



The State of Urbanisation, Migration and the Family in the MENA Region

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The State of Urbanisation, Migration and the Family in the MENA Region

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Introduction

The purpose is to map the evidence on the interlinkages between migration, urbanization, and family dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, from multidisciplinary perspectives.

The paper first explores, in brief, the declining trend of 'extended-families' upon the rising prominence of urbanization, and explores the beneficial traits associated with extensive family structures

Then, the paper attempts to answer two big research questions within the MENA context. The first demarcates **the impact of urbanisation on family structures**, with a focus on extended families within urbanised contexts, and the dilemma of household size and family size. The second focuses on **the consequences of migration on family dynamics at a local and transnational scale**, addressing challenges by the different social structures in the region.

The Beneficial Traits Arising from the Cohesive Structure of an Extended Family

Family is the root environment to invest in new generations and at the same time to take care of the old generations. Solidarity between generations enriches the well-functionality of the family and accordingly it contributes to the community development at large.

(a) Culturally; enhancing intergenerational solidarity helps to protect cultural heritage, because the grandparents act as the **repositories and transmitters** of culture and values to the children.

(b) Financially; the involvement of grandparents in family life as caregivers reduce the financial burden of childcare on the state level. I.e., in the USA, **7.4 million children live in households headed by a grandparent or other relative, known as 'grand families'**.

It is **estimated** that grand families save **US taxpayers more than \$ 6.5 billion** a year by keeping children out of the government-funded foster care system. Furthermore, caring for elderly within extended family reduces the governmental expenditure on elderly care systems.

The Beneficial Traits Arising from the Cohesive Structure of an Extended Family – Cont.

(c) **Physically and emotionally**; intergenerational solidarity provides mutual beneficial exchanges between generations, as studies showed that extended families have better physical health **especially for members with disabilities** than nuclear families. Emotionally, intergenerational ties provide emotional fulfillment for elderly by reducing their isolation, providing them the opportunity to learn new skills, as well as providing the new generations with a caring and loving environment which enhances the sense of carefulness and commitment.

The notion of **'cohousing' of extended families promote 'cohesive' and 'sustainable' communities .. "a better quality of life ... greater social interaction, support, ... opportunities to share resources... increased feeling of empowerment"**

The Downhill Trend of Extended Family

The unwavering expansion of urbanisation and modernisation in the middle east, catalysed by the phenomenon of globalisation, has been accompanied with a trend in decreasing extended families and rising nuclear families. Modernisation contributed to containing extended family structures more in rural areas, while **nuclear families in urban cities.**

Families and communities are integrated into the **multi-spatial globalised system**, where “values”, “traditions” and “relationships” become subject to change. “The mother or grandmother is no longer the main agent of raising children ... values and knowledge derived from television, ... and the Internet”.

Early critics in 1950s – 70s projected that Arab families remain unhindered to these effects, and that the **traditional extended families will prevail**. Other critics also projected “modernisation accelerated the pace of change from the extended family to the nuclear family, **leading to a gradual disappearance of the former**”.

1- What are the contemporary trends of the extended family in the MENA region within urbanised contexts?

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Urbanisation and the Extended Families' Survival

Despite urbanised lifestyles influencing the separate living of nuclear families, the extended family structure **remains strong to a large extent in the Arab region**. In recent research on “**The Arab Family Strength in Qatar, Jordan and Tunisia**”, according to the participants, the family concept often includes extended family members. One participant said: “We live next to some of our relatives.” Another said: “**We are all next to each other.**” Others talked about married and unmarried siblings and older family members that were living in the same household. Even when they don't live together under the same roof, there is a commitment to spending time together. One participant said: “**Thursday is for the family of the mother and Friday is reserved for the family of the father**”. (DIFI, 2018).

What are the contemporary trends of the extended family in the MENA region within urbanised contexts? – Cont.

Urbanisation and the Extended Families' Survival – Cont.

[Familial VS Individualistic Viewpoints]

Throughout the near past century, emerging oil wealthy states in the Gulf have summoned enormous wealth to the region at exponential rates. With rising living standards and new life facilities, El-Haddad (2003, p.4) reveals how families are re-evaluating their arrangements, acclaiming: **“the desire of the new parents to enjoy life would overcome traditional values that considered large numbers of children as a source of support and pride”**. Reyes (2019, p.784) further elaborates this, asserting, **“the decision to live in an extended-family household is often determined by necessity rather than being a choice...”**.

What are the contemporary trends of the extended family in the MENA region within urbanised contexts? – Cont.

Extended Families Supporting Nuclear Ones: Breaking Stereotypes

The negative stereotype arises from undesirable interferences that might affect marital relations within nuclear families. **DIFI (2018), highlighted that interference from extended family members is one of the main challenges facing the Arab families in the selected case studies (Qatar, Jordan and Tunisia), which stems from the qualitative narrative.**

However, the recent evidence from empirical research on assessing the marital relationships in the first five years of marriage across 19 Arab countries revealed prominent harmonious interactions between extended families and nuclear ones. 30% of a representative sample (1184 participants from Arab countries) from newly married couples confirmed that the fathers and mothers and in-laws contribute positively to solving any marital disputes. 18 % of participants confirmed that they still receive financial support from their families, where 22% and 23 % of participants respectively confirmed that extended families help to raise the kids and take care of them during the sickness of mothers, while the negative interference remained limited to 21 % (DIFI, 2022).

What are the contemporary trends of the extended family in the MENA region within urbanised contexts? – Cont.

Urbanisation and Fertility: Dilemma of Household Size and Family Size

Most of the literature on urbanisation and social dynamics proves that families tend to have fewer children in urban cities. This would affect fertility rates at the state level, especially in high-income countries.

For instance, a study, that covered **Near East/North Africa and Latin America**, used data from household surveys in 43 developing countries to describe the main dimensions of household size and composition in the developing world. **The 'household size' was found to be positively associated with the level of fertility.**

What are the contemporary trends of the extended family in the MENA region within urbanised contexts? – Cont.

Urbanisation and Fertility: Dilemma of Household Size and Family Size – Cont.

There is not enough evidence examining the same argument in the Arab region. In a recent study by DIFI (2022) on social aspects of fertility in Qatar, **around 55% of the sample mentioned a relationship between household size and a person's decision on the number of children - the smaller the household size the less tendency among partners to have more children.**

Moreover, it is evident that in some low to middle-income countries with high fertility rates and family planning policies in the region, such as **Egypt; subsidized housing units are very small (60 – 80 square meters)**, in a governmental attempt to reduce family size.

It is worth highlighting that in some Arab countries, especially in Mashreq, large families are the common structure. For instance, **Jordanian households have an average of 4.7 to 7.7 members (DOS and ICF, 2019). Although 91.63 percent of Jordan's total population lives in urban areas and cities, tribalism** remains the main source of continued large family' structure.

2- What are the interlinkages between migration and family structures and dynamics in the MENA region?

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Refugees and Transnational Family Network

In a contemporary world plagued by increasing challenges of human security, political turmoil, conflicts and wars, the status of diaspora communities now occupies a place of critical importance in the global dialogue on refugees. According to the most recent data from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 70.8 million people around the world have been forcibly displaced, amongst whom are approximately 22.9 million refugees. According to the World Bank data on refugee populations by country, **the MENA is ranked as the top contributor to refugees worldwide.** From 2011 onwards, statistics show a massive flood of refugees resulting from the wars and conflicts in the region, following the Arab spring. UNHCR documented 5.5 million refugees from **Syria alone, representing 28.8 percent of refugees worldwide.** Figures show that although there are different regions where Arab families seek refuge, MENA remains at the top for hosting the highest number of refugees, **where Lebanon hosts 1.5 million Syrian refugees and Turkey hosts 3.7 million** (UNHCR, 2022).

What are the interlinkages between migration and family structures and dynamics in the MENA region? – Cont.

Refugees and Transnational Family Network – Cont.

Narratives of pre-migration loss among Refugee Arab Families prior to resettlement have been well-documented. Such **loss includes that of family members, material resources, social support and networks, amongst others**. In addition to these types of hardship carried from their home countries, families **face structural challenges related to their inclusion and integration in host countries, in terms of being acknowledged culturally, economically, socially or politically in the national social policies of the host countries** (Baobaid et al, 2018).

Research on “austerity for the poor and prosperity for the rich”, shows how with fragile social protection systems in the Arab world, people have constructed their own resilience mechanisms for survival to cope with poverty and exacerbated hardships, as recently illustrated with covid-19 circumstances. Various literature demarcates this as a “**Transnational Family Network**”, where such mechanisms comprise the increase in remittances and financial support from migrant family members to their relatives at home countries.

(Beirut Port Explosion, Covid-19, Economic Crisis – inflation of Lebanese pound, etc.)

It is worth noting that the *“Transnational Family Network”* concept refers to the volume of emigration outflow and remittances inflow.

What are the interlinkages between migration and family structures and dynamics in the MENA region? – Cont.

The impact of Regional Gulf Migration on Families

Despite the prevalent financial opportunities to establish a family, the regionally common sponsorship (Kafala) system, which still exists in many GCC countries, has found numerous foreign nuclear families making a life and a home in a country to which they can never attain naturalization entitlements. **Due to the lack of intermarriages and naturalization**, literature described population dynamics as the growth of two independent populations.

Living in a significantly lengthy period results in a degree of detachment from the extended families back home, or as Vora acclaims, **the production of “a unique, hybrid form of cultural identity”**.

Low- skilled labour are detached from their nuclear families, spending maybe two years or more to get annual leave for a family visit. **Yet, literature highlighted that the decision for these migrants to move to the Gulf was “produced at the familial level” for better economic opportunities.**

Nevertheless, over the past several decades the dilemma of South Asian migrants has gathered attention, generating dialogue on the removal of the Kafala system, towards more prominently, new labour law policies. This can be illustrated with Qatar, where they have recently implemented a new comprehensive **minimum wage** of 1800 QR (\$491) and a **reform of the labour regulations** – now allowing workers to leave to other jobs without the constraint of seeking permission from their employers (Pattison, 2020). In fact, this amendment was part of a comprehensive labour policy transformation in Qatar towards social inclusion.

Policy Recommendations

Research agenda:

The mapped literature is opening the door for potential qualitative and quantitative research, such as highlighting the impact of urbanization on family dynamics and cohesion, examining the consequences of household size on fertility decisions, and exploring the impact of gulf migration on nuclear families' wellbeing and their extended families back home, etc.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Introduce housing policies that support the physical closeness of nuclear and extended families.
2. Rethink vertical urbanization by developing policies that utilize the deserts in the region for horizontal and sustainable urbanization.
3. Produce and publicize evidence on the crucial role of extended families in support of the establishment and sustaining the institution of marriage and nuclear families.
4. Further enhance social inclusion and social protection policies for migrant workers and expatriate families.
5. Bring back large families and extended families to the policymaking agenda and develop related multidisciplinary policies.

Thank you

Discussion