

Women in Arab countries: challenging the patriarchal system?

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The stark picture of human development in the Arab world painted in a report written for the United Nations by leading Arab researchers became the subject of impassioned debate in late summer 2002. They found that it was being seriously undermined by failings on three fronts: civil and political freedom, knowledge production and dissemination, and empowerment of women [1]. All—but especially the latter—are seen as the main factors of demographic transition, especially fertility reduction. Women's status, therefore, should be reflected in continuing high fertility. But is that the case?

The average total fertility rate (TFR) for the Arab world was 3.4 children per woman in 2000. Still high compared to the world average (2.7), it is low compared to the six to eight children per woman which was the norm for the previous generation. So fertility has dropped sharply. Compared to Asian or Latin American countries at the same level of economic development, the decline onset later in the Arab world, but once under way progressed so fast that international statistical yearbooks were taken unawares and almost invariably over-estimate the true TFRs (table 1).

Arguably, then, the Arab countries would present a paradox of fertility decline without women's empowerment. And yet the causes of fertility decline are universal: in the Arab world as elsewhere, it stems from the changing role of women and the place of children in the family and society, in the wake of the radi-

cal changes in today's world, not least urbanization, the shift to service economies and the spread of education. Why have these causes been so late-acting in the Arab world? Is it down to the Islamic religion and culture, or to economic and political factors?

◆ Oil and fertility

Late-starting fertility decline in the Arab world—and in other parts of the Muslim world—is commonly attributed to the influence of Islam [4] in supposedly holding back the two agents of demographic change—women's autonomy and the emergence of civil society organizations that promote community self-empowerment—by harnessing the former to the yoke of male authority and the latter to that of political authority. And yet, whether as a State or grassroots religion, Islam has not stood in the way of radical demographic changes. Cases in point are the Islamic Republic of Iran—a country which, though ruled by the most fundamentalist of clergies, may well have experienced one of the most rapid fertility declines in history [5]—or Algeria, where fertility collapsed in the 1990s at the very time when Islamic fundamentalism was gaining most strength among the population.

Islam, however, is not all that Arab countries have in common; they also have a heavy economic dependence on oil revenues: either directly in the case of major oil exporters (Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the Gulf States in the east, Libya and Algeria in the west), or indirectly for the other countries, where oil wealth has a major

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impact through development assistance, private investment and migrant workers' remittances. The oil economy experienced an unprecedented boom in the ten to twelve years after the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, one immediate consequence of which was to send oil prices soaring. The sudden change in scale of oil revenues (crude oil rent) enabled Arab governments to establish welfare state systems through financing development (health, education, etc.) and subsidizing consumption.

While development activities were conducive to fertility decline, subsidized consumption, by reducing the cost of children, could work to the opposite effect. This is what happened in a number of Arab countries, especially the most oil-rich ones, whose governments, by keeping the population in check through generous oil wealth redistribution, were able to play the forces of conservatism and change off against one another. Social conservatism was reflected in particular by a continuing very low labour force participation rate among married women. So, by both cutting the costs of fertility and keeping women in the home, oil revenues indirectly promoted high fertility. To some extent, oil revenues "generated" population.

The onset of the oil crisis in the mid-1980s put an end to this. Collapsing oil prices slashed revenues and all countries, apart from the Gulf States, were quick to bring in economic reforms from which families lost out. Age at marriage rose, a trend fuelled by the practice acquired in the heady oil-rich days of amassing a substantial marriage dowry, which now took many years to scrape together. Married couples had smaller families, as they continued to nurture the aspirations held for their children during the good times, while life grew dearer. This succession of economic cycles widened the generation gap between the children of the welfare state and those of structural adjustment [6].

◆ **An emerging group: young never-married women**

The early stages of fertility decline in the Arab world were mainly due to the rising female age at first marriage [3] [7]. Three quarters of girls in the 1950 birth cohort married under the age of twenty, compared to just one third in the 1970 birth cohort. Mean age at marriage had risen from under twenty to over twenty-five in barely a generation.

Why should women's age at marriage have risen so fast? A longer length of education is one reason.

That explains the decline in early marriages, but not the high incidence of very late marriages: the vast majority of girls are now educated up to the age of 15, but still only a minority remain in education after age 20. The proportion single among young women aged 20-24 is therefore much higher than their enrolment ratio: 47% against 10% in Syria (1994 census), 84% against 17% in Tunisia (1994), 56% against 18% in Egypt (1996).

Employment is another reason for delayed marriage. It is not yet wholly acceptable in Arab societies for a married woman to work outside the home. In the Arab countries covered by the fertility surveys of the 1990s, the average participation rate was 31% among single 25-29 year-old females against 18% among married women of the same age group with (18%) or without children (17%): clearly, marriage more than motherhood is what prompts women to forsake working life. By putting a growing number of women on the labour market, the economic changes under way—growth in women-dominated occupations (teaching, health, administration, etc.) and declining living conditions from the end of the welfare state—have therefore arguably contributed to delayed marriages.

Delayed marriage tends to be construed as evidence of the empowerment of Arab women. The two reasons cited above—rising educational levels and entry into the labour force—argue in favour of that interpretation, in that for many young women, their unattached years are a time for acquiring skills or material assets, and for self-fulfilment. But empowerment is not absolute, as single women remain under the authority of their father or legal guardian. They live with their family until marriage, as do the overwhelming majority of young people: in the working-class districts of a large metropolis like Cairo, male students and soldiers are the only single people to live away from their family of origin. The lengthening pre-marital period, sometimes beyond age 25 and even to almost 30 (28 in urban Morocco, 29 in Libya), has created a population sub-group of never-married young women. This new group has not yet carved out its own place in society, still less secured legal recognition.

◆ **Increasingly better educated, but less economically active than men**

The number of veiled women about the streets of many Arab cities is growing. Is this a reflection of resurgent religious devotion? Or simply that more women are to be seen in the public space because the

Islamic veil allows them to move around freely? Education is what has really allowed girls previously confined to domesticity from the age of puberty, into the public space. But has it gone as far as full gender equality in education? Egypt has witnessed a steady birth cohort-specific improvement in the deficit of girls in the school population (figure 1). Egypt, which is averagely-placed in this respect, reflects a reassuring picture of a steady advance towards gender equality. The once chiefly male school population (barely one girl to three boys in the cohorts born around 1930) has now become nearly gender equal in primary and secondary education (90 girls to 100 boys in the cohorts born around 1980), and seems well-advanced in university education (66 girls to 100 boys in the 1970 birth cohort).

Unlike school, many workplaces remain relatively closed-off to women. Labour statistics (table 1) show that Arab countries have the world's lowest female participation rates. However, the evidence of a series of time use surveys is that traditional statistical sources (censuses) underestimate Arab women's real contribution to the economy, because it partly comprises homemaker activities, and census takers' questions are usually answered by men who are unwilling to acknowledge the economic nature of such activities. Is it to take account of unrecorded female activities that international publications have significantly revalued (albeit on an unknown basis) the female participation rates reported in recent censuses: revalued from 14% (1996 census) to 35% in Egypt, from 15% (1998) to 30% in Algeria, from 21% (1994) to 41% in Morocco, from 23% (1994) to 37% in Tunisia? The fact remains that, even revalued, these rates remain low compared to the world average (55%).

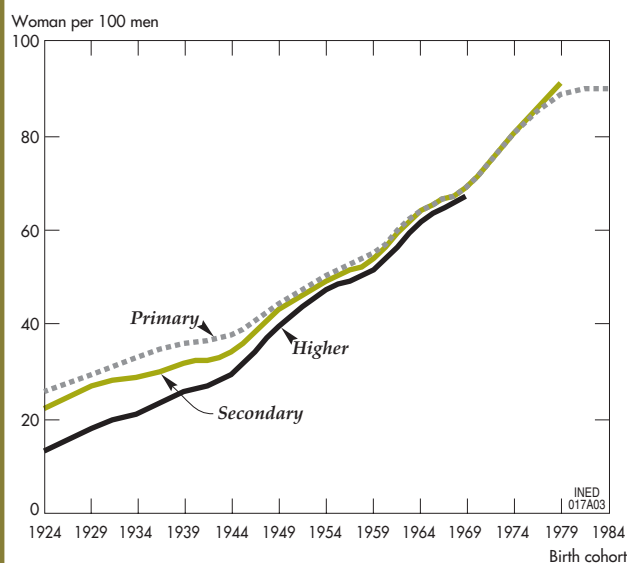
Might not women's low participation rates hold the clue to one means by which Islam has helped delay fertility decline? Lawyers argue that by recognizing women's right to own personal property, but not an obligation to contribute to family finances out of their income, the Shari'ah (Islamic law) increases husbands' reluctance to allow their wives to work. But we must be wary of syllogism: legal provisions do not produce

Table 1 – Indicators of women's status in Arab countries

	Population en 2000 (millions)	Total fertility rate in 2000 (number of children per woman)		Proportion of married women under 20 (%)		Proportion of women in the labour force among those aged 15 and over (%)
		UN	INED	1950 cohort	1970 cohort	
Arab countries						
<i>of which</i>	284.3	4.2	3.4	74	36	33
Egypt	67.9	3.1	3.0	65	41	35
Sudan	31.1	4.7	3.6	84	36	35
Algeria	30.3	3.0	2.7	86	24	30
Morocco	29.9	3.2	2.7	73	29	41
Iraq	22.9	5.0	–	–	–	–
Saudi Arabia	20.3	5.9	4.2	83	39	21
Yemen	18.3	7.6	5.7	88	64	31
Syria	16.2	3.8	3.6	65	37	29
Tunisia	9.5	2.2	–	67	20	37
Libya	5.3	3.6	–	83	9	25
Jordan	4.9	4.5	3.9	55	27	27
Lebanon	3.5	2.2	1.9	44	21	30
Palestine	3.2	5.6	5.6	–	–	8
Mauritania	2.7	6.0	–	–	–	63
UAE	2.6	3.0	–	88	33	32
Oman	2.5	5.6	–	96	56	19
Kuwait	1.9	2.8	3.3	65	29	37
Qatar	0.6	3.5	–	–	–	41
Bahrain	0.6	2.4	–	77	21	34
World	6 010.1	2.7	–	–	–	55

Sources: UN, 2002 [1]; Courbage, 2001 [2]; Rashad & Osman, 2003 [3].

Figure 1 – Number of women per 100 men in the educated population in Egypt



Source: 1996 census

actual practices. The evidence of anthropological research is that economic realities outweigh legalism: in the crisis-hit urban classes, families not uncommonly rely on the wife's income, prompting husbands to forgo standing on their legal rights to restrict the main breadwinner's movements. In terms of family finances, women's work is a response to the decline in men's real wages.

Under the welfare state, women's low participation rates could partly explain their high fertility. Is the modest rise in female economic activity recorded in times of economic hardships reason enough for the collapse in fertility? Probably not. A more likely explanation is low household incomes compounded by low female participation. The welfare state had raised parents' aspirations and the level of their financial investment for their children, while structural adjustment now undermines their real resources. So, women's partial empowerment reflected by their low contribution to household incomes becomes an effective fertility regulation factor (1). This could explain the paradox stated above of a fertility transition unaccompanied by (total) empowerment of women.

◆ The end of the patriarchal system

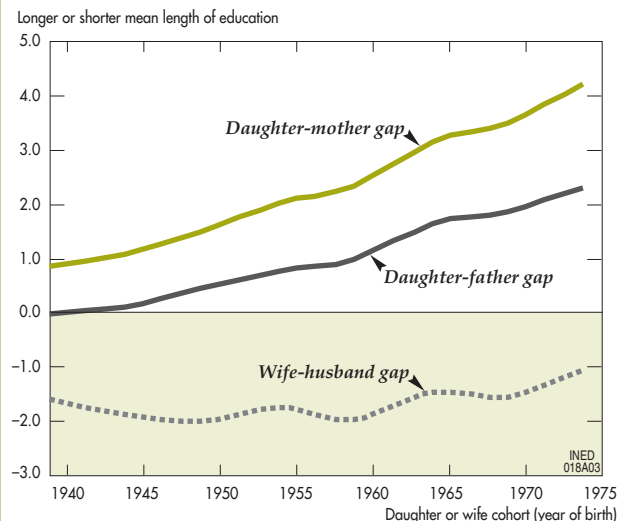
What prospects might these trends foreshadow?

Demographic change is undermining the patriarchal system which has governed the family system since time immemorial. That system rested on two pillars: younger brothers' subordination to the eldest brother in sib relationships, and girl-women subordination to males within the family or marriage unit. Fertility decline undermines the first pillar. The modern trend towards two-child families—on average a boy and a girl—quite simply lessened the scope for a hierarchy between brothers, for lack of brothers.

The second pillar can still be based on law, still modelled as regards personal statuses on the Shari'ah. But the gap between law and actual practices is widening. The rise in education levels has not only affected gender, but also generation, hierarchies. Measured by mean length of education, the educational attainment gap between children and their parents has grown steadily (figure 2). From the 1950s birth cohorts, girls have not only been educated longer than their mothers, but also than their fathers. And since education is an element of authority, girls' over-achievement com-

(1) Married women's non-participation increases the relative cost of children, while participation increases their opportunity cost (loss of earnings during spells out of employment for child-rearing).

Figure 2 – Education gap in Egypt



Note: Assumed age gaps: wife-husband 5 years, daughter-mother 30 years, daughter-father 35 years.

Source: 1986 and 1996 censuses.

pared to their fathers could well challenge the patriarchal system. On a cohort-for-cohort basis, women are now almost as well-educated as men, their labour force participation is bringing them in growing numbers into close contact with non-relative males with whom they are competing in the labour market. Women's activism and civil and political lobbying for the reform of personal statuses now under way in a number of Arab countries are likely to topple the patriarchal system from its increasingly shaky foundations.

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