

Marriage Patterns in the Arab World

The family is seen as the pillar of society, and women as the agents responsible for its efficient functioning, which implies taking care of children, spouse, and household management. Nelly P. Stromquist

In Arab societies, women's role is predominantly linked to the domestic sphere. The family is seen as a pivotal axis of society, a basic unit that demands that women devote all their time and energy to it. Over the past decades, there has been notable transformation in gender relations in Arab societies particularly in urban areas, and women have gained greater degrees of freedom. This can be attributed to a number of factors that have played a role in exacting changes in gender roles. One factor is education that has contributed to more awareness and empowerment despite the fact that the educational system in many Arab countries remains oppressive and not conducive to change. Indeed the majority of women still see marriage as the ultimate goal and destiny of the female sex. Despite the fact that marriage laws are oppressive and that the family is strictly controlled by men, marriage plays a major role in the psychological development of women since it gives them authority, power, identity and an eventual more egalitarian role with the husband. If the young wife's space is restricted and controlled and her role is subordinate, these restrictions are relaxed when she grows older. When she becomes a mother-in-law she gains power over her son's wife and more control over the family and the husband. Furthermore, since she is no longer viewed as dangerously feminine, she enjoys fewer restrictions and greater social mobility. A second factor that has contributed to change in women's domestic roles is directly linked to economy. Indeed women have increasingly derived a sense of independence and assertiveness from a job no matter how little they may earn. Notwithstanding, women still suffer within the household from domestic violence, marginalization

and the unfair family laws that privilege men over women and give them the upper hand. Among the restraints that continue to plague Arab women are problems related to marriage, divorce, property rights, and rights regarding inheritance.

The first article in the file "The Marriage Mystery: Exploring Late Marriage in MENA" explores reasons why women are marrying at a later age in the Middle East and North Africa. In the second study, Diane Singerman and Barbara Ibrahim examine the soaring costs of marriage in Egypt that are forcing many couples into protracted engagements. Nadia El-Cheikh examines the 1998 proposed civil marriage law in Lebanon and the reactions of the concerned religious communities. Najla Hamadeh's article on urban and Bedouin co-wives studies the difference between rural and urban wives' reactions to the husband's other wife through case studies undertaken in cities and towns in Lebanon. Anne Tohme-Tabet traces choice modalities in the selection of spouses among the Maronite community in 19th Century Mount Lebanon. While May El-Hajj studies the impact of education on marital relations and tries to determine whether higher education contributes to more tension or more stability within the marriage. The article entitled "Misyar Marriage" traces the advantages and disadvantages of, what is referred to as Ambulant marriage, on women who accept to enter into such a marriage. The file incorporates a review of two works of fiction (Alia Mamdouh's *Mothballs* and Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot*) on the politics of marriage in the Arab world. Finally a summary of marriage and divorce laws in Arab countries is provided.

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