



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 6

Family Changes in the Context of Social Changes in the Gulf Region

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Abstract

Several developments affecting the Gulf family or emanating from it have emerged recently. The accelerated rate of modernization and the unprecedented socioeconomic, political, and demographic changes have implications for the well-being of Gulf families that require better understanding. However, there has been little research on modern family life in the Gulf countries. The workshop will seek to provide a space for dialogue and discussion on family issues – seen as critical to the future of the region. The proponents of this workshop have attempted to examine contemporary trends and issues in the formation of families over the life course and how they interact

with family-oriented social policies of modern welfare states in the Gulf region. The workshop will discuss the centrality of the family in state policies that attempt to address the challenges that face the family. It will also provide a context in which to understand how family relationships and social policies can promote child well-being.

Description and Rationale

Objectives and Scope

Over the last three decades forces have disrupted the established patterns of family life in the Arabian Gulf societies. These forces include urbanization, technology transfer, educational progress, different patterns of emigration, globalization, changes in the status of women, and the advent of new ideological implications concerning social equality, social justice and human rights. These changes led to contraction or decline in traditional family roles, changes in norms and attitudes toward family life, the rise in a culture that attributed great social significance to symbols of material differentiation, changes in family structure, increasing rates of divorce, delayed marriage, and shifting patterns of female labor force participation. Women's empowerment and leadership have become the cornerstones for many national and regional development initiatives in the Gulf. Traditional cultural values and social norms of parental behavior are in flux as are the timing and means of procreation and the customary gender division of labor in household production. Fewer people are getting married; couples who marry are doing so later in life, splitting up more frequently, having fewer children and living longer than ever before. The rise of the new phenomenon of remaining unmarried and the "spinsterhood crisis", especially among well-educated middle-class people, and the weakened role of the elder generation are additional social changes. Many Gulf families are dependent on foreign babysitters (maids/servants), a dependence which may carry negative connotations because it is associated with socialization of children and of young family members by individuals who may not share traditional Gulf social values. Social media influences the values, traditions and practices of Gulf youth and complicates socialization by their families. Despite short- and long-term effects, family violence, child abuse, and the maltreatment of toddlers and adolescents have been underreported and not adequately documented in the Gulf countries, with the exception of a few scholars.

These changes have created new pressures and needs over the course of family life. Among the Gulf countries, existent welfare state policies have been reformed and new ones drafted in response to the challenges posed by the changing patterns of family dynamics. Different types of child care arrangements have emerged, along with policies for the care of elderly family members. Diverse public measures have been implemented to strengthen the family, and to harmonize work and family life.

The proposed workshop examines contemporary trends and issues in the formation of families over the life course and how they interact with family-oriented social policies of modern welfare states in the Gulf region. The life-course perspective extends the conventional analyses of family policies, which tend to emphasize public programs and benefits clustered around efforts to harmonize work and family life during the

early years of childrearing. The workshop will discuss the centrality of the family in state policies that attempt to address the challenges that face the family.

The workshop especially welcomes research on aspects of modern family life that include: family relationships, diverse household structures, fertility patterns, and the fluctuating division of household/market labor over the course of family life in modern times. Also welcome are historical, demographic, and legal trends in marriage and divorce in different Gulf countries and the policy implications of those trends, the setting and issues which contemporary family policies have been designed to address, theoretical issues concerning gender relations, family culture and the role of the state.

Contribution to Gulf Studies

The workshop is designed to address several major deficits in knowledge regarding family issues in the Gulf countries. The workshop will contribute to the discourse on family issues and the myriad social processes through which persons in the course of everyday life organize family relationships. The workshop also will provide a context in which to understand how family relationships and social policies can promote children's physical health, behavioral adjustment, psychological well-being, social relationships, safety, cognitive development, and economic security in the Gulf countries.

The accelerated rate of modernization on the Peninsula and the unprecedented socioeconomic, political, and demographic changes have implications for the well-being of Gulf families that require better understanding. Several developments affecting the family or emanating from it have emerged recently. It is therefore important to understand how current trends influence family well-being, particularly in families whose relational and material well-being may be precarious and vulnerable.

Government involvement in the lives of families may stem in part from the recognition that families do not exist in a vacuum in the Gulf region. Public policies affect families, providing the context within which individuals develop their relationships and raise their children. The current concerns that have led governments to reflect on what is happening to the family include concerns about demographic trends, employment, gender relationships, human rights, health, education, identity, and political stability. Research and data to guide these efforts are lacking in the Gulf region. What types of support do families need? What are the specific challenges that couples face in trying to maintain healthy families and fulfilling relationships? How best should governments allocate their resources?

The workshop will bring a critical perspective to the emerging challenges facing families on the Peninsula, as well as open lines of inquiry on this development among scholars from across the disciplines.

Anticipated Participants

The desired outcome of the workshop is the production of an edited volume. Towards that purpose, original contributions are encouraged from diverse disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, economics, political science, education, public health) and methodologies. The workshop welcomes research from across the humanities and social sciences—from the perspective of social and political theorists, philosophers, cultural theorists, as well as from researchers in social policy. Papers can focus on a single country case or propose cross-country analyses. We are seeking papers that deal, not exclusively, with the following areas and focus:

- Family relationships
- Household structures
- Fertility
- Household labor/market labor
- Parenting
- Marriage and divorce
- Contemporary family policies
- Gender relations
- Child well-being and protection

The above are purely indicative areas: suggestions and original ideas are most welcome!

Workshop Director Profiles

Anis B. Brik is the Director of Family Policy Department at the Doha International Family Institute, a member of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development. Graduated from London School of Economics and Political Science. Dr. Ben Brik has served as advisor on social policy at the UAE government. He has served in a number of national and international committees, including chairing the Middle East United Nations NGO Major Group, member of the Social Protection Committee of the Qatar National Development Strategy; member of the national committee on youth, labor market, population of the UAE government. Dr. Ben Brik has served as Assistant Professor of Sociology at the UAE University. He has conducted research on youth, family relationships, child well-being, social protection, culture and sustainable development.

Jennifer E. Lansford is a Research Professor at the Sanford School of Public Policy and Faculty Fellow of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University. She earned her PhD in Developmental Psychology from the University of Michigan in 2000. Dr. Lansford has authored more than 200 publications that focus on family relationships, culture, and child development. Dr. Lansford leads the Parenting Across Cultures (PAC) Study, a longitudinal study of mothers, fathers, and children from 13 cultural groups in nine countries (China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States) funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health. Through collaboration with researchers at universities in each country, the PAC study aims to understand how risk-taking develops from childhood through early adulthood as a function of biological factors and socialization (parenting and culture).

In addition, Dr. Lansford has consulted for UNICEF on the evaluation of parenting programs in several low- and middle-income countries and on the development of a set of international standards for parenting programs, and currently works with a team of scientists using data from the UNICEF-supported Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, which include nationally representative samples from as many as 100 countries, to examine questions related to experiences of children around the world. Dr. Lansford also has consulted with the Doha International Family Institute to produce a report on child well-being in the Gulf countries. She serves in editorial roles on several academic journals, including as Associate Editor of *Developmental Psychology*, Associate Editor of *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, and on the editorial boards of *Development and Psychopathology*, *Parenting: Science and Practice*, and *Aggressive Behavior*. She has served in a number of national and international leadership roles, including chairing the U.S. National Institutes of Health Psychosocial Development, Risk and Prevention Study Section; chairing the U.S. National Committee for Psychological Science of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; chairing the Society for Research in Child Development International Affairs Committee; and serving on the Secretariat of the International Consortium for Developmental Science Societies.

Abdallah Badahdah is an associate professor of sociology. He has a B.A. in psychology and Ph.D. in sociology from Iowa State University. Prior to his tenure at South Dakota State University, he was the Director of the Family Research Division at Doha International Family Institute (DIFI), a member of the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development. Dr. Badahdah taught at the University of North Dakota and served as the Director of the Sociology Graduate Program for several years. He published several papers and encyclopedia entries. He has written research reports for many organizations such as the Saudi Ministry of Health, the Oman Ministry of Health/UNICEF, and the North Dakota Department of Health.

Selected Readings

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