

The Arab Family and The Challenge of Social Transformation

This article is a summary of an essay by Halim Barakat* in which he discusses the challenges confronting the Arab family.

He defines the Arab family as a basic unit of social organization in traditional and contemporary Arab society. The Arab Family has been undergoing significant social, political and economic changes and needs to be examined in the context of the transitional nature of Arab society, the ongoing confrontation, and the struggle for social transformation in response to many challenges. The Arab family may be described as patriarchal, pyramidally hierarchical, and extended.

The Arab family constitutes an economic and social unit and is at the centre of social organization in all three patterns of living (bedouin, rural and urban). The behaviour of an individual member becomes that of the family as a whole. Many structural changes have begun to undermine traditional relationships, roles, and values within the Arab family. The centrality of the family is being challenged by the social institutions and the state structure. These institutions and the state are in control of the economy and education and have already become the biggest employers in most Arab countries.

In the traditional Arab family the father holds the authority and the responsibility. The wife joins his kinship group (patrilocal) and the children carry his surname (patrilineal).

Recent changes in family structure due to the emergence of competing socioeconomic units, have contributed to the democratization of husband-wife and father-children relationships. The patriarchal tradition

is passing through a transitional period, yet it remains hierarchical in structure. According to the traditional norms, a woman commits a grave mistake by challenging her husband's authority.

The traditional Arab family is stratified on the basis of sex (females are subordinate to males) and age (the young are subordinate to the old). Arab society has traditionally assigned women a subordinate status. This is reflected in the following features:

1. Women are secluded and segregated. Though an increasing number of women are receiving education (still seen as a man's priority) and are occupying important roles and positions in the public domain, the majority continue to occupy the private domain of the household.
2. The roles most available to women are those of daughter, sister, wife, mother, mother-in-law, etc. Few professional careers are available to women under the existing division of labour.
3. Veiling is still widespread in most of the Arab world.
4. Personal status codes discriminate against women, particularly in such areas as marriage, divorce, and inheritance.
5. Among certain classes, ownership of property is almost exclusively confined to men. Social, economic, and political organizations relegate women to marginality.
6. The prevailing standard of morality stresses those values and norms associated with traditional ideas of femininity, motherhood, wifehood, and sexuality.
7. The prevailing religious ideology considers women to be a source of evil, anarchy (fitna), and trickery or deception (kaid).

* Barakat, Halim, "The Arab Family and the Challenge of Social Transformation" in *Women and the Family in the Middle East. New Voices of Change*. Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1985. pp. 27-46.

8. Women may still be exposed to such practices as forced marriage, honor crimes, clitoridectomy, etc.

Arab writers agree that society assigns women a subordinate status, but strongly disagree on the extent of acceptance of this situation, its origin, and the nature of required reforms.

Followers of the traditionalist trend assert that women are subordinate by nature and/or by God's will and design. Abbas Mahmood al-Aqqad states in his book **The Women in the Quran** that women are subordinate by nature, and they receive their character ('irf) from men. This trend may be traced back to al-Imam al-Ghazali (1050 - 1111) who insisted on the right of man to be followed and not to be a follower because the Quran described men as being superior to women.

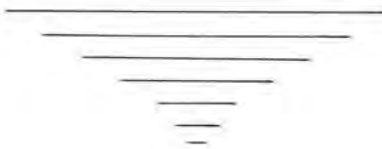
- A reconciliatory, apologetic, reformist trend attributes the subordination of women to the misinterpretation of Islam rather than to Islam itself. According to the Egyptian author Aminah al-Said, Islam in its time "appeared as great social revolution in the history of women's position, not only for us in the Arab nations but also for the whole world... Islam restored to woman her total humanity; it freed her from the domination of the male by giving her (a) the right to education, (b) the right to buy and sell property, and (c) the right to hold a job and go into business."⁽¹⁾

- More liberal and radical progressive writings reject the traditional and reconciliatory trends. The subordinate status of women was a significant issue in the writings of Boutros al-Bustani (1819-1893) who wrote **Ta'lim al-nisa'** (**The Education of Woman**) in 1849, Shibli Shmayyil (1860-1916), Farah Antoun (1874-

1922), and others. Qassem Amin (1863-1908), a pioneering voice on behalf of the emancipation of women, wrote two books on the subject, **Tahrir al-Mar'a** (**Liberation of Woman**) and **Al-Mar'a al-Jadida**. (**The Modern Woman**). In his first book he based his defence of women's rights on religious texts. In his second book, he based his argument on the social sciences and was influenced by the liberal concepts of individual freedom and the rights of free expression and belief. He linked the decline of women to the decline of society. Amin called for the removal of the veil, granting the right to divorce to women, the prevention of polygamy, specification of the conditions under which a man might be allowed to proclaim divorce, education of women as well as men, and women's participation in scientific, artistic, political, and social activities.

Barakat believes strongly that the socioeconomic conditions rather than some inherent nature are responsible for the woman's role being dependent on man, for her evaluation in terms of role rather than her personality, for her responsibility not only for her own but also for those of men because she is seen as a source of seduction and evil. The prevailing general order and the nature of its division of labour, property ownership, degree and quality of involvement in social and economic activities, control over the production process and products, and the overall position in the social structure constitute the basic factors contributing to the subordination of women.

The emancipation of women must begin by transforming the prevailing socioeconomic structures in the context of eliminating all forms of exploitation and domination.



(1) Al-Said, Aminah, "The Arab Women and the Challenge of Society" in **Middle Eastern Muslim Women** by Fernea and Bezirgan. pp. 373-390.