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The tempo and intensity of marriage in the Arab region: Key challenges and their implications

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INTRODUCTION

The Arab region has, and is continuing, to experience significant changes in marriage and family formation patterns. A number of earlier studies¹⁻⁴ have shown that, despite the diversity of Arab countries in terms of their positions within the stages of nuptiality transition, they have all experienced important changes in the tempo and intensity of marriage^a, as well as in the characteristics of marriage^b and marriage partners^c.

In terms of temporal changes, it was shown that early and universal marriage are no longer the standards they once were. Countries of the region that passed through the most notable declines in early marriage – between seventies and mid-nineties -include Kuwait, Libya and the United Arab Emirates. These countries moved from between 40 to 57 percent of women aged 15–19 being married in the seventies, to between 1–8 percent in the mid-nineties. Similarly, universality of marriage was shown to have experienced significant, but varied degrees of changes in Arab countries. During the mid-nineties, two thirds of the 15 Arab countries investigated had a proportion of between 10 and 27 percent remaining never married by age 30–39.²

These temporal and intensity changes in marriage patterns are continuing to operate and to shape new profiles of marriage structures. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the knowledge base on the recent profiles and the nature of key challenges associated with them. The study provides more in depth analysis of these challenges and discusses their individual, family level and societal impacts. The study also investigates the implications of the analysis on public policies and research.

MARRIAGE STRUCTURE AND CHALLENGES

1. Distribution of population by marital status

One of the direct manifestations of the continuously changing aspects of marriage includes the age structure of the population by marital status. The nature of temporal and density changes is expected to result in a sizeable number of young adult that never marry to grow over time. Furthermore, this category is not expected to be confined to young adult ages, but to continue to exist at older ages.

Figures 1 and 2 provide the percentages of the population in age groups 20–29 and 30–49, who are ever married and the size of the populations in these age groups by sex and country.

As expected, among the younger age group 20–29, the percentages of women ever married is considerably larger than the percentages of males ever married. The ratio between ever-married

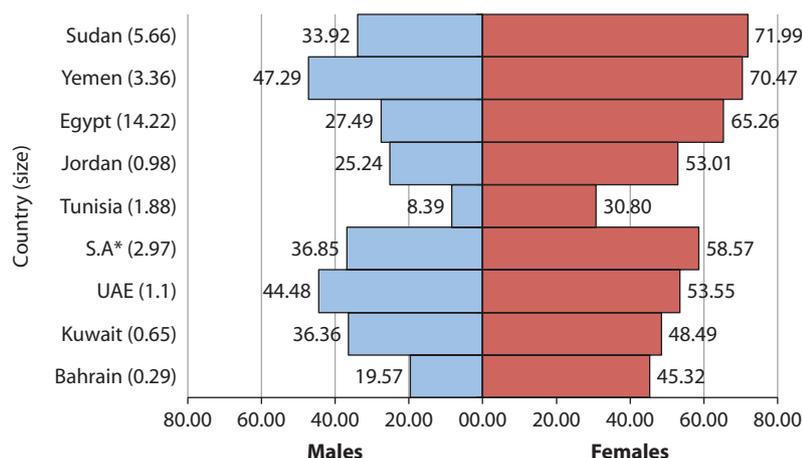
^aTempo and intensity of marriage refer to the timing of first marriage and its occurrence. Aspects analyzed include the occurrence of early marriage, delays in marriage as well as the non-occurrence of marriage (celibacy).

^bCharacteristics of marriage cover a number of features including: consanguinity, establishing independent homes, stability of union, type of unions, . . .

^cCharacteristics of marriage partners include their individual endowments (education, work, financial resources . . .) as well as the relative positions of partners along these endowments such as: spousal gaps in age and education, spousal gaps in command over resources and participation in public life, . . .

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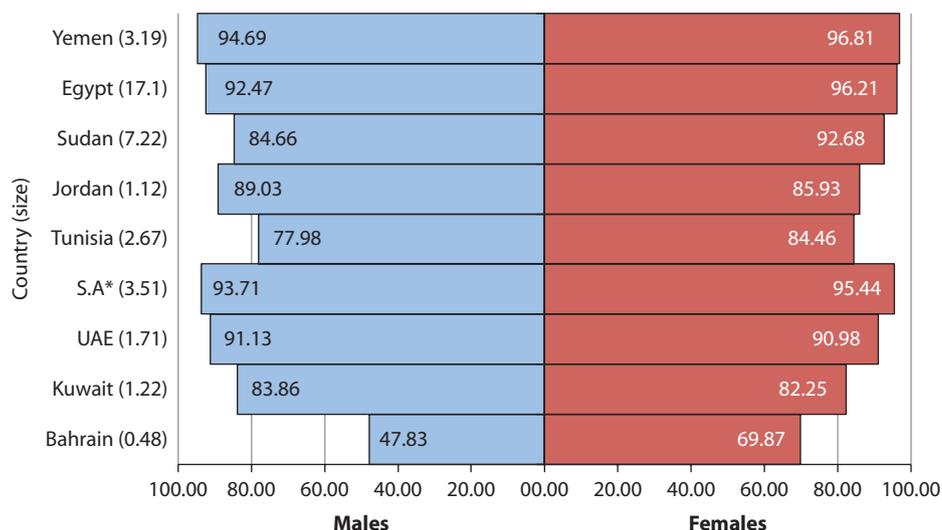
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*S.A. data refers to nationals only

Figure 1. Percentages of population aged 20-29 ever married and the size of the total population in this age group in millions by sex and country (Source: CAPMAS. Egypt population and housing census: 2006.³¹ CBS. Sudan Population Census: 2008.³² CDSI. Saudi Arabia Population and Housing Census: 2004.³³ CIO. Bahrain Population Census: 2010.³⁴ CSB. Kuwait Population, Housing, Buildings and Establishments Census: 2011.³⁵ CSO. Yemen Population and Housing Census: 2004.³⁶ DS. Jordan Population and Housing Census: 2004.³⁷ NBS. UAE Population Census. 2005.³⁸ NIS. Tunisia population and housing census primary results: 2004.³⁹ SA. Qatar population, housing, and establishments census: 2010⁴⁰).

females and males in countries like Sudan, Egypt and Jordan exceeds two fold, and reaches more than three fold in Tunisia. It is noted that Yemen shows a lower ratio, indicating that males tend to marry young. Clearly in these countries, the marital composition of young adult, in the age group 20–29, is quite different between sexes. The majority of males in this age group are single while a lower percentage of females in the same age group are single. It should be noted that Gulf countries with a large percentage of migrants do not follow systematically this pattern. The ratio is not easy to interpret due to the fact that female populations tend to be nationals with later ages at marriage, while the male population is a combination of nationals and non-nationals.



*S.A. data refers to nationals only

Figure 2. Percentages of population aged 30-49 ever married and the size of the total population in this age group in millions by sex and country (Source: CAPMAS. Egypt population and housing census: 2006. CBS. Sudan Population Census: 2008. CDSI. Saudi Arabia Population and Housing Census: 2004. CIO. Bahrain Population Census: 2010. CSB. Kuwait Population, Housing, Buildings and Establishments Census: 2011. CSO. Yemen Population and Housing Census: 2004. DS. Jordan Population and Housing Census: 2004. NBS. UAE Population Census. 2005. NIS. Tunisia population and housing census primary results: 2004. SA. Qatar population, housing, and establishments census: 2010).

Table 1. Percentages of single males, females, total population and the size of total population in age group 20–49.

	% Single male	% Single female	% Total single	Total single	Total population
Tunisia (2004)	50.87	37.60	44.12	2,006,908	4,548,742
Jordan (2004)	40.83	29.07	35.11	736,001	2,096,303
Egypt (2006)	36.97	17.87	27.51	8,611,873	31,306,888
Yemen (2004)	30.03	16.50	23.22	1,520,729	6,550,013
Sudan (2008)	36.77	16.72	25.98	3,344,833	12,875,481
Bahrain (2010)	62.70	39.83	55.13	427,517	775,478
Kuwait (2011)	31.39	30.81	31.15	584,065	1,875,125
UAE (2005)	25.9	26.35	26.02	729,404	2,803,363
S.A* (2004)	32.10	21.64	26.92	1,745,594	6,484,108
Qatar** (2010)	32.51	31.43	32.29	452,299	1,400,688
Total %	36.28	20.27	28.51		
Total size	13,201,764	6,958,447		20,159,223	70,716,189

Source: Population censuses- CAPMAS. Egypt population and housing census: 2006. CBS. Sudan Population Census: 2008. CDSI. Saudi Arabia Population and Housing Census: 2004. CIO. Bahrain Population Census: 2010. CSB. Kuwait Population, Housing, Buildings and Establishments Census: 2011. CSO. Yemen Population and Housing Census: 2004. DS. Jordan Population and Housing Census: 2004. NBS. UAE Population Census: 2005. NIS. Tunisia population and housing census primary results: 2004). SA. Qatar population, housing, and establishments census: 2010.

* SA data refers to nationals only.

** Age 15–54.

In terms of the older age group 30–49, the percentages of ever-married males catch up with females. Clearly the majority of populations in this age group are ever married.

In terms of the never married population, Table 1 shows the percentages of single adult population among the total population, in age group 20–49, range from 23–55% with an overall percentage of 28% amongst the 10 countries considered. This implies the size of the single population in age group 20–49 is relatively large. The total size of this group reaches 20.2 million amongst 70.7 million adults in the 10 countries considered. It should be noted the total number of single males in the age group 20–49 is higher than single females.

The ramifications of sizeable social group formation in the never-married state imply a growing number of youth and adults with special needs. This demographic requires societal responses, as well as the articulation of new policies and development plans recognizing the changing family compositions and population structures.

The implications of the changing structure of the population include a number of dimensions that operate at the macro level and lend themselves to aggregate data analysis. Earlier studies addressed demographic consequences of these changes, including their impact on fertility levels, household structures and living arrangements.^{5,6}

Other implications of a more sociological nature have proven to be difficult to gauge. Examples of these are the influence on gender relations, family ties and scripts, cultural norms and values, the very fabrics of society, as well as the livelihoods of individuals and their wellbeing.

Indeed the literature on the Arab region is very limited in terms of investigating sociological, family and individual level concerns. The sparsely available studies have been forced to limit their investigations to small areas and more anthropological types of analysis or to a conceptual theorization. Examples of these include the transformation of marriage ties from submission to voluntary commitment in Tunisia⁷; the parent-adolescent dynamics in Egypt⁸; as well as the undermining of the patriarchal system of the family.⁹

2. Tempo and density of marriage and their challenges

Table 2^d summarizes the diversity in timing and density of marriage across Arab countries. Diversity in the spectrums of early marriage, delays in marriage and levels of celibacy are noted. For example, the phenomenon of early marriage appears relatively low in some countries (8% or less of women marry before age 18), yet remains very high (32% or more of women marrying before age 18) in others. The average age at first marriage for those ever married (or singulate mean age at marriage- SMAM), ranges from approximately 22 in six Arab counties to as high as 28 or more in another six countries.

^dTable 2 is based on the indicators provided in the annex Table A1 and the classification categories provided in the annex Table A2.

Table 2. Groupings of Arab countries by the nature of key challenges in the tempo and density of marriage.

Key challenge: Early marriage				
Very high early marriage (32–35%)		High early marriage (17–25%)		
SMAM Low (22–23)		SMAM Low (22–23)		SMAM Med (25–26)
Low celibacy (3–4%)	Med celibacy (7.5%)	Low celibacy (3.7%)	Med celibacy (10.4%)	Med celibacy (11.1%)
Mauritania Yemen	Sudan*	Egypt	Iraq Palestine	Syria
Key challenge: Delayed marriage and high celibacy				
Low early marriage (2–8%) SMAM High (28–31)				
Very high celibacy (24–32%)			High celibacy (15–18%)	
Libya Kuwait Lebanon			Algeria Tunisia Djibouti	
Combination of challenges:				
SMAM (25–26)				
High celibacy (15–18%)		Med celibacy (7–12%)		High celibacy (17.8%) Med early marriage (13%)
Bahrain Jordan		Qatar UAE		Morocco
No major challenges:				
Low celibacy (3–4%) SMAM Med (25–26)				
Oman Saudi Arabia				

Source: Annex Table A1 and classification categories provided in annex Table A2.

*Sudan data in all tables refers to Sudan prior to the separation of South Sudan. Available data for Somalia and Comoros are too limited to allow their groupings.

Celibacy remains relatively low in 5 countries (percentages of women 35–39 never married not exceeding 4%) and quite high in as many as 9 countries (percentages of women 35–39 never married 15–32%). The co-existence of different combinations of early, delayed and non-occurrence of marriage is also noted.

Despite the noted diversities, a large number of Arab countries can fall easily within two main contrasting groups as shown in Table 3.

The first group includes countries with a major challenge^e in terms of early age at marriage. This includes Mauritania, Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, Palestine, Syria and Egypt. The estimated total size of the population in this first group exceeds 200 million. The second group includes countries with very high celibacy and delayed ages at marriage.^f This includes Libya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia and Djibouti, with a total population of approximately 60 million. Clearly, in terms of the overall magnitude of the challenge, early marriage impacts on a sizeable number of females compared to delayed marriage and celibacy.

The remaining countries appear in a more transitional phase within 2 groups. They tend to follow one of these groups but with a less severe degree of the challenge and some indication of a combination of the two types of challenges.

^eMajor challenge is defined as very high early marriage (women married before 18th birthday 17–35%), SMAM low (22–23%) or Med (25–26%).

^fHigh celibacy (never married women aged 35–39, 15–32%) and high SMAM (28–31 years).

Table 3. Summary groupings of Arab countries by the nature of key challenges in the tempo and density of marriage.

Key challenge: Early age at marriage and no major delays in SMAM (Celibacy, low and med)	Key challenge: Celibacy and delays in SMAM (Low proportion of early marriage)
Mauritania (35%)* Sudan (33%) Yemen (32%) Iraq (25%) Palestine (19%) Syria (18%) Egypt (17%)	Libya (31.6%, 31.2)** Kuwait (24.5%, 27.5) Lebanon (23.7%, 28.3) Algeria (16.6%, 29.5) Tunisia (15.5%, 28.7) Djibouti (14.7%, 27.7)
Transitional Countries	
Morocco (13%)	Bahrain Jordan Qatar UAE
Low early marriage, little delays SMAM, Low Celibacy	
Oman Saudi Arabia	

Source: Summary of Table 2.

Note: * (% women aged 20-24 who married before their 18th birthday).

** (% never married women 35-39, SMAM).

For example, Morocco is combining both the challenge of early marriage (13%), relatively higher average age at marriage (26.4), as well as experiencing a high level of celibacy (17.8%). Similarly, Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar and the UAE do not experience a significant level of challenge in terms of early age at marriage and delayed SMAM, yet their celibacy levels remain at medium or higher levels, but are less severe than those in the second group.

Only two countries (Oman and Saudi Arabia) in the Arab region do not suggest a serious challenge in terms of population proportion experiencing early age at marriage (4%), delayed SMAM (approximately 25) and level of celibacy (4%).

The two key challenges identified will be further investigated in the following sections with the aim of providing further details on the nature of these challenges, their ramifications, as well as implications for policies and research.

THE CHALLENGE OF EARLY MARRIAGE

The challenge of early marriage, and its related adolescent pregnancy, is an international concern that has led the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to devote its annual report "The State of World Population 2013" to this issue.¹⁰

The report highlights that motherhood in childhood is a huge global problem, estimating 7.3 million girls give birth under the age of 18. The report also details how early pregnancy can have a detrimental impact on a girl's health, education and prevents her from realizing her potential. The negative impact of this challenge goes beyond the girl herself and takes a toll on her offspring, the community and national development. Needless to say that the most dire consequences operate, the younger the age at marriage and birth. The report estimates that as many as 2 million girls give birth by age 14.

Some of the emphasized global consequences include an estimated 70,000 adolescents (15–19 years of age) in developing countries die each year from complications during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as an estimated 3.2 million annually experiencing unsafe abortions. The report documents the risk of natural death and obstetric fistula is double for girls who became pregnant before age 15, in low and middle-income countries. These girls are more likely to experience premature delivery, low infant birth weight, perinatal mortality and health problems with their newborns.

Furthermore, available evidence discussed in the UNFPA report, show that among the 13.1 million births born annually to mothers aged 15–19, there are significant elevated health risks. For example, still births and newborn deaths are 50% higher among infants of adolescent mothers than among infants of mothers between the ages of 20 and 29. Approximately 1 million children do not make it to their first birthday.

The consequences of early marriage are not, of course, confined to the physical health of the girl and her offspring. Females married at a young age are usually coerced or at least denied an informed choice. Age and characteristic gaps between spouses do not usually support balanced gender relations, the female child is prematurely transitioned into adult roles and denied prospects for further education and work. These features clearly undermine female human rights, psychosocial health and wellbeing.

Furthermore the ability of young girls to support a functioning family and to adopt sound child rearing practices are curtailed by the fact that decision making ability and cognitive development are known to be formed later in life and not governed by biological puberty.¹⁰ The latter is usually brought forward to justify early ages at marriage.

In terms of the Arab region, UNFPA¹⁰ places the average situation within the global context at a relatively low level (Figure 3), in terms of early pregnancy (10% below age 18, 1% below age 15), superseded significantly by average levels in developing countries (19%) and by five regions (out of the

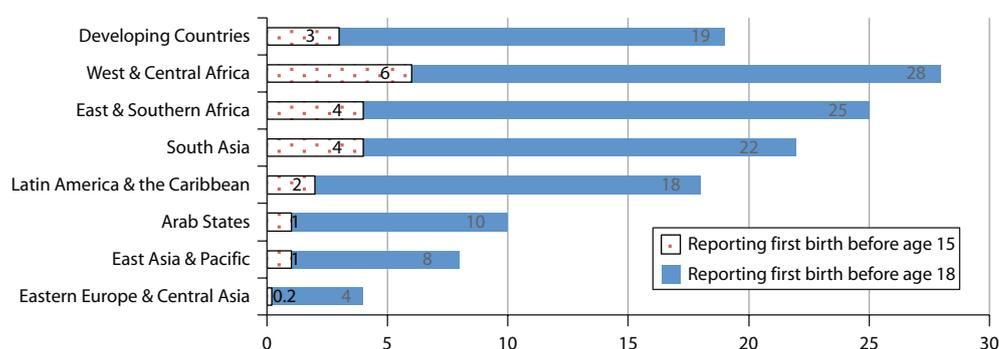


Figure 3. Percentages of women ages of 20-24 reporting birth before age 15 and before age 18 (Source: Reproduced from UNFPA¹⁰).

7 regions considered). Only, the one region of Eastern Europe and central Asia shows a markedly lower level than the Arab region (4%).

This average picture hides a great deal of diversity, as discussed earlier. As much as seven Arab countries are showing a level of early marriage of 17% or more, reaching as high as 35%.

It should be noted that knowledge on early adolescent fertility (below age 15) is scant. These pieces of information are not usually reported, particularly in countries with a legal minimum age at marriage that exceeds 15. They require special tabulations from surveys that ask for this information and tend to be understated.

Table 4 provides examples of levels of very early adolescent marriages in a sample of countries. Among ever married women aged 20–24, ranging from 3–17 % gets married before the age of 15.

The nature of the ‘early marriage challenge’ in Arab countries has been the subject of two recent publications of the Population Reference Bureau.^{11,12} The discussion in this section draws on these publications, the UNFPA¹⁰ report, as well as special tabulations and analysis from recent surveys.

The challenge of high levels of early marriages is expected to prevail in countries with high illiteracy, lower educational achievements, higher levels of poverty and lower economic resources. In these

Table 4. Percentage of ever-married women aged 20-24 married under 15 and under 18 years of age.

Countries	Ever married aged 20–24	
	Under 15	Under 18
Egypt 2008	4.1	30.9
Jordan 2007	3.0	26.3
Morocco 2003-04	6.6	41.5
Iraq 2011	14.6	52.2
Syria 2006	8.7	43.7
Yemen 2006	17.0	54.5

Source: Special tabulations prepared by author based on datasets of Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), accessed from: <http://www.measuredhs.com>; <http://www.childinfo.org/mics.html>

Table 5. Selected indicators of underpinnings and consequences of early marriage.

Countries	Income group (1)	2013	2003–2009	2005–2010	Population with			2011	2010	2010	2010	2012	2012	Gender Inequality Index Rank*
					% Population below national income poverty line	Adult illiteracy rate (% ages 15 and older)	at least secondary education (% ages 25 and older)								at least secondary education (% ages 25 and older)	Female population with at least secondary education (% ages 25 and older)	Female labour force participation rate (% ages 15 and older)	IMR	MMR	TFR
High early marriage														
Mauritania	Lower middle		42.0	42	14.2	8.0	28.7	75	510	4.4	139			
Sudan	Lower middle			28.9	15.5	12.8	30.9	66	730	...	129			
Yemen	Lower middle		34.8	36.1	16.0	7.6	25.2	57	200	5.0	148			
Iraq	Upper middle		22.9	21.8	32.4	22.0	14.5	31	63	4.6	120			
Palestine			...	5.1	52.1	48.0	15.1	20	64	4.3	...			
Syria	Lower middle			16.6	32.8	27.4	13.1	14	70	2.8	118			
Egypt	Lower middle		22.0	28	51.2	43.4	23.7	19	66	2.7	126			
Comoros	Low income			25.1	...	...	35.1	63	280	4.8	...	
Somalia	Low income			...	...	...	37.7	108	1000	6.3	...
Low early marriage														
Libya	Upper middle			10.8	49.6	55.6	30.1	13	58	2.4	36			
Kuwait	High income			6.1	48.9	53.7	43.4	10	14	2.3	47			
Lebanon	Upper middle			10.4	54.2	53.0	22.6	19	25	1.8	78			
Algeria	Upper middle			27.4	24.1	20.9	15.0	31	97	2.2	74			
Tunisia	Upper middle		3.8	22.4	37.0	29.9	25.5	14	56	1.9	46			
Djibouti	Lower middle		...	...	...	...	36.0	73	200	3.6	...
Transitional phase														
Morocco	Lower middle		9.0	43.9	28.0	20.1	26.2	30	100	2.2	84			
Jordan	Upper middle		13.3	7.4	73.3	68.9	15.6	18	63	2.9	99			
Bahrain	High income			8.1	78.0	74.4	39.4	9	20	2.5	45			
Qatar	High income			3.7	63.4	70.1	51.8	7	7	2.2	117			
UAE	High income		...	10	64.3	73.1	43.5	6	12	1.7	40			
Oman	High income			13.4	53.9	47.2	28.3	8	32	2.2	59			
Saudi Arabia	High income			13.4	54.6	50.3	17.7	15	24	2.7	145			

Source: UNDP⁴¹, Human Development Report 2013.(1) World Bank⁴², Country and Lending Groups.

* Gender Inequality Index: Composite measure reflecting inequality in achievements between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and labour market, calculated for 148 countries.

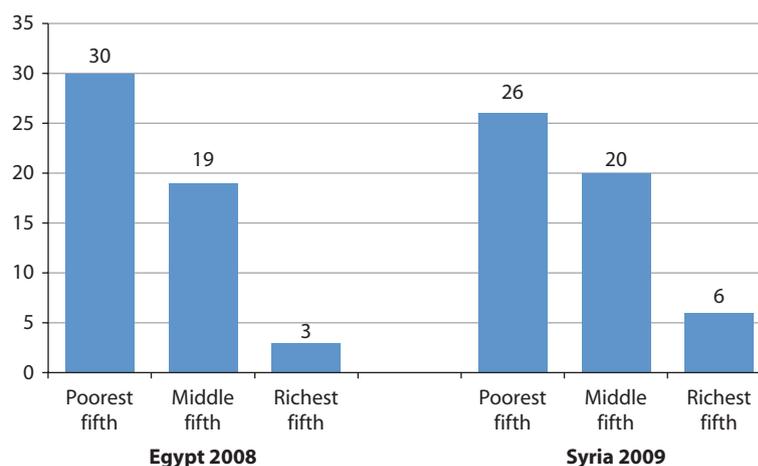


Figure 4. Percentages of women aged 20–24 who before age 18 by wealth quintiles (Source: Reproduced from Roudi-Fahimi and Ibrahim¹¹).

countries gender dynamics interact strongly with deprivation and translate themselves into early marriage as the only viable choice for a girls security and/or as a form of exploitation.

Furthermore, the high levels of early marriage tend to support higher fertility rates, higher maternal mortality and poorer reproductive and child health.

Table 5 provides some indicators of these underpinnings and consequences for Arab countries caused by their experience of early marriage. Table 5 generally follows the expected pattern, but there are a number of deviations. There are anomalies that call for additional, in depth country level research. For example, the countries experiencing high early marriage tend to fall into lower middle economic groupings (except Iraq, in the upper middle), have a high level of poverty and a high rank in terms of gender gaps. A number of countries that are not experiencing a significant challenge in terms of early marriage are not markedly different in their rank on an economic front and levels of illiteracy; Algeria and Tunisia are similar to Iraq, in being in the upper middle economic rank; they have an educational profile not markedly different from Egypt and Iraq. Similarly, the limited economic and health data available for Djibouti are inconsistent with the absence of a high prevalence of very early marriages.

In terms of within country analysis, the same underpinnings and consequences need to be investigated. Of particular importance are the early marriage clusters within every country that form in disadvantaged social groups particularly in terms of poverty and low education. Figures 4 and 5 provide illustrations of the clustering of early marriage.

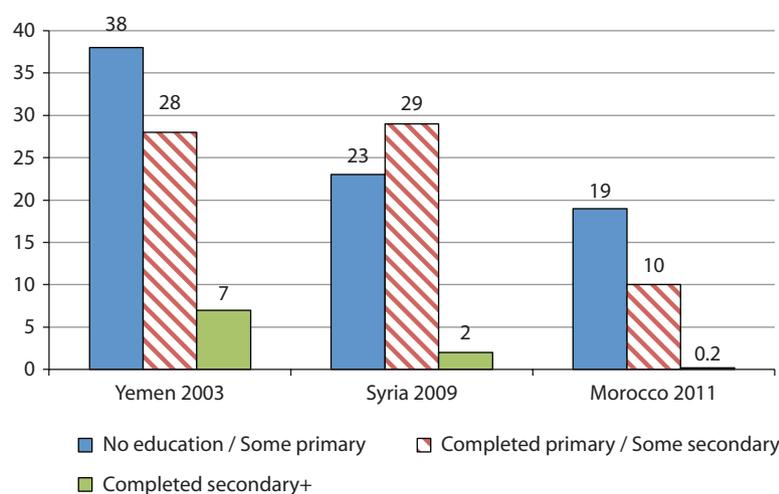


Figure 5. Percentages of married women aged 20–24 who wed before 18 by education (Source: Reproduced from Roudi-Fahimi and Ibrahim¹¹).

The elevation of risks among disadvantaged social categories is significant. In Egypt the relative risk of marrying early is 10 fold in the poorest fifth of the population, when compared to richest fifth. Similarly, in Morocco while the occurrence of early marriage amongst the highly educated is almost nonexistent, the risk amongst the lower levels of education is 19%.

It should be noted that such illustrations are only feasible to calculate for countries with national surveys collecting both social characteristics and ages at first marriage.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES AND RESEARCH

The harmful impacts of very early marriage are well documented and the evidence base for advocacy is reasonably established. The majority of Arab countries have already adopted a minimum legal age at marriage as summarized in Table A1. However, only 13 countries have a legal age at marriage of 18 or more.

The institutional control of minimum legal age, while very much welcome, remains necessary but not sufficient. The enforcement of this legal requirement is not always effective and gets circumvented through loopholes engineered by social groups who find beneficial features of early marriage. For example, Iraq and Egypt, whilst having a minimum legal age of 18, have a sizeable proportion of the population marrying below that legal age. On the other hand, a number of Gulf countries with a low or non-existent legal age, are not experiencing a high proportion of early marriage.

In the Arab region, some countries have expressed concern over the high prevalence of early marriage (e.g. Jordan national report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women), but there does not seem to be explicit articulations of policies to address this harmful practice. As noted in Table A1, some Arab countries have a very low minimum age of marriage and other countries, that have a minimum age of 18, do not strictly apply it. More importantly, there are no comprehensive structural interventions to address the problem.

In Yemen, as an example of a highly affected Arab country, early marriage is not even mentioned as a challenge in their guide to integrate national policies in the development plan.¹³ There are, however, some sporadic efforts. For example, the reproductive health policy 2011- 2015 stated the reproductive health department will launch a campaign to raise awareness about safe motherhood. Hazards of early marriage will be one component included in the campaign.¹⁴ A one-year pilot project "Safe Age of Marriage" was conducted in 2009 in a deprived Yemani governorate to train 40 community educators, including religious leaders, midwives, and nurses to raise awareness about the issue.¹¹

Egypt has conducted a similar project named "Ishraq" to support vulnerable girls in Upper Egypt. The project aimed to enhance the abilities of girls who have dropped out of school, to increase social opportunities to prepare them to get back into school, and to decrease their chances of early marriage.¹¹ On the other hand, legislations in Egypt have many loopholes. Families can claim that they lost their daughter's birth certificate and issue a new one after estimating her age by a physician.¹⁵ There were efforts to prevent this and the practice has become more regulated by providing a national identification number for each newly born child attached to his/her birth certificate. As a result of not being able to falsify age, delay registrations of marriage is another practice adopted in some communities, (e.g. parts of Sinai).

The future of this challenge starts by explicitly defining early marriage as a human right violation and refuting any religious justification for such a practice. The recognition of the problem severity needs to be supported by an evidence base, allowing differentiated analysis of the magnitude of the challenge and its impact. This is particularly important for countries that have managed to reduce the overall level of this challenge. The invisibility of social groups suffering from the clustering of this assault on female human rights is supported by both a lack of data as well as the more visible competing challenges of delayed marriages and higher celibacy.

More importantly, the framing of this challenge and its related policies need to move from behavioral changes to a combination of public and institutional controls. UNFPA¹⁰ provides an adequate discussion of such policies.

THE CHALLENGE OF DELAYED MARRIAGE AND HIGH CELIBACY

The term 'delayed marriage' is a relative concept that changes over time and is defined differently among a variety of social groups within the same population.

Table 6. Percentages of ever-married women 15-49 who are highly educated and working among those with low or high age at first marriage.

Country	% university +		% working	
	Age at first marriage		Age at first marriage	
	22–24	27 +	22-24	27 +
Egypt 2008	26.5	29.6	24.1	32.5
Jordan 2007	54.4	48.5	20.4	23.1
Morocco 2003-04	7.5	16.5	21.4	34.3

Source: Special tabulations prepared by author based on DHS datasets accessed from: <http://www.measuredhs.com>

When illiteracy is high and a low proportion of women reach secondary school, delays in marriage are defined around a much younger age. The minimum legal age at marriage or even younger define the normal age at marriage. On the other hand, delays in marriage for women completing university education are defined around a much higher age. These women are not expected marry before age 22, and a few additional years beyond that age are not perceived as delays in marriage.

Not so long ago, in the majority of Arab societies, girls marrying when they were over 18 were considered to be experiencing delayed marriage. However, the increase in educational level, the changing financial affordability of marriage and of establishing new homes and the adoption of age 18 as the boundary age for defining a child, have all contributed to different societal and demographic considerations of the definition of delayed marriage.

The average age of marriage for those who get married (SMAM) is usually the basis for classifying the term delays in marriage. The classification categories in this study were dictated by the SMAM range (between 22 and 31) observed in different Arab countries.

Table 6 allows a comparison between the characteristics of those who are marrying within a low SMAM (22–24) and a high SMAM (27+). The expectation is those marrying later would be educated to a higher level and are more likely to be participating in the labor force. Analysis can only be done on countries that have conducted specialized surveys with accessible data. Among groups with later ages at marriage this expectation is generally observed.

Improved commands over resources suggest the livelihood of these women and their families may be better than their counterparts who married at young ages. The delayed marriage, however, is expected to reflect itself in lower fertility levels than desired by the families concerned. The sexual, reproductive, as well as psychosocial health and well-being of these women have not being adequately studied.

In terms of celibacy, it is defined as referring to women aged 35–49 who have never married. These women may of course marry at a later age but given the low prospects of a marriage at later ages and the unacceptance of sexual relations outside marriage, they are considered celibate. It was important to use this cut off age group to be able to conduct meaningful analysis in terms of numbers of celibate women. Furthermore, in some few tables we used the age group 30–49 to allow an increase in sample size.

The focus of the following section is to provide information on the relative size, characteristics and well-being aspects of this particular group of women, who are spending a longer portion of their lives in non-marital living arrangements and whose prospects of remaining single are higher than a few decades ago.

The concern within this category is prompted by a realization that very little is known about them, the opportunities and challenges they are facing and the quality of lives they are leading. This is particularly important in view of the observation that existing societal and support systems appear to continue to revolve around the role of women as wives and mothers, and to neglect this category and its increasing weight in society. Indeed very little research have been done on this group of women “who have never been married, have not attained the privileges that come with being a wife and a mother, but nevertheless are full citizens with full basic social, civil and sexual rights”.¹⁶

The following section attempts to provide an estimate of celibate population size with a focus on women, their characteristics and how different they are from married women in the same age group. More importantly, an attempt is made to investigate the available information on their well-being, interests and demands.

Table 7. Total number in the age group 35–49 of single males, females, total population single, total population and percent single among total population.

Countries	Single male	Single female	Total single	Total population	%
Egypt (2006)	236,948	158,822	395,770	12,380,359	3.20
Sudan (2008)	240,075	139,253	379,328	4,978,159	7.62
Tunisia (2004)	106,042	103,709	209,751	1,926,296	10.89
Jordan (2004)	19,138	35,894	55,032	724,373	7.60
Yemen (2004)	33,959	22,225	56,185	2,220,302	2.53
Kuwait (2011)	51,548	44,681	96,229	812,247	11.85
S.A* (2004)	40,608	31,923	72,531	2,366,435	3.06
Bahrain (2010)	101,470	28,840	130,310	319,396	40.80
UAE (2005)	38,176	13,370	51,546	1,067,646	4.83
Qatar** (2010)	69,720	12,063	81,783	598,761	13.66
Total	937,684	590,780	1,528,465	27,393,974	5.58

Source: CAPMAS. Egypt population and housing census: 2006. CBS. Sudan Population Census: 2008. CDSI. Saudi Arabia Population and Housing Census: 2004. CIO. Bahrain Population Census: 2010. CSB. Kuwait Population, Housing, Buildings and Establishments Census: 2011. CSO. Yemen Population and Housing Census: 2004. DS. Jordan Population and Housing Census: 2004. NBS. UAE Population Census: 2005. NIS. Tunisia population and housing census primary results: 2004). SA. Qatar population, housing, and establishments census: 2010.

* SA data refers to nationals only.

** Age 35–54.

Table 7 shows the number of celibate females in the age group 35–49, ranging from approximately 13 000 in the United Arab Emirates to approximately 159 000 in Egypt. The percentages single population in the age group 35–49 ranges from a low of 3% to a high of 41%. Among the total population in the age group 35–49, around 27.4 million in 10 countries considered, there are 1.5 million in the single population and 0.6 million celibate females.

Table 8 does not reflect a consistent pattern in terms of the percentages celibate by social characteristics. In Egypt and Jordan, the highly disadvantaged groups (primary or less education, poorest fifth), tend to have high percentages not getting married.

Morocco portrays a very different picture. The more privileged groups (Higher education, Richer and Richest fifth) have higher percentages not getting married. The differentiated prospects of marriage by different social groups warrant more in depth country level analysis.

In terms of the distribution of never married women by residence and wealth index (Table 9), the same observation, that relations between variables and percentages of never married are different in different countries, applies. In Egypt, never married women are equally divided in terms of urban and rural residences, are mainly composed of a low educational status (66% primary or less) with a slightly higher tendency to be poorer (40% in the lowest 2/5 wealth category, 34.8% in the highest). Celibate women in Morocco generally reside in an urban setting, they are similar to Egyptians in that they have mainly primary education or less (66%), but they fall into a higher economic status. It should be noted that, in the three countries considered, a higher proportion of never married women are heads of a household compared to ever married women.

Table 8. Percentage of females in age group 35–49 who are never married by selected characteristics in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco.

	Egypt 2008	Jordan 2007	Morocco 2003-04
Place of residence			
Urban	2.6	9.6	13.9
Rural	2.5	12.9	9.0
Education			
Primary or less	2.9	11.6	9.8
Preparatory and less than secondary	1.4	8.6	22.4
Secondary	2.2	9.1	18.4
Higher	2.3	11.8	25.3
Wealth index			
Poorest	3.6	12.2	6.7
Poorer	2.0	10.0	8.9
Middle	3.3	12.1	9.5
Richer	2.4	9.4	16.2
Richest	1.8	8.0	16.3
Total	2.6	10.1	12.1

Source: Special tabulations based on DHS datasets accessed from: <http://www.measuredhs.com>

Table 9. Percent distribution of never married and ever married females aged 35–49 by selected characteristics in Egypt, Jordan and Morocco.

	Egypt 2008		Jordan 2007		Morocco 2003-04	
	Never married	Ever married	Never married	Ever married	Never married	Ever married
Place of residence						
Urban	47.4	46.6	80.4	85.1	73.7	63.0
Rural	52.6	53.4	19.6	14.9	26.3	37.0
Education						
Primary or less	66.0	58.2	20.4	17.6	66.2	84.1
Preparatory and less than secondary	3.7	7.0	32.4	38.9	21.3	10.2
Secondary	21.3	24.6	13.7	15.3	2.5	1.5
Higher	9.0	10.2	33.6	28.2	9.9	4.1
Wealth index						
Poorest	26.3	18.6	19.2	15.6	9.1	17.5
Poorer	13.7	18.0	17.4	17.8	12.4	17.7
Middle	25.3	19.6	23.6	19.4	14.8	19.4
Richer	19.5	21.4	20.2	21.9	29.7	21.2
Richest	15.3	22.4	19.5	25.2	34.0	24.1
Female heads of household						
Yes	18.3	9.8	18.5	5.3	29.7	14.9
No	81.7	90.2	81.5	94.7	70.3	85.1

Source: Special tabulations based on DHS datasets accessed from: <http://www.measuredhs.com>

These different compositions of celibate women in different countries are a reflection of the status of the country in terms of urbanization, education and economic distribution as well as the differentiated probability of marriage by social characteristics.

In terms of the difference in participation in public life between single and ever married subjects, earlier studies indicate that “In the Arab countries covered by the fertility surveys of the 1990s, the average participation rate was 31 percent among single 25–29 year-old females against 18 percent among married women of the same age group with (18%) or without children (17%)”.⁹ Unfortunately recent data on the working status of single females are more difficult to calculate. For example, the recent demographic health survey in Egypt 2008, Jordan 2007 and Morocco 2003-04 no longer collected the working status within the household module. Special tabulations from the 2005 Social Contract Survey conducted in Egypt confirm that the percentage of never married women that worked during the month before survey reaches 30.1% compared to 17.9% for ever married women.

As for other aspects of participation in public life (civic and political participation), Figure 6 shows that never married females generally show a higher level of participation (positive gap).

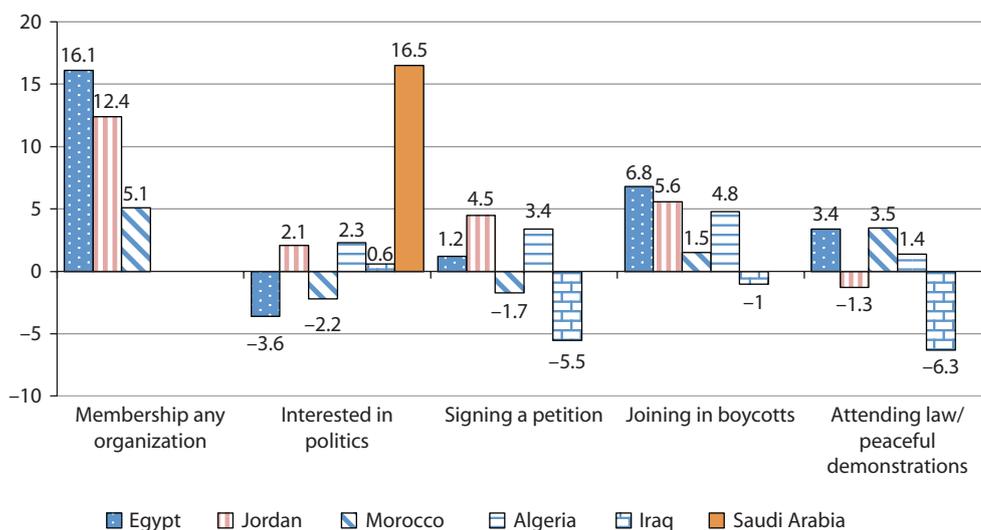


Figure 6. Gap in percentage participating or interested in civil or political life by selected aspects between never married and married women for different countries (Source: Based on annex Tables A3 and A4).

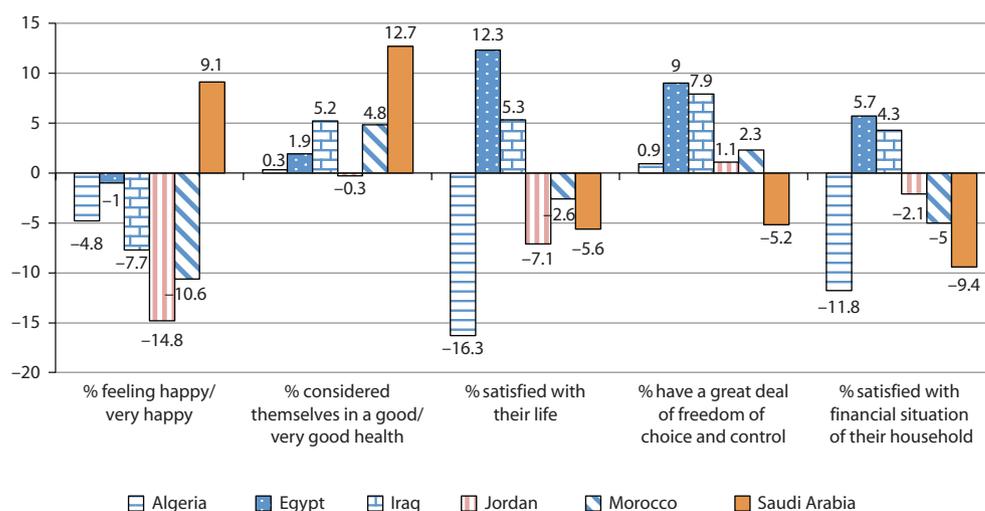


Figure 7. Gap in percentages with positive replies on different aspects of wellbeing between never married and married women for different countries (Source: Based on annex Table A5).

In terms of key questions on the prevailing discourse of the celibacy challenge; what is known about the well-being of celibate women? How they are perceived in their societies, and what are the types of public policies adopted? It is important to note that the evidence base that allows us to address these questions is scant in the Arab world. The standardized more readily available national household surveys collect data from ever married women only. The following is a first attempt using scattered data and information drawn from different sources. These sources include special tabulations from the World Value Survey, Master Level Thesis, personal blogs mainly administered by single women, newspaper articles, as well as a quick review of online policies on reproductive health and population. The following observations are noted:

- The literature reviewed agrees on the importance of the institution of marriage and its specificity in the Arab region, whereby marriage is the only form of sexual union that is endorsed. Society and individuals alike embrace the advantages of marriage. Furthermore, the fact that marriage is the sole socially approved arrangement that allows reproduction and sexual relations adds to the centrality of marriage in the Arab region.
- The reviewed literature reflects an adequate appreciation of the seriousness and overall negative implications of celibacy. This is very contrary to the muted discourse on early marriage.
- There is inaccuracy of indicators quoted and the use of scare tactics in advocating the seriousness of celibacy in the Arab region. For example, Madani in 2013¹⁷, stated Egypt's statistics indicate 13 million males and females, over 35 are currently never married. The official 2006 census data states that this figure refers to the age group (16–75+). Similarly, a newspaper article on Egypt quotes a figure of 9 million reaching the age 35 or more without ever being married. The 2006 census statistics states this number as half a million. It also states that the number of never married females at age 30 or more in Saudi Arabia reaches over one million, while the 2004 census figure of total national single females is only 85,217.
- The discourse used in reference to celibate women is very derogatory. The term itself "A'anness" is seen as insulting. A master level thesis in Egypt¹⁸ indicated that as many as 90.6 percent of interviewees desired to change that label. The stereotype of celibate women as non-achievers in one's life and as sufferers, depressed and envious of others is quite dominant. This stereotype is not confirmed by the analysis of Figure 7. The figure shows, with exception of feelings of happiness and financial situation, never married women tend to indicate more positive feelings and increased wellbeing.
- Pressures on women to get married are precipitated from all circles (families, friends, coworkers and the community at large) and in many instances turn to disapprovals, suspicion, insults and condescension.¹⁹ Furthermore, spinsters feel they are intentionally excluded from family events of friends and colleagues (weddings, birth of children, ...), blamed for the misfortunes of others (evil eye), drawn upon extensively for errands and assistance with little consideration for their private lives.²⁰

- The discussed impediments of marriage cover a wide range, including financial difficulties (high unemployment, high cost of living and difficulties in securing independent households . . .), affordability of marriage costs (expensive dowries, extravagant marriage costs, financial conditions imposed . . .), unavailability and restrictions from male suitors (high number of females vs. males, males apprehension of responsibilities, reduced importance of the marriage institution, higher expectations and stringent conditions on partners, characteristics with the interesting caveat that men shun away from highly educated, independent females . . .), higher expectations and restrictions from female suitors (higher expectations and more selective criterion in choosing partners, smaller pool of compatible partners, reduced centrality of marriage in view of increased freedom and competing opportunities available to single females . . .).
- The proposed solutions to reduce the levels of celibacy are shaped by the monetary impediments. They include a demand that families reduce their financial conditions and that the state and civil society provide financial privileges to newlyweds, as well as different forms of direct financial assistance.

Other possible solutions in the cultural domain, take two contrasting forms. At one level, there is a call for an ambitious strategy at the Arab region incorporating the establishment of national and local level committees. A special mention of “the compatibility of suitors”, as a dominant marriage impediment in Saudi Arabia needs to be addressed.²¹

A contrasting solution appears to advocate the return of early marriage and for *belittling* the importance of emotional ties.²¹ Therefore, a return to arranged marriages,²² as well as advocating the practice of polygamy.²³

- An interesting development is the increasing volume of online discourses on and from celibate women. Noteworthy is a recently (May, 2008) established facebook group: “Spinsters for change”, by Yomna Mokhtar, a young Egyptian journalist/activist.^{24,25} The aim, the mission and the whole thrust of the discourse, detailed in the following, speaks to the emergence of a new social reality claiming its place in Arab culture.

The aim of the group is to initiate dialog between women to discuss how to change the negative social view of unmarried women. The group is outspoken against the social labelling and ill treatment of unmarried women, and has a media spokesperson, a social advisor, a religious advisor and a psychologist.

The group’s mission statement states they are ‘A social movement that seeks to change the negative attitude towards every unmarried girl who finds herself facing two dead ends: either forced to get married to any man so she can get rid of the ‘spinster’ title that’s suffocating her, or maintaining her position, insisting on waiting until she finds the right guy and [in the meantime] dealing with the curses that society will throw at her. We aren’t seeking to make men enemies [. . .] nor are we calling on girls to boycott marriage. But we reject the idea that girls should get married under pressure from their families or societies or just to get rid of the title ‘spinster,’ [so they don’t] come back to their families [. . .] carrying the label ‘divorcée’.²⁴ The group isn’t asking for the right to be single or crossing any of society’s “red lines” and the fact that Mokhtar is veiled holds some importance in showing she is not a morally decadent spinster. As is adding that Islamic weddings are held to prevent “deviant” behaviour (aka, homosexuality and premarital sex) and not simply with the aim of helping those without funds get married.²⁵

Mokhtar believes that the negative outlook of society on unmarried women is part of the issue surrounding Egyptian society’s continued wrongdoing against women. “It shows how our society looks at women as wives and baby makers. She is born to get married and give birth no matter what kind of marriage she is in. Happily married or not, the point is to [get] married,” Mokhtar added. The concept of a wife as “property” in marriage spans centuries in Egypt, but ancient history may point to a different story.¹⁹

She notes that even though marriage in modern Egypt is seen as an equal contract between husband and wife, in practice it is not that easy. Many women on the edge of marriage are hesitant to ask for equal rights in the contract itself because of fear their suitor may decide to “back out” of the arrangement.

- A final observation relates to the serious absence of data and information and a context specific discourse on impediments, implications and policies.

The absence of well conceptualized and structured studies on the many aspects of the phenomenon is noteworthy. One of the few examples on studying the sociological aspects of celibacy is the Masters Thesis conducted in Amman.²⁶ This thesis adopts the lens of social exclusion to investigate the lives of celibate women. It asks how do never-married women navigate social spaces? How do they define and claim rights in their daily interactions? What are the challenges and opportunities they might encounter in dealing with the larger society?

The thesis also explores never-married women's selfhood and identities as a result of multi-combinations of different life aspects of family, work, selves and society. Through the narratives of coping, social groups, harassments, beliefs and understandings of marriage and sexuality. The findings indicated that identity confusion and conflict were clear with most of the women informants, while men do not have the same conflicts. This results from the gap between women's ideals and practices due to cultural norms, as well as power and the loving relationships within the family. Patriarchy and modern patriarchy practiced at home, gender roles and notions of femininity and masculinity shape the struggle women have and reflect on their understandings and definitions of their self-inclusion and exclusion, as well as the society's inclusion and exclusion of them as never-married women.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES AND RESEARCH

The concern with marriage delays and celibacy is widespread amongst the wider public in the Arab region. Such a concern is not confined to the countries that were shown to experience higher levels of delays and celibacy. In a country like Egypt, where the challenge of early marriage is more dominant, the pre-occupation of families is to secure marriage for the non-married females.

In terms of public policies, the Gulf countries in particular show serious state interest in addressing this challenge. For example, in Saudi Arabia, there are specialized governmental entities that advocate against the concepts of costly traditional weddings and facilitate "Mahr and Shabka" for youth who wants to marry. King Abdulaziz University²⁷ launched a project under the umbrella of its "Scientific fund agency" to facilitate marriage among students. The project is called facilitating marriage "Tayseer El zawaj", and is implemented upon a recommendation of a study conducted by the scientific fund agency (KAU). In Qatar, the population policy has 'encouraging people to marry and facilitating the procedures' as one of its aims to increase the natural population growth among Qatari nationals. Qatar gives loans for housing and raises awareness among families to ask for reasonable "Mahr".²⁸

Despite the fact that celibacy is very much visible and on the conscious mind of individuals, families and many Arab states, the diagnosis and proper understanding of this phenomenon and its implications remain at a very superficial level. The solutions proposed and their efficiency are not based on scientific evidence and are not informed by a serious discourse.

The dearth of data and analysis pertaining to the growing number of youth and adults with different aspirations and needs are quite noticeable. Furthermore, the framing of the unattached years as "period in waiting" neglect the fact that these years could be a time for acquiring skills, material assets and for self-fulfillment.

Many solutions proposed do not touch on the patriarchal system and the prevailing gender dynamics as serious impediments to the occurrence of marriage itself. For example, the observation that males shun marrying independent and well-educated girls⁸ while, at the same time, fear the financial burden and extra responsibility of being the breadwinner, poses a contradiction in dealing with the daily realities of life. A contradiction shaped by gender dynamics not supporting equality of marriage partners and not allowing joint sharing of burdens within unions. This contradiction is not seen in all countries. Data from Egypt, for example, shows a higher likelihood for educated and richer women to get married than women with lower education and poorer resources.

Another solution is grounded in gender dynamics that see marriage and motherhood as the only destiny for girls. A perception that fails to cope with the new realities of educated and assertive girls seeking fulfillment in work careers, with independent incomes. Such a perception proposes a return to early ages at marriage, arranged marriages and polygamy as solutions.

⁸An observation very well-articulated by Salma Hassan, a member of the facebook group "Spinsters for Change" blame a mind set that pushes away potential husbands: "Qualities like independent, successful, and smart are our stigma. Those traits push the typical Middle Eastern man away, he becomes intimidated by such characteristics that leave him with no other option but to flee."

The polygamous proposal, for example, fails to see the much larger number of males who are single (13 million single males in age group 20–49, compared to 7 million single females in the same age group, as well as 938 thousand single males and 591 thousand single females in age group 35–49, in the 10 Arab countries considered).

A reasonable solution would be to encourage a smaller age gap between marriage partners. A solution that appear to have been adopted, in a more extreme form, in a number of Arab countries (Algeria, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen), whereby a tendency for an increase in marriage prevalence between well-educated, older women with less well-educated, younger men.² Another practice that appears to be increasing is the occurrence of different forms of marriage (Urfii, Messyar . . . etc.), these types of marriage may not face the same difficulties encountered in typical marriages.

The magnitude, nature and implications of these practices on marriage partners, their wellbeing and the functioning of their families, as well as on the societal fabrics remain black boxes that have not received adequate scientific analysis.

It should be noted that the above discussion of implications fails to take into account the different contexts of Arab countries, as well as the need for differentiated analysis within each country. Clearly discussions of delays in marriage and celibacy and their solutions have to be adopted within the context prevailing in different Arab countries and social groups. The meaning, the implications and the solutions proposed are very different for women who are more financially and emotionally independent than for women with no education and lower economic means.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Analysis presented here scratches the surface of continuously evolving social realities in the Arab region; Realities that are affecting individuals and families who are negotiating and carving a space in their societies. Such a negotiation is pursued within a societal framing that adopts “Notions of the self that do not confirm to the individualist, separatist, bounded, autonomous constructs of western psychodynamic theory”,²⁹ cited in Stack.³⁰ There is an urgent need to better research the situation, dynamics and consequences of the interplay of changing marriage realities and the specificity of contextual forces.

The analysis focuses on women and needs to be complemented with a similar study on the male population. The explanation of this focus is the implications of changes in marriage patterns are expected to be stronger for females than males, as well as the limitations of data on male marriage patterns and implications.

Despite the limitations of data, the analysis succeeds in pointing out the need for more effective societal responses and articulation of differentiated context specific policies and development plans, recognizing the changing family composition and dynamics. The analysis suggests the patriarchal system and gender dynamics are supporting the occurrence of three types of challenges (early marriage, delayed marriage and celibacy) that are not conducive to the wellbeing of a population, as well as translating themselves into possible neglect.

The need for the Arab world to revisit its patriarchal dominance and gender dynamics as a constraint supporting the key marriage challenges is evident. Furthermore, the need for a richer evidence base to guide analysis and policies cannot be over emphasized.

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