

The Arab Family in Kuwait: Size and Structure ⁽¹⁾

Recent studies dealing with family status in the Arab world are few and sometimes contradictory. While some researchers, such as Dr. Madeeha Naser (1972), assume that 75% of Iraqi families belong to the extended type grouping three generations living under one roof⁽²⁾, Dr. Sana Khawli's investigation, condensed in *Al-Raida* (no. 9, vol. II, p. 15), leads her to conclude that the Arab family is evolving into a non-isolated nuclear family.

Some researchers adopt a middle course by recognizing the existence of differences between country and town regarding family type and affirming that the extended family exists in a larger proportion in the country than in town and city. Good, another sociologist, asserts that for economic and other reasons, the extended family has not been the rule in Arab countries. Peterson says that demographic factors have prevented the extensive spread of the extended family in Egypt and that the large family of six members or more formed 40% of Egyptian families since the beginning of the twentieth century.

A study prepared by Dr. Fahd al-Thaqeb aims to show that even if economic and demographic conditions should favor the spread of the extended family, as is the case in Kuwait, this family type is bound to remain a minority.

This study is based on statistics derived from interviews between 1965 and 1970 with a random sample of Kuwaiti families representing various social levels.

Family Size

Between 1965 and 1970, the majority of families in Kuwait were made up of six or more members per family. This proportion decreased among university graduates from 67.4% in 1965 to 56.9% in 1970. The data reveal that the number of family members tends to decrease in proportion with the cultural, economic and social status of the family. For example, while 33% of family heads with secondary education have limited the number of their families to five or less, only 12% of illiterate family heads have adhered to this number.

Large-sized families are characteristic of higher middle and lower middle classes. Small-sized families of 1-5 members exist at the rate of 38% in less privileged classes, while 72% of the lower middle class are made up of eight or more each.

Family Structure

Three family types have been singled out: the nuclear, the quasi-extended and the extended family. The first

comprises the parents and children; the third includes two or more families living in the same house, joined by blood ties. The quasi-extended family is a small sized extended family.

In Kuwait, the nuclear family forms 59.2%, the quasi-extended 18.4%, and the extended family 22.4%.

The size of the family is not a sound indicator of its type, though it may have some connection with it. It was found that only 26% of the nuclear families interviewed were made up of six members each, while 70% of them had 6-12 members per unit.

The study has shown that the nuclear family, while it is not the ideal type, is most common among urban, educated, young people and among the middle class. This type is less common in lower and lower middle class. About 31% of families of the lower class are quasi-extended while in the upper socio-economic group, the quasi-extended type reaches only 15%.

The proportion of the extended family type is higher among illiterate groups: 30% for illiterate against 17% for university people.

Age of Respondents

The family type differed according to the age of people interviewed. Around 50% of the young lived in nuclear families. Many of them lived in quasi-nuclear ones and did not break communication with their relatives. The ages of 65% of nuclear family people ranged between 30 and 39 years, while the highest proportion of the extended family type existed among those who were 50 years of age or above.

Conclusion

The majority of families forming the random sample of this survey belonged to the nuclear family type. The extended family, though it should be favored by social and demographic conditions in a country like Kuwait, is likely to form a minority.

The data show a steady increase in the average number of family members during the last few years. In 1957 the average was 6.8 per family; in 1965 it rose to 7.3; and in 1970, to 7.6. The rise is due to improved economic and demographic conditions in Kuwait. Also, the proportion of families numbering 6 or more each, rose from 66.4% in 1965 to 70.2% in 1970.

The family size is also an indicator of the fertility rate and bears no relation to family structure. It is noteworthy that extended families joining together three generations formed only 17% of the bulk of extended families. This result coincides with Good's theory that traditional, extended families have been and remain a minority in the Arab world.

(1) Condensed from Dr. Fahd Al-Thaqeb, "Size and Structure of the Arab and Kuwaiti Family," *Journal of Social Sciences*, No 12, Year IV, July 1976 (Arabic), pp. 81-91.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 81.