve

himself?” Educated girls, whether they belong to the urban milieu or to the rural, affluent and educated class, demand to be treated equally, whereas most poor girls have no notion of what equality means or stands for.

Most teenagers in the sample who pursue their education and are in their secondary school years are adamant about pursuing their higher education. Moreover, they are eager to work and get married in the future. As far as the poor teenagers are concerned most of them left school at an early age. Despite the fact that they dream of working, it is all “talk” given that they are not working hard enough to realize their dreams nor are they prepared for such a step. It is worth noting that some of the poor girls in the sample pitied women who worked outside the home. Their position is influenced by the traditional and agricultural societies they belong to and that made it possible for women to dispense of the hard work they used to carry out in the fields.

The position of boys vis-à-vis housework is still vague and unresolved. In theory boys belonging to educated and well-to-do families refuse the traditional division of labor and are more willing to assist with the housework. For example, Ashraf is for total equality between the sexes, yet, he preaches more than he practices. And there are some men who complain about women’s much exaggerated need “to be equal with men.”

### **Feeling Monitored and Discrimination Against the Sexes During Puberty**

Girls, in general, put up with being monitored and endure strict surveillance by their parents. Based on our findings, most of the arguments and clashes that arise within the family stem from the way girls dress and their desire to go out. Most teenagers argue with parents on issues regarding freedom of movement, yet boys go out more freely and parents are more lenient and tolerant with sons. Moreover, girls are often questioned about the nature of their relationships with boys.

Hence, we find that rural families watch their children closely and are more overprotective in general. The family’s economic status plays an important role in increasing or decreasing the meddling of parents. Besides, belonging to a conservative and traditional family is another factor that affects the youth’s mobility and freedom. For instance, Rani, who belongs to an urban conservative family, is closely watched; however, he admits it is bearable. Whereas girls from popular and poor backgrounds are severely monitored, they are not allowed to go out unaccompanied and are prohibited from wearing improper and indecent clothes. Hence, most of the disputes and conflicts are related to freedom of movement and dress, and occur mostly in rural areas that are generally very conservative – like most Arab societies.

### **Body, Appearance and Sports**

Based on our research we recognized that most boys take care of their physical appearance, strive to be physically fit and

pay attention to the way they dress. Most often they realize that they don't need to diet, all they need is to work out in order to remain physically fit. Through sports men aspire to acquire the perfect figure and rarely do men contemplate plastic surgery. Being slim and fit are necessities among teenagers, be they male or female. However, one has to admit that females are more obsessed with their weight than men. Moreover, unlike women who often diet to attain the perfect figure, men concentrate on sports and prefer to exercise. Many of the girls interviewed admitted that they do not eat dinner so as not to put on weight. Besides, a lot are thin and fit, yet they still insist on taking extra care of their figure. Nadine is the only plump girl who is content with her figure and has accepted the fact that she is overweight. Her brother, on the other hand, often asks her to pay more attention to her weight problem and encourages her to diet.

## Role Models

A father who is successful and holds a good job such as an army officer or a university professor, is usually considered a role model or hero by his son. Sometimes a maternal uncle, usually living abroad, who is a successful businessman or an athlete, may also serve as a teenager's idol or hero. For girls, mothers are their role models especially if they belong to popular and poor backgrounds. Yet, most of the time a teenager's role model is a teacher. Herein lies the importance of the school and the faculty in the life of the teenager. Thus, it is imperative to provide education for all and to train the faculty thoroughly. Moreover, special emphasis ought to be given to the choice of schoolbooks and to sex education.

Yet, based on the research undertaken we realized that in poor backgrounds, the youth tend to identify with a famous female/male singer. The massive proliferation of television programs, artistic and musical in nature, that have burst upon the Arab world drawing huge audiences is worth investigating given that Arabs from different backgrounds and communities spend their evenings glued to their television sets watching these programs. What is the purpose behind such programs? Why do the youth of both sexes pass time watching them? Is it because of the loneliness they suffer? Or because of the frustration that has resulted from the many defeats the Arabs have experienced? Or is it because of the absence of hope, or because of the prevalence of autocratic regimes? If some of these programs represent what is presently "fashionable" in art and singing, and if we agree that a few enjoy an average artistic level then soon they will become the norm. Every new trend in society raises a lot of objections at first; however, with time it becomes accepted and develops into a characteristic of the period. (Let us not forget that the classical songs sung by Abdel Haleem Hafez and some of his contemporaries, such as Shadia, were called "*taqateek*" (or very light popular music) in the beginning given that the songs were considered light music in comparison to *tarab* or authentic Arab music.) The trend nowadays is to invest in programs that

host the latest "clip singers" who, instead of capitalizing on their talent, take advantage of their physical attraction to promote themselves. These artists are bold to the point of vulgarity. Instead of art the audience is entertained with flesh. Pornography and the willingness to strip have replaced talent. The question remains: What do these programs represent for the viewer? What do these phenomena symbolize? Do these programs really represent the ideal for the youth in their behavior and aspirations?

Are the youth in the Arab world divided into those who view light artistic programs and others who follow religious programs aired on the satellite channels? The latter programs also have their heroes and heroines, such as Amr Khaled who promotes the nominal religious symbols, namely wearing the veil yet dressing in modern clothes, and praying and fasting yet putting into practice all aspects of modernization.

## Friendship Between the Sexes

The higher one climbs the social ladder, the more recurrent the interaction between the sexes and the more probable and possible the friendship between them. Friendship between the sexes is a privilege only educated and affluent girls enjoy. Poor girls are more reserved and unapproachable when discussing the subject. Sometimes just mentioning the subject is frowned upon.

## Music and Reading

Listening to music is a youth distraction par excellence and is sought universally. Youth listen to all sorts of music depending on age and social class. Yet, one must admit that music nowadays is part and parcel of a teenagers' life, with some unable to imagine life without it. Unlike music, reading is practiced by the select few and is seen as an obligation by most young people. It is crucial to investigate the reasons behind such a serious crisis and work on finding a rapid and serious solution if we are hoping to improve our deteriorating position on the international scene.

## Violence

Domestic violence was detected as a problem the young suffer from. The violence ranges from verbal to psychological to physical abuse. Some of the young people interviewed admitted that domestic violence existed in their families but it was mostly verbal violence. Among certain families battery was also used when the respondents were young. Yet, many affirmed that the beatings lessened with the passage of time and became practically non-existent at the onset of puberty. However, such is not always the case given that three cases were detected where battery and abuse were more prevalent and consistent than the rest of the cases. It is worth mentioning that psychological and verbal abuse is mostly prevalent among poor families. Moreover, mothers more than fathers make use of verbal abuse and upper class fathers do not employ violence.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir