

## NOTES CONCERNING ELDER'S PATRONAGE IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES

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Issues that are related to elder people in the Arab countries are characterized by several features that distinguish them from their counterparts in other countries, particularly the advanced industrial countries as countries of Western Europe and North America. That the Arab societies are going through a transitional phase: from the traditional and the old phases to the modern and contemporary. The old social relationships and traditional values fall back, some are fading gradually, but the modern social relations and values of modernity have not been confirmed, nor become a mainstream yet. Most reflected the situation on the relationships within the family, including the method of dealing with the elderly.

1. The traditional family (extended family) where parents, sons and daughters, and grandchildren live with their grandparents, no longer exists except in a narrow range that does not exceed the fifth. (The proportion of extended families ranged between about 4% of the total families in Syria and 18% in Qatar, for example). As for the rest of the families, they became marital (nuclear) which only include a husband, a wife and their children. Although the split of the traditional family into separate family units might solve lots of the social problems that occur due to maladaptation that happens sometimes as a result of difference between generations in one family, it also leads to the changing of the expected roles for parents and children and what is connected to the role of the grandchildren and grandparents. The traditional roles for each of the generations within the family are no longer the same. Also the supportive of these traditional roles for the generation of grandparents, parents and grand children are fading gradually (gradual loss). The contemporary family is no longer considered to be the productive unit for its individuals. The grandfather or the father is no longer the master or the decision-maker in the family.<sup>2</sup>

Many of our traditional social values are still present strongly in most of the Arab societies. There is still a part of the family correlation, cohesion, solidarity which protects the parents during their late-life; there are differences in the correlation in different countries according to their social and economical development. As well as some differences between countryside and town within the same country, where it is found that the family relationships are stronger in the countryside. In addition, the elder people are not really heard due to the effects and influences of globalization, the young youth are being busy with internet, satellites without even having the ability to differentiate between what is good and what bad, or what is relevant to our values and behavioral styles of what is being broadcasted through different media means.

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2 For more information, see Yusuf Breeck: situations of the elder people in the care houses that are officially licensed in Syria. The Syrian Organization for family. Damascus, 2006. (Field study; not published)

Thus highlights the contrast between the pattern of contemporary family and the roles of individuals, roots and branches and between the expectations of each generation from the other within the same family, depending on the different values that govern the behavior of each of those generations.

2. The second characteristic feature of the issues of aging in the Arab countries is concerned with the demographic shift in these countries. When we talk about the elderly in the Arab countries we are dealing with a broad category of non-homogeneous society. In most Arab countries employees are to retire at the age of sixty, although a large proportion of them are still able to work and give, and do not need any care (in terms of health at least). The age is not the only indicator to signify the term “elderly”, but the ability to work, and the health status of the person concerned. And some researchers distinguish between the “young elderly” (60-74 years), and “older adults” (75-84 years), and “elder old people” (85 years and over). Problems related to each category of the elderly differ from one to the other. What concerns us here is that most of the first category continue to be able to work, and must look for ways and mechanisms of integration in economic and social activity for their communities. But the major obstacle to achieving this goal lies in the lack of adequate employment opportunities, as a result of patterns of demographic transition on the one hand, and the nature of development plans in place on the other. Demographic shift towards more demographic openness (the opportunity) has begun in a number of Arab countries. But this transformation has its distinctive characteristics in these countries. Where increasing numbers of young people with increasing numbers of children and the elderly at the same time, unlike developed countries where increasing numbers of older people with declining numbers of children who are going to the youth of the country in a few years. The fertility rates in Arab countries are still among the highest in the world, at a time of declining mortality rates and rising life expectancy at birth.

Thus, the percentage of young people aged 15-24 has reached about 20% of the total population of Arab countries in 2000, while the proportion of working-age population (15-64) to about 38% and is expected to reach 45% in 2020. The age group 65 and over has formed 3.6% in 2000, and is expected to exceed 5% in 2020.<sup>3</sup> But as we have indicated the retirement age in the Arab countries is at 60 years. Therefore, the proportion of this category will increase significantly from the ratios mentioned. The question is: how to ensure sufficient employment opportunities for the increasing numbers of young people and old people that are able to work at the same time?

Arab countries have missed the opportunities provided by economic booms in the second half of the last century and the beginning of this century, particularly the boom in oil prices after the October 1973 war and the resulting unprecedented rise in GDP for the Arab States of oil-producing, as well as the rise in the price of oil and gas in the past few years, before the financial global crisis affects the Arab region. Most of the oil money of both booms mentioned has either gone to foreign

<sup>3</sup> Abdul Basit Abdul Muti, *Population Developments in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities*, paper presented at the Arab Conference on Population and Development: Reality and Perspectives, Doha, May 2009  
Khaled Louhichi, *Arab Migration: Challenges and Opportunities*, paper presented at the above mentioned conference.

banks and multinationals, or to the construction sector projects and luxury leisure, and use only a fraction of them in productive projects that can create and re-create real jobs for the growing numbers of job seekers.

Therefore, unemployment has exacerbated in the Arab region until it became the highest rate in the world, while unemployment rate among young people has reached about 25% which represents three times the rate of unemployment of adults.<sup>4</sup> It is striking that the rates of unemployment among females is higher than among males in all Arab countries, Which refutes the views that attribute the lack of contribution of Arab women in work due to the customs, traditions and culture. There is no doubt that some women are barred from work or abstain as a result of customs and traditions, but the data clearly show that in all Arab countries, there are increasing numbers of females looking for work and unable to find, Which confirms that the lack of job opportunities is the primary reason behind the smaller contribution of Arab women in economic activity.<sup>5</sup> If so, for young people, how can we empower the elderly to contribute in economic activity? How do we work on integrating them in the fields of community life?

Therefore, the Transitional status faced by Arab countries, affects the situation of older persons in the following respects:

**A. Reduces the possibility of enabling the elderly to contribute to economic activity:** It is clear that such a possibility becomes less and less with the worsening unemployment and growing numbers of young job seekers. For example decreased the proportion of workers aged 60 years and over in Syria from about 30% in 1994 to less than 20% in 2004. The argument put forward is to give young people the opportunity to find work. However, facts show that youth unemployment rates are increasing, and lose at the same time experience of the elderly, wisdom and far-sighted vision.

**B. Reduces the state's ability to provide adequate support for the elderly:** The aggravation of poverty and unemployment, and sources' abuse lead to the inability of the State to meet the needs of the elderly, in particular, lack of social security coverage to all them, and lower income of the elderly and inadequate financial resources for the family to provide care. In addition, the youth unemployment makes the elderly have to support young people rather than that young people are responsible for supporting the elderly. The migration of young people in search of work is often left the elderly without family support, or care.

**C. The conditions of older women are more severe than elderly men:** The elderly woman are often illiterate and have no source of income, and the coverage under social security system is less likely than men. The status of older women in the family below the men. Often divorced or widowed getting older lonely because her marriage much more difficult than analogous man. And what makes the situation more difficult, it is women who are usually in the service of men and it includes the elderly as it includes the others.

<sup>4</sup> Khaled AL-Wahashi (Arab Immigration), research paper presented to the above mentioned conference.

<sup>5</sup> This was true since the eighties of the last century at least, is still true even today. See in this regard: Khadr Zechariah, On the social status of Arab women, house parents, Damascus, 1998 Based on the data of population censuses in 1994 and 200

D. Although the values of respect for elders retreat, and the new generations do not busy themselves with the elderly in the family, and the ability of the family, especially poor families, to care for its elderly diluted, the values prevailing in Arab societies still oppose the entry care home and considered to be a defect and a shame on the family that put the elderly in the nursing home. Hence the number of elderly people in the nursing home mentioned is very low. For example, the number of elderly in all nursing homes in Syria (19 houses) in 2006, a total of 585 elderly and elderly out of a million people aged 60 years or more, or less than 0.6% of the elderly. The funny thing is that the number of workers in this houses more than the number of treated patients (593 people). Herein lays the plight of the elderly in our country: neither family able to care for them, nor social values allow putting them in care homes. So what then.

We need innovative solutions:

**First:** the empowerment of older persons and their integration: the creation of the required areas of work and economic activity for the elderly who are able to exercise this activity, regardless of their profitability or economic feasibility handicrafts, and production projects in small and micro enterprises, and organizing training courses on the work appropriate for them. As well as the establishment of special funds to support aging issues, and work on the coverage of social security systems and health of all older persons.

**Second:** In the area of care: the adoption of welfare-style mobile home, which means periodically visit the elderly in their families by professionals, and medical assistants, social workers, psychologists, and to provide financial and technical support to families caring for elderly members, and strengthening the role of civil society organizations and private charities to promote and support financially and technically in the field of care for the elderly and raise the financial allocations for their support by the trade unions and professional associations, and others.

**Third:** In the area of recreation: Encourage and support traditional forms of gathering the elderly (by the state and civil society): such as hostels, social clubs, forums, etc. and encourage the spread of popular cafes, especial for the elderly, and the establishment of social and recreational clubs, sports and education for them, under their management and to develop programs for them. Considering the media which is interested in the old people like TV series, movies and documentaries all of these materials keep the dignity of the elderly and help them to spend the rest of their lives in peace without any disturbance.