

FAMILY STATUS IN SYRIA(1)

Modernism and social evolution have had a definite impact on the status and functions of the family everywhere. As an example, woman's education and her integration in work outside the home has affected the structure of the family as well as the woman's attitude toward marriage and her choice of a mate.

In studying the Syrian family, differentiation should be made between the urban family and the rural and bedouin ones, besides the clear differences between religious communities.

The present field-study tries to answer the following questions: What are the dimensions of the recent changes in the Syrian family? How far have they affected its structure and what kind of responses have the changes produced among its members?

Study Procedure

A preliminary survey was made by using a sample of 50 people chosen at random from a series of responses to newspaper and television advertisements concerning the form of inquiry. The results of this preliminary study encouraged the researcher to enlarge his sample to include 400 families from Damascus, representing all the various sectors and containing children who went to school and whose ages ranged from six to twelve. The schools frequented by the children represented the different quarters of the city. A random sample was chosen from both the male and female students of those schools. Their parents were immediately contacted and asked to fill out the forms prepared for them which contained 75 questions on the following topics: basis and factors of marriage, immediate and delayed bride-price, family income and social class structure, family planning and birth control, education and increased woman's influence in family and society, use of the veil, woman's social and political activity, socialization of children, their recreational activity, public and private role in facilitating woman's work.

Part of the study was allocated to the blood-feud stereotype which is still practiced in tribal and family circles.

Principal Results

1. Concerning the pre-marriage period, it was found that the brideprice and trousseau did not play a significant role in postponing marriage. The study revealed a general claim for the limitation of the bride-price, asserting that the excessive sums demanded by the bride's parents represent a primitive social stage and contrast with the spirit of Islam.
2. The study showed a general tendency to reduce the age difference between the spouses, especially among the younger generation.

3. Exogamous marriages, i.e. marriage outside the family and quarter of the spouses, is more and more frequent, not only within the city but also extending to the outside and favoring intermarriage between village and city people.
4. It was found that a young man may marry a girl who is less educated than he, while an educated girl requires of her future husband at least the same level of education as hers.
5. Polygamy, in the sample studied, represented a small proportion: two percent, hence it was impossible for the researcher to explain this fact through the change occurring in the wife's status or in the family income. This result shows the fallacy of the theory which ascribes polygamy to a condition of wealth and luxury and seems to give support to other factors which have a social, psychological or hygienic origin.
6. Remarriage of the husband was chiefly due to divorce or death of the wife, especially among spouses whose educational level did not exceed the elementary stage. The family income did not prove to be a factor in remarriage.
7. The use of the veil is most wide-spread among illiterate women and those with semi-literate or illiterate husbands. It is less common among the educated classes.
8. The family income, though it may be an indicator of social standard, did not prove to be an important factor in veiling or unveiling the woman. This is explained by the fact that in traditional society, wealth depends less on the educational level than on a free profession. The correlation coefficient did not register a strong connection between the annual family income and the use or disuse of the veil (34.67 percent).
9. The number of children in the family seemed to have a definite correlation with the level of education of the parents. The less educated had a larger number of children and vice versa. The researcher did not find a high correlation between family income and the number of family members, nor between the number of rooms and that of the dwellers.

The final conclusion drawn by the researcher regarding this item, is the existence of a strong correlation between the size of the family, the level of the wife's education and her willingness to work. The increasing number of educated women engaged in professional or employed activity is likely to impose birth control and family planning. To ensure a balance between the woman's new status and the size of her family, concerted efforts should be made by social and health institutions for the purpose of creating guidance centers and clinics for parents interested in proper family planning in addition to nursery schools for children of working mothers and employment offices for trained women workers.

10. Questions addressed to the parents concerning the socialization method of children showed that the

(1) This topic was treated in a field study of 281 pp. prepared by Dr. M.S. Akhras and published by the Arab Institute for Planning in Kuwait, 1976. The study was condensed and introduced by Dr. Louis K. Mulaika in *Qira'at fi Ilm-in-Nafs al-Ijtima'i fi-l-Watan el-Arabi*, vol. III, 1979, p. 125. This article is a summary of the condensation.

- less educated group adhered to traditional methods based on coercion and harsh treatment, while the more educated group preferred the modern method of patient, understanding encouragement.
11. Living quarters investigated by the researcher did not provide children with adequate spaces for recreation and play. This condition has led the children to use the street as a playground. To remedy the situation, the researcher suggests that schools be asked to offer their playgrounds for the use of children in their free time. Municipal councils with the cooperation of local groups and associations are urged to create public gardens and playgrounds for children. To encourage woman's participation in national development which has now become a general necessity, the same local institutions should encourage the creation of a sufficient number of day care centers for the children of working mothers.
 12. An inquiry carried out by the researcher showed that the number of blood-feud crimes reached 152 in 1960, or 3.9 percent of the total number of crimes, against 12.27 percent for the crimes of murder and suicide.

Further investigation led to the following conclusions:

- a. Blood-feud or vendetta is a primitive form of self-defense and group protection used in tribal and bedouin societies. Its practice tends to decrease in industrialized areas while in bedouin and agricultural groups it has a wide practice.
- b. The persistence of the extended family structure favors the practice of blood-feud in view of the feeling of group responsibility which binds the members of the family together.
- c. The educational level plays an important role in determining the spread of this tradition. In modernized communities it tends to lose its halo.

The disappearance of this primitive form of conduct is linked with a number of reforms, mainly the following: strict enactment of positive law; encouraging the settlement of bedouins; revision of penal laws regarding murder crimes in tribal communities; providing areas where this practice is common, with social workers and trained counselors.

Finally the researcher asserts that the emancipation of the family through the education and liberation of women is a most important condition for achieving social progress and ensuring general welfare.

TUNISIAN LULLABY(1)

*She is my good fortune, she is my good fortune,
Sing for her and keep the Evil Eye from her,
Suitors already are coming to court her,
But we won't let her go,
All Tunis should be hers,
All the oil of the coast should gloss her braided hair,
And the wheat of Africa fill all the corners of her house.
My daughter, your suitors stand in line,
Their heads humbly bowed,
Your father asks for thousands,
But your mother says it's not enough,
We won't give you up, my daughter,
Not till the son of the bey comes,
Who wears a robe of silk,
He'll bring you anklets
That will jingle and move when you move,
He will offer 130 camels
But in the eyes of a mother
That's not enough for a beloved daughter.*

(1) One of a collection of lullabies picked out between July 1968 and March 1969, from Tunisian muslim women aged forty to sixty; published in *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, Ed. by E.W. Fernea and B.O. Bezirgan, p.92. See section "Recently Received by IWSAW" of this issue.

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

During 1975 and 1976, the Danish Women's Society, DK, held seven seminars in various parts of the country to study the role of women in developing countries. Their activities led to the establishment of a group to aid those countries.

In March 1976, a conference entitled "Solidarity with the Women of Developing Countries" was held with the object of discussing how Danish Women's organization may cooperate in lending support to women in the Third World. A group was appointed to draw up a constitution of a Women's Committee on Developing Countries which was established in May 1976, including 19 organizations and groups.

The purpose of the Committee's work is first to inform Danish women's organizations concerning the conditions and problems of women in developing countries. Second, to contact women's organizations in those countries and back them in their efforts to influence national feminist policy. Third, to induce policy makers to align official development assistance with the cause of women. Fourth, to launch projects aimed primarily at the women of developing countries.