



**DIFI**

معهد الدوحة الدولي للأسرة  
Doha International Family Institute  
البحوث لدعم الممارسات الأسرية  
Research to advance family policies

# The Arab Family Strength

in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia



# THE ARAB FAMILY STRENGTH IN QATAR, JORDAN, AND TUNISIA



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## DOHA INTERNATIONAL FAMILY INSTITUTE

The Doha International Family Institute (DIFI), a member of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development (QF), was established in 2006. The Institute works to strengthen the family through the development and dissemination of high quality research on Arab families, encouraging knowledge exchange on issues relevant to the family and making the family a priority to policy makers through advocacy and outreach at the national, regional and international levels. Among the Institute's most important initiatives are the Annual Conference on the Family; and the OSRA Research Grant in collaboration with the Qatar National Research Fund, an annual research grant which encourages research related to the Arab family and family policy. The Institute has special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

To know more about DIFI, please visit [www.difi.org.qa](http://www.difi.org.qa).

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## FOREWORD

Families all over the globe are currently experiencing dramatic transformations and Arab families are no exception. Unprecedented political turmoil, economic challenges, and rapid sociocultural changes in the Arab region continue to shake the existing social fabric and threaten the well-being of families. Despite this, the institution of the family remains the backbone of Arab society and serves as the primary source of support and aid for its members.

Research indicates that families living in the most difficult circumstances draw upon a rich set of characteristics, or ‘family strengths’, that enable them to nurture their members and continue to prosper in the face of even the most extreme adversity. Family strengths not only contribute to family cohesion and foster the individual growth and well-being of all family members, but also have positive benefits for communities and societies as a whole. By conducting this study, the Doha International Family Institute contributes to efforts to shift the research on families in the Arab World from a deficit-centered approach that highlights problems and pathology to a strengths-based perspective that identifies and draws upon the strengths of family members, community and culture.

Through the lens of the international family strengths perspective, this report explores the strengths, whether individual, family, community, or culturally based, that families in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia employ when facing a variety of social, financial, and health-related challenges. The insights shared herein on the characteristics that distinguish healthy, successful families in the Arab world can be used by families, communities, policy makers, and governmental entities to inform strategies and programs aimed to strengthen families throughout the region.



**Noor Al Malki Al Jehani**  
**Executive Director**  
**Doha International Family Institute**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All the problems in the world either begin in families, or end up in families. Sometimes families create their own problems, and at other times, families are forced to deal with problems that the world has thrust upon them. For this reason, it is imperative that all societies seek to understand families in all their considerable diversity; to protect families; and to help strengthen families through intervention on the level of the family, the immediate community, the nation, and the international community. Research teams were assembled and conducted focus group studies of family members in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia. The purpose of this preliminary report is to discuss the qualitative research findings from focus groups with Arab family members in all three countries, revealing their perceptions of Arab family strengths and challenges, and how they see that families under stress can be better supported by society.

### The main research-based themes outlined in this preliminary report include:

**Family Strengths.** When asked to identify the strengths of their family, participants gave a variety of answers. Overall, seven important themes emerged across all focus groups:

- Responsibility
- Support
- Good communication
- Respect
- Conveying traditions
- Resilience
- Love

**Family Challenges.** Participants were also asked to identify and speak about a time in their family that led to a negative experience, as well as to identify the challenges that their family experienced. Together these yielded six common themes:

- Societal changes
- Inequality of women
- Absent or unengaged fathers
- Financial problems
- Interference from extended family members
- Conflict in the family and poor communication

Challenges can threaten the strengths of families and prohibit them from reaching their potential.

The overall findings from this research on Arab Family Strengths in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia can be used by families, communities, and nations to help guide and develop educational programs and strategies for initiatives to strengthen families throughout the Arab world.

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Objectives and the International Family Strengths Perspective

The purpose of this effort is to study and report on the current Arab Family Strength in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia. The focus was on Arab family strengths and challenges, and how Arab families use their strengths to meet life's challenges. We began by reviewing past literature on Arab families and culture, and looking at global literature on international family strengths and challenges. Then, focus groups in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia were conducted in which participants were asked to talk about the strengths and challenges of their own families. Examples of challenges families faced were sought, and stories of how the families relied upon their strengths to meet these challenges were gathered.

The overall findings from this work can be used by families, communities, and governmental agencies and policy makers to help guide and develop programs and strategies for initiatives to strengthen families throughout the Arab world.

The family is perhaps society's oldest and most resilient institution. Around the world, the family is valued and celebrated. From the beginning of human life on Earth, people have grouped themselves into families to find emotional, physical and collective support. In recent years, there have been those who have predicted the failure of both marriage and the family. However, countless marriages and families continue to survive and even thrive today, while further changing and evolving. As the world continues to change, families adapt and change to meet these new challenges.

David Olson points out that: **“All the problems in the world either begin in families or end up in families”** (Olson, Olson-Sigg, & Larson, 2008). What Olson implies is that sometimes families create their own problems, and sometimes the world forces problems upon them, but in all cases, families end up being responsible for solving these problems. For this reason, it is imperative to protect and strengthen families, in all their diversity – extended families, nuclear families, single-parent families, stepfamilies, and so forth. And though the structure of the family may vary around the world, the value of family endures.

Families are our most intimate social environment. They are the places where we begin the vital processes of socializing our children: teaching them – in partnership with countless others in the community – how to survive and thrive in the world. Life in families can bring us great joy or excruciating pain, depending upon how well family relationships are unfolding. A healthy marriage and family can be a valuable resource for helping us endure difficulties that life inevitably brings. On the other hand, unhealthy or dysfunctional relationships can create serious problems that may persist from one generation to the next.

Families – in all their diversity – are the basic, foundational social units in every society. Healthy individuals within healthy families are essential and at the very core

of a healthy society. It is the responsibility of society and in everyone's best interest to help create a positive environment for all families.

Those who study the family recognize that the field of family studies is diverse. Not only are there many structural variations that describe families and numerous ways of defining the family, but there are many ways to explain how families function and operate in society. Some of these theoretical frameworks focus on family structures, while other theoretical frameworks focus on family functions or dynamics. There are several reasons why it is necessary to examine the why and how of family functioning. Most importantly, we need to know and make sense of how families behave. This information is helpful to those who directly assist families as counselors and support workers. Also, this information is important to help guide government policy that affects families.

In this section we will discuss the International Family Strengths Perspective, which grounds the current studies of Arab family strengths and challenges. For a discussion of seven other prominent family theories and perspectives that also influenced our thinking, please see Appendix A of this preliminary report.

**The International Family Strengths Perspective.** This perspective has been especially helpful in guiding the development of the research, and we will be focusing on family strengths in our efforts to better understand The Arab Family Strength in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia. Looking at families from a strengths-based perspective brings into a more reasonable balance our understanding of how families succeed in the face of life's inherent difficulties. We believe that the International Family Strengths Perspective is most appropriate for a study of Qatari, Jordanian, and Tunisian families, and it has been chosen as the theoretical framework for this report.

Since the beginning of the 20th Century, family theorists have tried to create a theory or framework that explains the family and the place that it holds within society. According to White (2005), early family theory focused on the place of the family in American culture, creating frameworks that borrowed from other disciplines such as anthropology and economics. In the last half of the 20th century, the focus moved to the functions of the family using typologies to classify families. An interest in cross-cultural comparisons also led to a new look at previous perspectives in an effort to internationalize family theory. Since that time, researchers have largely failed to advance any new theories about the family.

The International Family Strengths Perspective is a world-view or orientation toward life and families that is positive and optimistic, grounded in research conducted around the world. It does not ignore family problems but restores them to their proper place in life: as vehicles for testing our capacities as families and reaffirming our vital human connections with each other.

Most of the research on families, historically speaking, has focused primarily on the problems or weaknesses of families, or the individuals within the family. Early research on family strengths began in the 1930s with Woodhouse's study of 250 successful families during the Great Depression, followed by Otto's work on strong families and family strengths in the early 1960s (Gabler & Otto, 1964; Otto, 1962, 1963).

Since that time, researchers at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln led by John DeFrain, at the University of Alabama Tuscaloosa led by Nick Stinnett, at the University of Minnesota-St. Paul led by David H. Olson, plus affiliated institutions in the United States and around the world have studied families from a strengths-based perspective<sup>1</sup>. To date, data from more than 29,000 family members in 40 countries, representing all seven major geocultural areas of the world (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East, North America, and Oceania) have been collected by these teams.

It is essential to point out that each country, each culture, and even each individual family has a unique constellation of family strengths. However, the similarities that are found through research with families globally point to a set of qualities that commonly describe the characteristics of strong families. When people from country to country and culture to culture talk about what makes their family strong, these are some of the traits they often identify:

#### **Appreciation and Affection**

- Caring for each other
- Friendship
- Respect for individuality
- Playfulness
- Humor

#### **Positive Communication**

- Giving compliments
- Sharing feelings
- Avoiding blame
- Being able to compromise
- Agreeing to disagree

#### **Spiritual Well-Being and Shared Values**

- Hope
- Faith
- Compassion
- Shared ethical values
- Oneness with humankind
- Oneness with the Earth

#### **Commitment to the Family**

- Trust
- Honesty
- Dependability
- Faithfulness
- Sharing

#### **Enjoyable Time Together**

- Quality time in great quantity
- Good things take time
- Enjoying each other's company
- Simple good times
- Sharing fun times

#### **The Ability to Manage Stress and Crisis Effectively**

- Adaptability
- Seeing crises as both challenges and opportunities
- Growing through crises together
- Openness to change
- Resilience

<sup>1</sup> Al-Barwani & Albeely, 2007; Carlo, Koller, Raffaelli, & de Guzman, 2007; Casas, Stinnett, DeFrain, & Lee, 1984; DeFrain & Asay, 2007a; DeFrain & Asay, 2007b; DeFrain & Asay, 2007c; DeFrain, DeFrain, & Lepard, 1994; DeFrain & Stinnett, 2002; Geggie, Weston, Hayes, & Silberberg, 2007; Kaldi-Koulikidou, 2007; Koshen, 2007; Kraus, Bahyarudin, Mohd, Shahrimin, Assim, Juhari, & Yacoob, 2007; Mberengwa, 2007; Medora, 2007; Nadolu, B., Nadolu, D., & Asay, S. M., 2007; Njue, Rombo, & Ngige, 2007; Nkosi & Daniels, 2007; Olson, DeFrain, & Skogrand, 2018; Sani & Buhannad, 2003; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1985; Stinnett & O'Donnell, 1996; Stinnett & Sauer, 1977; Xie, DeFrain, Meredith & Combs, 2007; Younes, 2007; Zubkov, 2007.

Recent global family strengths studies and continued work on the model have combined evidence from multiple cultures around the world to further enhance the International Family Strengths Perspective. A positive and useful approach to conceptualizing families from a global perspective links family strengths, community strengths, and cultural strengths and demonstrates how families use these strengths to meet the many challenges they face. DeFrain and Asay (2007) developed a conceptual model incorporating all three levels of strength in an analysis of the strengths and challenges of families in 18 countries representing all of the world's seven major geocultural areas (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, North America, and Oceania).

Understanding family strengths requires understanding the cultural contexts in which families live. Numerous external factors surround and influence families, sometimes proving helpful and useful to individual families, but at other times proving harmful and demanding. Families from culture to culture live in a sometimes desperately confounding environment. To judge them without understanding the social context in which they live is unfair and often tells us more about the outsider's level of understanding rather than the insider's perspective.

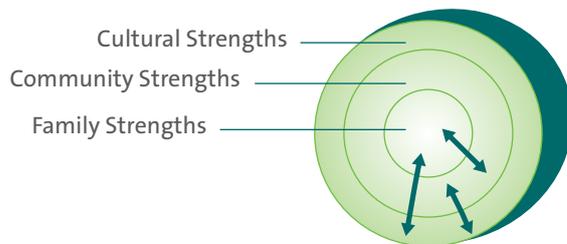
**Community Strengths.** In addition to the six major qualities of strong families identified and outlined above, a number of important community strengths were identified. Community strengths are infused in the immediate neighborhood or area in which the family lives. These strengths include:

- A supportive social environment that genuinely values families, and a general willingness and natural generosity infused in the community to help when families are in need
- An effective educational delivery system
- Religious communities for families seeking this kind of support
- Family-service programs developed by government and non-governmental organizations for families who cannot find the help they need from their own extended family, friends and neighbors
- A safe, secure and healthful environment.

**Cultural Strengths.** In addition to family and community strengths, cultural strengths were identified. Cultural strengths cover a broader area than just a local community and have developed over a long period of time in social and historical context. Cultural strengths include:

- A rich cultural history
- A viable economy
- Shared cultural meanings
- An understanding of the global society
- A stable political process

Using a visual model, DeFrain and Asay (2007) envisioned the strong family as that family where the three areas of strengths intersect. A family that possesses not only internal family strengths but enjoys support from the community and a positive and empowering heritage is, indeed, in an excellent position in the world. Strong families can survive in communities and cultures under tremendous stress, but it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to meet their potential.



**Figure 1. The Relationship of Family, Community, and Cultural Strengths: Concentric Circles.**

In this model, the three areas of strengths move out and away from the single-family unit to the broader context related in a concentric fashion. The three areas not only interact from dimension to dimension but also have depth, thus interacting on various levels.

**Individual Strengths.** Using the International Family Strengths Model, it was our assumption that Individual Strengths would emerge within family strengths, because no-one in the world stands completely alone and that individually, everyone in the world is a part of some kind of family. In a subsequent global study of the strengths of families tested by family violence, we discovered that individual strengths were strong predictors of the ability for those in difficult situations to rise above the situation and move forward from a position of strength. It became clear that developing individual strengths are critical in helping those who may not have family, community, or cultural strengths available to them (Asay, DeFrain, Metzger, & Moyer, 2014).

Individual Strengths include:

- Self-respect
- Commitment to family
- Survival skills
- Good ethical values and understanding of social justice
- Strategic thinking
- Spiritual well-being

Understanding the family is not just a static set of ideas or rigorously-testable hypotheses, but more like a family itself: a constantly growing and changing dialogue about the nature of strong marriages and strong families. Our training as skeptical social and behavioral scientists teaches us to be very cautious when talking about cultural universals. And yet our team's studies over the years of strong families in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, North America, and Oceania, lead us to the conclusion that there are remarkable similarities among families who feel good about their lives together and express satisfaction in their competence in dealing with the challenges that life brings. These similarities are much more apparent than the differences from culture to culture. We have been seeing this since 1984 when we began looking at family strengths outside of the U.S. (Casas, Stinnett, DeFrain, & Lee, 1984).

## 1. 2. Methodology

Research teams were assembled to conduct focus group studies of family members in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia. For example, in Qatar, a qualitative focus group study was conducted with three focus groups. Researchers identified a diverse sample of focus group members and conducted the focus group activities. The groups were gender specific with one group of males and two groups of female participants. The groups ranged from five to six persons. The focus groups were asked to respond to a set of semi-structured questions designed to elicit a variety of answers. Although the questions were somewhat controlled across groups to enhance comparisons, rich data emerged as the participants shared experiences and beliefs essential to the focus group research methodology.

All focus group data were transcribed for accuracy and translated into English. Data within groups were analyzed for common themes by the researchers in each country; and data across groups were analyzed for common themes for all three countries by Dr. John DeFrain and Dr. Sylvia M. Asay.

In addition to the focus groups, ten lengthy family interviews were conducted. Ten real-life stories are included with this report to breathe life into the research findings from the focus groups. These stories further illustrate the strengths and challenges of Qatari families in a compelling way that will capture the reader's attention and, in a way, that the reader can genuinely relate to personally.

The goal throughout the research process was to accurately assess Qatari family strengths and challenges from an Arab perspective. Specifically, the purpose of the focus groups was to identify themes common among the groups that were then used to construct a Qatari Family Strengths Inventory. This new research instrument can then be used during a larger quantitative study in Qatar. This endeavor, of course, would be a considerable challenge, but the benefits to Qatar could be very significant.

Focus groups in Jordan and Tunisia were gathered together in similar ways, and interviews and data analyses followed similar patterns.

The next step in the process could be to conduct research using an Arab Family Strengths Inventory, developed using the recent findings from the three countries. Guided by the International Family Strengths Perspective, family strengths inventories have been created for use by more than 30,000 family members in 40 countries, representing all seven major geocultural areas of the world (Africa, Australia, Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East, North America, and Oceania). Challenges faced in research of this nature include the difficulty in understanding language differences and cultural nuances as the research team develops a new inventory which will work well in the culture under study.

## CHAPTER TWO: QATAR

### 2.1. The Qatari Family

Each focus group discussion in Qatar began with a question about the participants' families. Participants spoke about their own specific families and gave demographic information including size, structure, and family dynamics. Besides talking about their nuclear family – mom, dad, and the children – many participants included information about their extended family. Questions about the dynamics of the neighborhood in which the family lived were also addressed.

According to the participants, the family 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.”**

The relationship between mothers and fathers is important and must be strong. Mothers and fathers are seen as the foundation and the models for the home. Some of the participants said that the mother is the manager of the home. One said: **“My mother is a school in herself.”**

Within the family is a system of hierarchy to fulfill duties and raise children. One participant said: **“... my father is deceased and I cover all the duties required for our home.”** Younger family members take on the roles of authority in the absence of older family members and there is often a sharing of roles within the family. One participant revealed a **“spirit of co-operation”** among the family members.

### 2.2. Family Strengths

When asked to identify the strengths of their family, participants gave a variety of answers. Overall, seven especially important themes emerged across all focus groups:

- Responsibility
- Support
- Good communication
- Respect
- Conveying traditions
- Resilience
- Love

The theme of **responsibility** was identified through statements by the participants such as providing protection, education, holding the family together, and commitment. Participants emphasized the importance of a sense of dedication toward each other.

The theme of **support** was identified as a strength for the family with statements such as encouraging, sharing, and helping each other. One participant said: **“Each time one of my family members had a goal, all of us would stand with him. All of us support one another.”**

The theme of **good communication** was identified as a strength by statements including listening, mutual understanding, transparency, and good problem solving. One participant said: **“There is never a problem that we don’t get together and solve as a group.”**

The theme of **respect** emerged as a theme with statements such as accepting differences and opinions. One participant said that respect for each other was important as a part of **“common decency”** necessary for the family. Another participant said: **“For example, my sister and I, in regards to some issues, I have my opinion and she has hers but that doesn’t make us argue with one another. It is truly okay that I have my opinion and you have yours.”**

**Conveying traditions.** A strength mentioned by some participants was found to be in the conveying of traditions. Statements such as passing on religious and cultural customs and providing a model of traditions were mentioned. One participant stated: **“In my opinion, customs and traditions are a source of strength for Qatari society.”**

**Resilience** was another theme that can be identified through statements such as working through problems. Many of the stories that participants shared about both positive and negative experiences focused on the resilience of the family to rise above the situations that the family had faced and the lessons that were learned as they moved forward.

Finally, the theme of **love** was identified through statements such as caring, understanding, and respect. While the researcher identified love as a component of family strengths, few participants talked about love directly. The idea of love or showing love seems to be more implied. One participant said she raised her children to understand that **“...love originates from their love of God...”**

When asked to identify a positive experience in the family, many participants told a variety of stories about negative situations that became positive because family members worked together for a better outcome. Many of these positive outcomes relate directly to the themes that were identified in the previous question about their family strengths. It is interesting to note that few stories were related to their fortunate life circumstances such as education, finances, and inheritance. Instead, they tended to focus on unreserved perseverance and working through a difficult time in the life of their family together. One participant revealed that when their family was going through a difficult time, they **“...sat together and discussed the problem, it was solved and our thoughts were united.”**

## 2.3. Family Challenges

Participants were also asked to identify and speak about a time in their family that led to a negative experience, as well as to identify the challenges that their family experienced. Together these yielded six common themes:

- Societal changes
- Financial problems
- The inequality of women
- Interference from extended family members
- Absent or disengaged fathers
- Conflict in the family and poor communication

Challenges can threaten the strengths of families and prohibit them from reaching their potential.

**Societal changes.** Almost all of the participants spoke about changes in society as a problem for their country. Specific problems mentioned were the breakdown of traditions and generational differences. In talking about the breakdown of traditions, one participant stated: **“If there aren’t any customs and traditions, there is no identity.”** Another said: **“I feel that one of the reasons for the breakup of families is when we move away from our customs and traditions.”**

Many of the participants spoke about their traditions as being necessary for society, but also recognized that society is changing and how adherence to the traditions has limits. There are generational differences that were mentioned as being problematic, with younger people wanting change more than the older generation.

Isolation was mentioned several times in connection with social media, and opportunities for family members to be engaged separately or outside the family. One participant said: **“I feel that social media has really influenced our values and principles.”** Others suggest that it isn’t social media that is the problem; rather, the problem lies in parenting – allowing isolation, not giving good guidance, or not spending quality time with their children.

**Inequality for women** was identified as a challenge for some of the participants. Several of the women spoke about the lack of independence and opportunities for women. One young woman stated: **“The University has given me a scholarship but I am not allowed to travel by myself, but they will agree if my guardian is present.”** Another woman said: **“For example, if I just go outside the house or am running any small errand, I have to get permission and this restricts my freedom.”** They also talked about how much more acceptable it is for a man to be caught doing something unacceptable, such as infidelity or gambling, than it is for a woman. Although some participants mentioned that inequality was lessening, others said it was not.

**Absent or disengaged fathers** are also a challenge that was identified by several participants. These include fathers who are absent because of their work; fathers who are not connected to the family because they live in separate areas in the home; or fathers who spend time away from the home at present. These situations can be a challenge, especially for their children. One woman said: **“I am the one who carried**

the burden as he [her husband] was always far from the house. So even during the children's upbringing there was never a father there but instead just a mother." Another participant lamented: "...we, as a society, have considered it normal for him [the father] to come home at 6 p.m. in the evening and to go to the 'majlis' [male sitting room]. He doesn't discuss things with his children and doesn't know anything about them." While some participants talked about their own engaged fathers, they did acknowledge that it is a problem for society.

**Financial problems** in a variety of forms were identified by participants. Some participants spoke about the materialism that is problematic for families because it causes jealousy and competition. The researcher who summarized the focus groups in Qatar mentioned that the lifestyle that has emerged in Qatar has changed family life. Some of the participants worry that materialism will affect future generations in a negative way as they have unrealistic expectations and social pressure. One participant said: **"Truly, truly, it is nothing but a breakup of family closeness that is the essential weak point. And these things were caused when materialism increased."**

**Interference from extended family members** was cited as a challenge for the family. While many are close to their extended family, they have concerns about the influence on their nuclear family. Some participants talked about how different opinions and competition can cause tension within the home where there are several generations and families living together. One participant said her family sometimes **"suffered"** because **"...whatever my paternal aunt said [it] was considered right by my mother."** There are also expectations family members must follow and these times together as an extended family are seen as **"sacred"**. One participant said: **"...it is a must that most of our family members are present at my grandfather's house. We can't upset them by not going."** Lack of respect for different opinions and for privacy were among the specific problems mentioned.

**Conflict in the family and poor communication** are challenges identified by the focus group participants. This challenge includes the marital relationship, as well as extended family members. One participant said: **"There must be communication and discussion between spouses. If there isn't, the marriage will not prosper."** Having mutual understanding among family members was mentioned many times by participants as being essential for a strong family.

## 2.4. Community Strengths

While neighbors and friends are a source of strength for some, most of the participants were not connected to their community in an intimate way. The researcher who summarized the focus groups in Qatar suggested that the community plays only a minor role in supporting family life. Some participants suggested that the community is there for them during times of big events, such as for weddings or a death. Some participants talked about feeling safe in their neighborhood as being important for them. Some mentioned that their neighbors may be strangers. One participant said: **"...you don't know anything about their upbringing. They may only stay one year and then they will leave. You might be afraid to let them in your home, not like before."**

## 2.5. Cultural Strengths

Customs and traditions were cited as a source of strength for many of the participants in the study. Several noted that their customs and traditions provide them with identity and direction in life. One participant said: **“If there aren’t any customs and traditions, there is no identity.”** One participant said in regard to the problems in their culture: **“The solution is present in our traditions and customs themselves.”** Several participants talked about the role of the family in passing down values to the younger generation.

## 2.6. Individual Strengths

Participants shared a variety of individual strengths that they felt were positive for their families. Common individual strengths cited by the participants included:

- Good communication
- Respect
- Taking responsibility
- Perseverance
- Humor
- Affection and caring
- Religious values

## 2.7. Family Interview Findings

The following real-life stories provide a more in-depth look at the strengths and challenges of Qatari families. They further illustrate the research findings of the focus groups, and show in story form how Qatari families use their family strengths to solve difficult problems in the family.

### Story 1: The Rock and Cornerstone of the Family

Abu Abdallah, a married man with eight children and seven grandchildren, describes family as **“people living under one roof, loving, supporting, and helping one another at all costs”**. Abu Abdallah believes that his children should stay with him in the same residential area. Indeed all of them, including his married sons, consult him on every issue as he is the final decision maker on all family matters.

He always takes care of his grandchildren and voices his opinion on how they should be raised, saying: **“This generation is different from my children’s. My grandchildren are really difficult to raise—stubborn, especially because of social media and all this new technology.”** He plays an active role in their upbringing and advises his son to follow the advice of older generations. Describing them as spoiled, irresponsible, and naughty, he mentions: **“I always watch my grandchildren closely, teaching them our traditions and beliefs about how to behave. It is essential to invest in a child’s upbringing from a young age—through discipline and guidance—otherwise, when they grow up, they will not learn this.”** He adds: **“I teach my grandchildren how to sit, speak, greet, eat, dress, and behave in front of people. This is my responsibility as their grandfather and the leader of our family.”**

Abu Abdallah's family share a very close bond, reinforced by the traditions and beliefs that they still practice. As his own parents stressed that he should never live apart from his brothers, all four of them still share one residential area<sup>1</sup> home with their children and grandchildren.

### **Story 2: The Ties that Bond**

Abu Salem, a married man and father of four, is having difficulty raising his youngest son who is an avid user of new communication devices including iPads and iPhones. When his son's behavior took a turn for the worse and his grades started to suffer, Abu Saleem turned to his family for advice. During their weekly family gatherings each Friday, he sought their opinions on this issue. Everyone agreed to devise a program for his son and encouraged Abu Saleem to strengthen his relationship with his son by spending more time socializing with him, chatting with him about his schoolwork, and being a friend to him instead of just being his father. They also advised him to limit his access to electronic devices as much as possible and to put him in more school-related activities. This would create a positive change in his son's behavior. Abu Saleem noted that he was able to turn to his brothers for such advice because of the strong bond between himself and his family members. He said that they always consult one another on a range of family-related matters, from travel, to business, to parenting issues during their weekly family gatherings on Fridays in their **majlis**. He noted that these gatherings are essential to family life as they provide a space where the men of the family can voice their concerns and find solutions.

### **Story 3: Empowering Families through Education**

Um Ahmed, a 58-year-old woman who lives with her husband, two children, and grandchildren, stated that education is an important source of strength for families. As a primary school teacher, she is a firm believer that her children's high level of education is due to the influence of her own and her husband's education. As a couple, they support education as a weapon against all matter of social ills and as the key to opening doors for everyone. She also believes that she would not have been able to achieve the success she did without the support of her educated husband. She also notes that education is not just of great importance to her own family but the key to instilling the values of responsibility and family commitment within the next generation.

### **Story 4: Sacrifice and Family Commitment**

Um Rashed, a married woman with two children, sacrificed her career to take care of her autistic child after discovering his diagnosis at the age of three. Since then, her life has totally changed. Leaving her job to dedicate her life to her child, she suffered from a lack of adequate services in Qatar. Also, she faced the social stigma surrounding autism, which discouraged her from speaking about it with her family and community members. Despite this, she had to continue to fight for her child, saying:

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<sup>1</sup> Residential area means buying a piece of land and building houses next to each other. Most Qatari families prefer to live next to their relatives.

**At the beginning, I had a difficult time accepting that my child was autistic. But through the support of family and prayer, I became strong enough to face this challenge. I had to stop working and concentrate on my child. I searched for every possible way to cure her. I read books and articles about autism to understand what I was facing. Finally, I managed to accept my situation.**

Then, she had to teach both her husband and mother-in-law how to help take care of her child. She said: **“It was very difficult in the beginning for my family to accept it. It was not easy for me to accept that my child was autistic. However, I got a lot of support from my husband and my mother-in-law.”**

To this day, her father-in-law still does not know that his grandchild is autistic as Um Rashed said he was not helpful. Her child is now in a specialized school and her development is progressing very well.

She said the most important sources of strengths for her family include communication (e.g. the ability to discuss and solve one’s problems within the family), togetherness and sharing strong bonds (e.g. spending time together and eating together around one table rather than alone). Although accepting her child’s autism diagnosis has been very challenging for both her and her family, she is still committed to her child and believes they will pull through this difficult time together as a family.

### **Story 5: Intergenerational Solidarity**

Abu Abdelrahman, a married father of six who lives with one of his sons and one of his grandchildren, has had to deal with the challenge of taking care of his in-laws. As his wife is the eldest among her siblings, she was responsible for taking care of her parents. This included travelling with her mother abroad for treatment. Describing this period, he said:

**I faced many difficulties when my wife went with her parents. I had to manage matters and raise our children. It was a hard time for me because my wife used to take care of everything in the house. So, I had to take care of the children, their schooling—homework and so forth—which was a new challenge for me.**

As he was in charge of caring for both his children and the home, he faced a lot of challenges during his wife’s absence. Although his mother-in-law recently passed away, his father-in-law still lives with him. His presence is a source of strength for the children and grandchildren who benefit from his wisdom and experience.

Abu Abdelrahman said: **“It is good to have my father in-law with me. He has a lot of stories and teaches his grandchildren many things, which is a rare scenario these days. This generation is missing out by not having an elderly person in the house.”** He teaches them traditions and they learn from the stories that he shares. Also, due to his presence in the house, all their other relatives such as his sons and daughters come by

to visit him regularly, which reinforces the strong bond between all the members of their family. For example, they share meals together with their grandfather and enjoy the family atmosphere. On Fridays, the entire family gathers together and all their relatives meet one another. Abu Abdelrahman is lucky that his brothers live next to him in the same neighborhood, as this makes it easy for them to get together and meet regularly.

Most importantly, he said that taking care of his father-in-law and the presence of a grandfather in the house is an asset to his family. His happiness about having his father-in-law live with him is a sign of the intergenerational solidarity in his family.

### **Story 6: Becoming More of a Sister than a Mother**

Fatma is a single woman who has never been married. She lives with her family and is currently the primary caregiver for her chronically ill siblings. Highly educated and working full-time, she has been taking care of her siblings for more than 10 years and has no-one to depend upon but herself while taking care of her siblings' conditions. With one brother who is mentally ill and in need of a great deal of support, she is unable to rest when she returns home from work. Instead, she shares that she must spend time, sitting and listening to him even when she is, herself, exhausted. Through the compassion and commitment that she shows toward her siblings and the rest of her family, Fatma has become more of a mother than a sister to them.

The sacrifices that she gladly makes for the sake of her siblings stems from the influence of her mother, who always used to tell her that they must stick together and never abandon one another. While she feels that her other siblings may be growing apart as they focus more on their own lives, her career and leading role in her family have strengthened her resolve and fortified her commitment to her family.

Although she receives assistance from a team of nurses and maids, keeping her family happy still remains a challenge. Also, since her mother passed away, there have been no more weekly family gatherings on Fridays. Despite always being invited to her stepbrothers' homes, she said that she is too tired from work during the week to attend as she needs to rest. However, she would love to visit her other relatives so that she could encourage them to make changes—to love and support each other more and so forth. This tendency is slowly diminishing among her family members due to the new faster pace of life, and due to her career and work. Now, they only get together during the fasting month of Ramadan. She feels disheartened that their interaction is slowly becoming less and less all the time.

### **Story 7: Division of Labor among the Family**

Abu Mohamed, a married man whose wife works full-time, defined the family as both the core of the community and the source of its health. Discussing his increased responsibilities after marriage, he noted that his immediate and extended family have increased their demands on him. Thus, he began to think about ways to make adjustments to his lifestyle and came to an agreement with his wife about the division of labor within his household. For example, he is the one in charge of dropping off and

collecting his children from school and making sure that the entire family eats their meals together. This is a priority for him as he said: **“It is important for a family to eat together at one table. I do my best to eat with my children on a daily basis because it is my chance to see them and speak to them.”**

Also, he is responsible for doing the household shopping if items are needed from the market. While his wife is in charge of household matters, he is in charge of anything outside the home.

As Abu Mohamed is the eldest among his siblings, they listen to him. Also, he makes sure that all his brothers come on Fridays to their parents’ get-togethers as this is a weekly time when they can all meet as a family and spend time with one another. He mentioned that they do not accept any excuse for not coming other than when someone is away traveling. For him, Friday is an important day for the entire family, and especially for the children as they get to play together and strengthen their bonds with their cousins.

However, he also reserves Saturdays for spending time with his own family—going out to eat or taking the children out to play. He mentioned: **“Communicating and discussing matters with my wife and children is very important for me. I value this skill and I find it key to making things easier.”**

### **Story 8: Parenting Challenges**

Um Hessa, a 37-year-old female who works full-time and has three children, lives under the same roof as her in-laws. While she is happy about living with her in-laws, she also realizes the pros and cons of this arrangement when it comes to parenting and raising her children.

One issue regarding her children’s upbringing that worries her is the influence of social media on them and their use of iPads and cell phones. She said:

**I am worried about my children using iPads a lot. Today’s children use them too often.**

**And I, as a mom, am worried about what they might watch, play or follow. It bothers me and my husband as we have faced lots of challenges with our children because of their iPad use.**

**One time, they broke it so we got a new one for them. Then, they broke it again. So, we made a rule that they can only watch it on the weekend. I give it to them on Friday and take it back on Saturday. But, even then, I have to monitor what they see. They are also not allowed to use it the whole day. Children have become addicted to this device and monitoring it has become a big problem for parents.**

Um Hessa is worried about this issue as it affects how her children behave. So, she has tried to limit their iPad use to certain days only, so that she can reduce its impact on them. But she said that the issue is not yet resolved still, because her mother in-law

has a different view about how her children should be raised. Children become more demanding and spoiled when they live with their grandparents:

**My mother-in-law spoils my children. She gives them everything they want, so I struggle with this issue a lot. That is the problem when one lives with one's in-laws. My in-laws have different ways of raising children as they are from a different generation but raising children nowadays is not the same as it was in the old days. We have to be careful and supervise our children. So I always struggle with my in-laws but I try to tell them that we have to do it this way or that way as it is not good for the children. Sometimes, my mother-in-law understands me and does as I say, but sometimes she doesn't.**

Regarding another problem that arose, she said:

**One day my twins came home saying they wanted a mobile phone to use at school. I told them they did not need a mobile phone as they were too young. They objected in the beginning but when their father and I explained that they did not need one as it is not useful for school, they were convinced.**

She said the problem is that: **“The children see each other at school and are influenced by one another. They want to copy their friends.”** Parenting is a major issue for Um Hessa, as shown by how much she worries about the impact of social media on her children, and about how she should deal with this problem.

But she also said that living with her in-laws also provides her with a lot of support. She experienced this once when her youngest son was very sick and hospitalized for an entire week. During that time, her in-laws and uncles took very good care of her eldest child. So, she was not at all worried about him while she was in the hospital. Regarding this incident, she said: **“I am glad that I live with my in-laws because they were able to take them to school and take good care of them when I could not come home every day. I had to stay with my youngest child in the hospital. This is a source of strength for the family.”**

Another source of strength for the family **“is supporting and helping one another during sickness, death, and marriage. During marriage, we support one another by dividing the workload. When there is a death in the family, we stay with each other and sometimes divide the shifts between us. When someone is sick, everyone in the family offers me support so I don't feel alone.”** These are important sources of strength for her that are common among all Qatari families.

## Story 9: Supporting One Another, Hand-in-Hand

Abu Mubarak, a married man with three children, lives with his parents and siblings. All together there are 15 adults, not counting the children, who live in one big house with their father, who is the head of their household.

Abu Mubarak talks with his father about business, marriage, parenting, and so on. He said: **“My father is the one who advises all of us about anything that we need to do. If we want to start any type of business we always take his advice and do as he says, because my father has the expertise and knowledge of such things. So, he is always right.”**

Abu Mubarak said that his family is everything to him. Living with his family provides him with a lot of support and a sense of closeness with one another. One time when his brother lost a lot of money, he said: **“We brought up the issue with our father, and we all supported my brother until he managed to get past the problem. Supporting each other is very important to our family and we always stand with each other.”**

Abu Mubarak said that supporting each other includes literally all difficult circumstances including death, marriage, and sickness. When someone dies, he noted that they support each other by handling all the food preparation. When someone is getting married, they contribute money or gifts. When someone is sick, they have to visit the person regularly to lift their spirits and make sure they don't feel lonely.

This matter of offering support and maintaining cohesion extends further, including offering advice about how to raise the children and take care of them. He said: **“My father teaches my children how to behave, how to sit and talk with adults. This is important because this generation needs discipline and an attitude open to learning. Those from the old generation like my father are the ones who can teach our children the traditions and values of our society.”**

His father teaches all of them – not just the children – to rely on him for everything as the leader of their family. Even when they're married, they still depend on him and rely on his advice. Abu Mubarak thinks that the next generation needs this advice from older people who are a source of knowledge and expertise. He said that the education offered in schools is not as it was in their day. For example, children do not know how to speak Arabic well. He would like to see a change in the educational system so that children can learn to speak better Arabic than they do now. He said that this is not the way that Arabic was taught in the past.

Abu Mubarak has a calm personality and said that raising children in a big house requires patience because all the children play together and sometimes fight with each other. He said: **“I try to resolve any problem between the children before it escalates and becomes a big problem between parents. I am a patient and a calm person, and I don't like to interfere unless I am asked to take action.”** Above all, he said that their family is still very cohesive and supportive of each other.

## Story 10: Challenges Faced by Younger Members of the Family

Ghaliyah, a single woman working full-time, lives with her parents and two of her brothers in the same home while her other brothers live away from them.

She said that, since the siblings had grown up, they tended not to see each other now so often. She said that each sibling had become busy with his own life so they do not see each other as frequently as they did when they were younger. She said:

**I come home from work at 4 o'clock, whereas my brothers and father return at different times. It is becoming hard to see everyone at one meal. We see each other in the evening when we get together in front of the TV to watch a show. That is when my father comes and sits with us and we spend time with each other. It is becoming hard to see each other, which in turn, lessens the closeness between the members of our family. But on Friday and Saturday, all of us still gather together at our house. It is a must that we see each other on this day.**

She faces another problem as a single woman when she travels, works, or drives. She has to get permission from her parents to travel. However, sometimes she faces difficulty in being able to convince her father. She said:

**My parents were against me driving a car, but I convinced them. In the end, they agreed. This is because our society is conservative. Because I am still single, they fear for my reputation. In the end, I learned how to drive after a lot of discussions and persuading.**

Ghaliyah has a strong character. Among her siblings, she takes on the role of diplomat and is flexible in taking actions when needed. Yet, the challenge of being single in a conservative society sometimes makes her uncomfortable.

## CHAPTER THREE: JORDAN

### 3.1. The Jordanian Family

Each focus group discussion began with a question about the meaning of the word family to the Jordanian participants. Participants not only spoke about the idea of family but gave information about their own specific families. Most answers also included information about their professional careers and education level.

According to the participants, the family represents a place of stability and security. One participant said: **“Family is a refuge.”** The family is seen as a place of warmth, where affection is shown. One person said: **“It is the source of compassion and affection and because of it, we have the will to continue our lives.”** It is seen as a place where the family members work together to build a life and achieve goals. Several participants talked about the responsibility expected in the family to care for and respect each other, to provide a model for younger family members, and to maintain mutual understanding and harmony within the home. Several mentioned that the family was the foundation of society. One participant said: **“If it [the family] is a success, then the entire society is a success.”**

While the extended family was often mentioned as an important source of support and strength, more often participants viewed family in terms of their immediate nuclear family. This contrasts with findings of Qatar and Tunisia where extended family are more likely to live together and take on more of a role in daily functions. Many said that they keep close contact with their relatives and get together often or connect through social media. One participant said: **“We have an excellent relationship with our relatives, but we don’t interfere in each other’s lives.”** Several participants mentioned that they limit the influence of extended family because of past negative experiences.

### 3.2. Family Strengths

When asked to identify the strengths of their family, participants gave a variety of answers. Overall, five especially important themes emerged across all focus groups:

- Responsibility
- Good communication
- Respect
- Love and affection
- Strong foundation of values and traditions

The theme of **responsibility** was identified through statements by the participants such as these: support, dependability, co-operation, trust, and loyalty. Participants emphasized the importance of working together and supporting each other. One participant said: **“Family is considered a shared endeavor based on co-operation and stability.”** Another said: **“...we divide the responsibilities of our lives and support each other.”** Several participants mentioned the role of the extended family as taking

on responsibility and being an essential source of support. One participant said: **“Relatives are a source of strength and keeping in touch with relatives is a must.”**

The theme of **good communication** was identified as a strength by statements including mutual understanding, openness, and transparency. One participant reported that he and his wife **“talk openly about everything with each other and rely on the technique of disclosure.”** Many participants expressed examples where the family was able to overcome a difficult situation because of their ability to solve problems. One said: **“Family is built on this foundation so that it is strong and we can deal with any problems or any difficult circumstances that we face. With wisdom, we can easily find a solution.”**

The theme of **respect** emerged as a theme with statements such as listening and accepting each other’s opinions, and supporting family member in their pursuits. One participant said: **“Each member knows their role and duties and respects others.”** Another participant described their family strengths as a **“state of being respectful to each other and caring about things, big or small.”**

The theme of **love and affection** was identified through statements, such as caring, understanding, and respect. One participant suggested that when you are at home with your family, the problems of the world are forgotten when there is **“mutual understanding and affection.”** While the researcher identified love as a component of family strengths, few participants talked about love directly. The idea of love or showing affection seems to be more implied. One participant said: **“Family is also about gentleness and care, not just affection.”** In contrast, one father said: **“I am very affectionate toward my children and I am not stingy.”**

A strength mentioned by participants was found to be a **strong foundation of values and traditions** that is conveyed within the family. Statements such as the desire to teach children through real life examples, instill religious values, and continuing to pass down traditions were mentioned. One participant stated: **“I would like to raise my children with religious values and for us to hold convictions in our home.”** Another participant said: **“The role of traditions and customs is that it brings your family closer.”**

Some of the participants talked about a positive experience in the family. Some participants told a variety of stories about negative situations that had a positive outcome because family members worked together and provided emotional support for each other. One participant revealed that when her husband had a car accident: **“It was like we renewed our relationship and we learned how to listen to each other better. And the atmosphere at home played a big role in my husband being able to heal quickly.”** Others talked about how positive it was to witness the success of their children.

### 3.3. Family Challenges

Participants were also asked to identify and recount a time in their family that led to a negative experience, as well as to identify the ongoing challenges that their family experiences. Challenges can threaten the strengths of families and prohibit them from reaching their potential. Together these yielded five common themes:

- Financial needs and concerns
- Negative outside influences
- Changing traditions and customs
- Illness and loss
- Absent fathers

**Financial needs and concerns** in a variety of forms were identified by participants. The primary researcher in Jordan mentioned that money issues and the economic situation in the country were challenges most often cited. Improving or “ensuring” financial status was expressed by participants as they talked about the challenges of making financial decisions. One participant said: **“You feel that no matter how much money you have, that it won’t be enough.”** Another said: **“The financial needs of the house are our biggest source of stress as we can’t cover these. Although my husband and I both work, we still can’t.”**

Some participants expressed concerns about the future of their children in the current economic climate. One participant said: **“Financial challenges are stifling and the thing that I worry about most is the children’s future. We have to do everything that we can for them to be able to live well in the future.”**

**Negative outside influences.** Participants talked about the influences outside the family that present challenges for their families. Some specific challenges included social media, pornography, and smoking. One participant said: **“We try not to be affected by the negative things that we hear these days and we tell our children what is right and what is wrong and remain close to them.”**

Other participants talked about the influences and “interference” of neighbors and extended family. The researcher who conducted the focus groups reported that these issues disturb the family, with participants mentioning that they prefer to be somewhat disengaged from their relatives and not interfere to avoid problems and conflicts. One participant said: **“We have an excellent relationship with our relatives but we don’t interfere in each other’s lives.”**

**Changing traditions and customs.** Almost all of the participants spoke about changes in society as a problem for their country. Many of the participants spoke about their traditions as being necessary for society (a foundation based on religious values), but also recognized that society is changing and how adherence to the traditions has limits. One participant said: **“These are important in so far as they serve our family.”** Another participant explained that custom dictates that when a guest comes to visit, it is a priority to make them food; but his wife believes that their children are the priority, so he said: **“You can’t always follow the traditions and customs because society has changed.”**

Other participants spoke about how some traditions and customs have become negative for society and for the family. One participant said: **“Traditions and customs support the family, although sometimes if you break them it can have a negative effect on the family.”** Another participant felt that traditions and customs were not always helpful, and explained this by saying: **“I feel that they have been an obstacle for us for a long time in our relationship. Most of our traditions and customs are followed insincerely, just to get us what we want sometimes, and lots of people apply these in public but forgo them in private.”**

**Illness and loss.** When participants were asked about negative situations, many of them mentioned illnesses within their family as well as the loss of family members. Hardships were created for families when there was an illness as there is uncertainty and worry for family members.

The death of family members was also identified by several as a challenge. One participant said: **“The most difficult challenge in my life was losing my mother. Overall, I had a sad life.”** While these challenges represented difficult periods, they recognized that they were able to get through it over time. One participant said: **“The hardest thing we faced as a family was the deaths of my mother and father but we overcame this period through faith and patience.”**

**Absent or disengaged fathers** are also a challenge that was identified by several participants. These include fathers who are absent because of their work and fathers who spend time away from the home. These situations can be a challenge for the family. One woman said: **“I feel my husband isn’t tuned in to how things are at home and doesn’t realize all the effort that I put into it and to be honest, I don’t know what he wants.”** Another woman said: **“I feel like I am both the woman and the man, the mother and the father in our home. I try to reconcile between my work, my husband’s absence, my home duties, and my children’s education.”** Fathers also recognized that they have limited time with their family. One father said that his work and other obligations **“take away the time that I am able to spend with family; sometimes I can only spend an hour at home.”**

### 3.4. Community Strengths

While neighbors and friends are a source of strength for some, most of the participants were only connected to their community in a limited way. One participant said of their neighbors that they **“don’t mix so their influence on our lives is limited.”** The researcher who summarized the focus groups in Jordan suggested that the community plays only a minor role in supporting family life, especially because they lack time to connect to their neighbors and rarely visit each other. Many of the participants suggested that their neighbors were good people but that they didn’t get together with them on a regular basis. They provided them with physical and emotional support when needed, or on special occasions.

### 3.5. Cultural Strengths

Customs and traditions were cited as a source of strength for many of the participants in the study. Some noted that their customs and traditions provide them with a foundation. One participant said: **“Family is built on this foundation so that it is strong and we can deal with any problems or any difficult circumstances that we face. With wisdom, we can easily find a solution.”** Others talked about their religious values and the importance of passing those on to their children. One participant said: **“We tell to our children what is right and what is wrong and remain close to them.”** Many participants expressed concern for the changes they see in their traditions and customs. One participant said in regard to the problems in their culture: **“Customs and traditions are not followed anymore... now everything is according to how we see and hear about it in the media and on television. I wish we had stuck to our old traditions and customs.”**

### 3.6. Individual Strengths

Participants shared a variety of individual strengths that they felt were positive for their families. Common individual strengths cited by the participants included:

- Patience
- Strong personality
- Calm/quiet
- Perseverance

### 3.7. Family Interview Findings

The following real-life stories provide a more in-depth look at the strengths and challenges of Jordanian families. They further illustrate the research findings of the focus groups, and show in story form how Jordanian families use their family strengths to solve difficult problems in the family.

#### Story 1: Treatment

A young man went to a European country to study, where he met a girl with whom he fell in love and grew attached, despite her being four years older. His mother knew that her son was in a relationship with a foreign girl so she suggested to his father that he marry off his son.

When he told his family that he wanted to marry his foreign girlfriend, his family accepted the idea, even though his father had some reservations about the issue of foreign women not residing in this country. But he gave his son the freedom to decide about his own marriage, and so the young couple married and started their life with joy and prosperity and without any problems.

At the beginning of the marriage, the young man’s mother-in-law refused to even look at the face of her daughter’s groom, because he had taken her only daughter away from her. However, after treating each other kindly and getting to know one another

well, she accepted him and began to love him, always travelling to visit her daughter and stay with them in Jordan. And, there was a special relationship that formed with the husband's family. They also maintained friendships with expat families, which helped alleviate the mother's feelings of foreignness. In addition to this, having children in the family created an atmosphere of love and affection.

The family was blessed with a son and a daughter. They finished their university studies abroad and returned to settle in Jordan. They had some difficulty acclimating to the prevailing traditions and customs of Jordanian society in the beginning. But in the end, the family's togetherness, co-operation, and the unmatched love of the mother was a source of help and support that allowed the father's work to flourish as was the case with the son's work with his father.

## **Story 2: Determination**

A young woman married when she was 17 years old. She was her mother's only daughter among three brothers from their father, who had been married to four women and had died when she was a child. Her 22-year-old husband was the eldest of nine siblings. He was forced to work at an early age as an adolescent to help his family after his father had an accident that stopped him from being able to work.

They began their life together in the husband's extended family home. It was a single room of a very modest home. She faced hunger with them and was treated like a servant for the extended family, responsible for cooking, sweeping, cleaning, and washing. But she loved her "uncle" – her father-in-law – because she had lived as an orphan without a father and he was like a father to her.

Life went on and they were blessed with their first son followed by a second. When she became pregnant with her third child, the mother insisted on leaving the house of the extended family. So, they rented a home for 14 years despite angering their in-laws, to the extent that they refused to visit them when their first daughter was born. The mutual love and respect between the husband and wife was a source of strength that helped them to be patient with their extended family.

Despite their physical distance from them, the wife continued to go to the home of the extended family to do all the cooking and washing for nine years. They continued having children and God blessed them.

The family of eight members lived together in good times and bad times, and the love between them grew. They became more attached to one another, and the love and affection between them increased as the father worked tirelessly to fulfill his duties to the family and extended family. He never once slowed his pace of work. This changed his perceptions and increased his cultural knowledge on how to deal with employers. The tools of mutual understanding and agreement that he learned from his work outside the home was reflected in the loving relationships at home among the members of his extended family. At one point, the father and mother were forced to go back and live next to the extended family for a period of eight years, as the father had built a second floor onto his family's home before a government agency demolished the house and compensated the extended family with a sum of money.

The mother insisted on educating her sons and had to borrow from people in order for her daughters to complete their education – in spite of all the talk against the principle of educating girls and the prevailing culture that says a girl's future is to be married and serve her husband.

The mother insisted, strived, and struggled for the sake of her daughters' education. And, she sacrificed everything to the extent that her youngest daughter even studied in the bitter cold, wrapped in a blanket because circumstances were so difficult during that time and they were in a new house without any furniture or means of heating. The first daughter did complete her university studies with distinction and got a respectable position and an excellent salary out of loyalty to her mother, father, and siblings. The second daughter insisted on studying law in order to combat wrongdoing and end injustice. She is currently about to graduate and dreams of becoming a judge. The youngest daughter is about to receive her high school diploma.

As for the sons, one travelled to a neighboring country for work, another got a job in a region far away from their area while the third one is currently studying.

The sons and daughters grew up and they have proven to the extended family that their mother's way of raising them was correct. The sons and daughters repay their mother and father's sacrifice with respect, gratitude, and appreciation. When the father returns after a long day at work, everyone stands up to greet, hug, and give him a kiss to make him forget the harshness of the day and circumstances. They sit together, discuss matters, and chat calmly and in harmony. They laugh, they play, they enjoy the presence of their mother and father together. They supplicate for them, asking God to give them long lives and reward them for their tireless work and sleepless nights, and to give them the patience to endure the unfairness of their relatives and the passing of time.

### **Story 3: Lacking a Male**

Thirty years ago, this family's beginnings were difficult, yet simple. The mother held a certificate and the father had a high school diploma and was a simple employee in the banking sector. They lived in a village near Amman. They married after some bickering between the family of the wife who were property and landowners, and the family of the husband who were only simple farmers.

The grandfather was the guardian over the wife because she was fatherless and was living with her mother and siblings in the grandfather's home. The family rejected the match due to a lack of social, financial, and intellectual compatibility. However, they were able to get married with the help of her cousin after a four-year-long engagement.

The couple lived with the spirit of challenge, persistence, and determination in order to prove that they truly loved one another, that they were compatible, and had mutual understanding. They moved forward toward the future, by staying together and being successful at dealing with the challenges of their wants and needs, of their family, and of their own self-fulfillment by relying on their faith in God and in their own abilities – and keeping faith with their relationship.

Their love, mutual understanding, trust, and the integrity of their relationship was the foundation of their family relationship. The wife provided all types of comfort in the home despite its simplicity. She managed the home and was understanding of her husband's circumstances. She never asked for much of anything. She was satisfied with his love and respect for her. He was her central reference – he would tell her what was right and she trusted his opinions. She was happy with him and he with her.

The difficulty of their life caused the father to think about the future. This instilled in him the ambition to become a powerhouse for acquiring earnings that would help him cover his family commitments. He looked toward the future, thinking in the long-term; he took on extra work in addition to his work at the bank. He decided to get a university degree and began attending university when he had three daughters. He completed his studies, receiving a bachelor's degree when he already had five daughters. And his wife stood by him with all her heart, with love and faith in his abilities and ambitions, to the extent that she sold part of her gold in order to cover part of her husband's university tuition.

The father then quit his job and started his own business. There was a leap in the quality of the family's life. His work flourished and expanded to more than one sector. Then the family moved to live in one of the homes he had built and lived a life of luxury. But their happiness was not complete as the family had hoped to give birth to a son along with their seven daughters, who had received the best education and were enjoying a happy, luxurious life. They were close to one another, one solid foundation. They were all held together by love, respect, affection, and appreciation for the tireless efforts and sacrifices of their mother and father.

#### **Story 4: Rationality**

Around ten years ago, a brother learned from his younger sister about a woman who might be suitable for him, and so he went to her workplace and met her. This formed the beginning of the period where they got to know one another. The young man found that the woman had all the characteristics that he wanted in a life partner: she was from an urban family; she was a teacher who worked and had an open mind; and she was joyful and social. The young woman saw that he was a fun young man, who was easy-going, a good listener with an open mind and not stern. She felt from her first meeting with him that she had known him for years. The first thing she liked about him was his love for his mother and father; this was compatible with her own values, which included her own love for her mother and father.

They were married after a short engagement and came to an agreement about their life values and started to plan for their future with transparency and honesty. They reached agreement on how they would organize their lives, how they would deal with their surrounding environment, and how they would engage with their families. The husband gave his wife the insight to separate the reality of his family's life from the reality of her family's life, because they were from dissimilar backgrounds and were totally different.

The foundation of their marriage was a mutual respect for each other; the wife believed that respect gives birth to love, while love does not give birth to respect. The marriage was also built upon the values of transparency, honesty, and clarity with each party putting all their cards on the table for the other to see, and all matters were open for discussion. The wife was able to win over the trust and friendship of her husband's family, despite their strict perspective on everything. The wife accepted her in-law's traditions and customs with the utmost respect, for the sake of her husband and out of respect for her husband's family.

The family was blessed with a daughter and two sons and is currently awaiting the birth of a fourth child. The wife had an impact on the life of the extended family. She was able to make a positive impact and change the feelings of the extended family toward her. Their respect and appreciation for her grew with her kind treatment of them and her engagement with everyone of all ages. This all stems from the father's superb treatment and his respect for his wife and his fondness for the way she was raised and her manners.

The sky is the limit for the father's ambition. He is hardworking and believes in education. He understands well how to depend on himself and to ensure his expenses are covered so he can complete his studies. He gained a doctorate degree in order to achieve his goals and prove himself. He is the first person in his family with an academic degree. Although he works in a large government organization, he feels he has not yet found a specific job opportunity that exactly matches his scientific abilities.

The family is stable and lives with each other in mutual harmony. The husband helps his wife with all matters concerning their family life. His personality is easy-going and he is not quick to anger. The mother is dedicated in her service to her husband and children. She has a special relationship with her husband's family, and her mother-in-law comes to take care of the children when the mother is at work.

The mother and father are aware of their children's interests, as the father insists on putting his children in the best schools and searches for a quality education — not just any education. The wife gave her husband greater respect in return for his respect of her, and trust in return for his trust in her. She works relentlessly to transform her home into an oasis of security and stability, particularly during her husband's studies when she helps him, reads with him, and supports him. Her sincerity has helped her to win over the hearts of her husband and her husband's family.

### **Story 5: Crisis Management**

A young man became acquainted with a young woman through her work, as it was near to his workplace. They were of a similar age and of similar educational backgrounds. She loved him and he loved her. She was enamored with his outgoing personality and the way he treated her. He went to request her hand from her father. Her father agreed to the engagement and their wedding was arranged quickly. They married when they were both 24 years old.

The couple were brought together by love, mutual respect, and the agreement of their families. They were blessed with two sons and a daughter and now the mother

is pregnant with her fourth child. Their relationship has become stronger due to the very forgiving nature of each spouse, their willingness to compromise with one another, the way that they discuss all the matters in their life, and the way that they deal with one another as friends. They established marital principles in their family, and they agreed upon certain behaviors which formed a family constitution between the mother and father. This helped them to deal with external influences such as their in-laws. It also established affection, love, and empathy with their extended family and grandparents.

The husband's support, respect, and appreciation for his wife, and his family's love for her was met by the wife with gratitude. And the wife stood by her husband to help him solve life's issues. She was forced to leave her work after seven years in order to have time to raise the children. The couple faced some financial difficulties which forced them to sell their home in order to pay off their loans. She handled family matters, and they lived well within their means. Those close to them were not aware of their difficult financial situation. She found a way to meet the expenses of the home and the needs of their children.

One day, the wife found a text message from another woman on her husband's phone. She was angry and asked her husband to explain himself. He could not say a word. After a few days, the husband called his wife and invited her to dinner in a nice, quiet place. She accepted because of her love for her husband and her love for her children. She insisted that she did not want to destroy her family and tear apart the lives of her children. Her husband and children were her life.

This turned out to be a point of transformation in their lives. He spoke from his heart about what was on his mind, including about how he had been hurt by his wife's nagging during the difficult economic times that his family had suffered due to the erratic nature of his work. Out of the blue he became acquainted with this other woman, began talking to her and exchanging messages. Then he left the messages on his phone for his wife to see them – hoping she might rethink the way she was treating him. The wife admitted that she was wrong and that she had been hard on him. He admitted that he had been wrong also in letting himself get to know another woman. He promised her sincerely that it would not happen again and she promised him to return to being the wife that he loved. They arrived at the mutual conviction that there was no meaning to life unless they were together, supporting each other and helping one another raise their children and take care of their family together. As part of their solution, they agreed to discuss problems and face them with honesty. They agreed that facing one's problems is better than putting off talking about it and letting it build up gradually.

His wife forgave him and forgot about what he had done. She was always rational and her husband's family always turned to her for ideas about personal issues, because she could provide solutions for others. She always made decisions with her head before her heart and put the interests of her home and children above all else. So he returned to her with all his heart: calmly, easily, loyal to his promise that would never be broken.

## Story 6: The Decision

A young man first saw his future wife 26 years ago. He was enamored with her and asked about her. Then, he went to ask her family for her hand. They got married and lived near her family, as the nature of the husband's work required his absence from home several days a week.

The husband did not like the idea of having children, as he was the eldest of his 11 siblings and there was a time when things were difficult financially. He became distant after his wife gave birth to their first son. However, the birth of a daughter was a point of positive transformation in the family's life. The father's attitudes changed. There was a dramatic reversal in all his ways of thinking. He began to count the hours until he would see his daughter and carry her and play with her to the extent that he would stay up at night in order to take care of her when she was sick.

Mutual understanding and mutual support between the spouses were the foundation for their marital relationship. They shared their social and family duties. The wife would handle all the requirements of their home and ensure the needs of the family were met during the father's absence. The presence of love, mutual understanding, and respect between the members of the family proved to be significant strengths. The husband would help his wife in the household chores when he was available. However, she insisted that he rest and she would take care of their children and handle all their family matters.

It so happened that the husband was entrusted with a foreign assignment for a period of one year. He went to say goodbye to his family and they asked him to give them his car so one of his brothers could use it to get whatever the family needed.

However, this arrangement negatively affected the emotional state of the mother and the children. The mother found herself one day in a difficult situation. It was a rainy winter evening when the weather was cold and stormy. She went out to search for a taxi to take her to purchase gas to warm the house for her children. While she was standing in the street for more than an hour and a half waiting for a means of transportation, a taxi driver saw her and was shocked so he asked her why she was standing at this late hour with an empty gas can. She told him that her husband was traveling and her circumstances were difficult. The taxi driver was most helpful in delivering the gas to her home. This incident was like an alarm bell for the marital relationship and the entire family. She then asked the husband to separate. She told him your salary does not cover the needs of our family. Her husband's response was quick and firm. He asked his family to return the car and everything to his wife.

This caused his husband's family to resent her. They cut off ties with her for several years. When her husband returned from his trip, he himself could not believe what he had done and how he had agreed to the request of his family. His family asked him to leave his wife and divorce her but he refused all their attempts and proclaimed that she was his wife and the mother of his children and that he could not live without her.

Indeed, stability and calmness returned and love filled the life of the family. That incident showed who loved them, who envied them, who hated them and who was

jealous. It also helped the family to come together and start fresh, strengthening their marital ties and family relationships. The father's wisdom, his logical, rational thinking, his outlook toward the future, his continuous initiative, and his independent personality provided a solid anchor for the future efforts of the family. The children were successful academically and professionally. As for the kind nature of the mother, her affection, never-ending love, her devotion to loving her family, her husband, and her children, and her altruism all played an important and significant role in the family's cohesion and the siblings' support for one another. The mother had learned to depend on herself and she was the candle that lit the way for the others.

### **Story 7: Harmony**

A young man finished his university studies and spent several years establishing himself and developing his professional skills. After accomplishing all this, he proposed marriage to a young woman at the beginning of his thirties. This occurred after he had seen her once at one of the speed-racing events that she attended because of her love for the sport. Then, in a non-traditional way, he went by himself to meet her family and to introduce himself, requesting their daughter's hand.

When he went and made an appointment to meet them, he did not think about telling his own family about his plans to marry. He also did not think about bringing a gift with him despite the customs, traditions, and social conventions followed on such occasions. He was especially happy and relieved then that there was no objection from the young woman's family in spite of his lack of foresight.

The couple rented a furnished apartment for a year-and-a-half. Next, they rented a house for eight years before his father-in-law decided to build a big house and give a floor to each of his two sons and two daughters.

Now the husband and wife were able to begin creating their life together in earnest. The husband, as head of the family, established his own private business with success after success in the auto field. The family was blessed with two sons and a daughter; all of them inherited a love of cars and racing and they grew very knowledgeable in this field due to the teachings of their father, in addition to being successful both academically and professionally.

A mutual understanding grounded in the committed love between the mother and father was reflected in their children. That is because their decision to get married was built on a firm foundation in the first place. It was based on an understanding of the responsibilities of marriage and forming a family, in addition to having conviction, mutual understanding, harmony, and the ability to complement one another. That is to say, they merged two very different personalities into one couple: the somewhat short-tempered mother's personality that loved organization and tidiness, with the father's very calm personality, who was an excellent conversationalist and could discuss and convince others through his rational, logical way.

Due to these characteristics that completed or complemented one another, small problems were managed well and did not grow into big problems. Everything in the family went according to an agreed upon system and no-one within the family

disturbed it. Their relationship was built on love and a strong adherence to the rules of the house.

From his upbringing and work culture, the father acquired a sense of diplomacy and flexibility. These skills instilled in the children a sense of responsibility toward their mother and father, and a sense of duty to their studies and professional careers. The father kept himself informed in the matters of his children and the mother paid attention to the details of their upbringing. The mother and father were brought together by a shared interest, a higher purpose, the distinction of their children among their peers, and the positive relationships the children had with one another.

The prevailing customs and traditions of society did not have an effect upon the upbringing of the children because their home upbringing had the greatest impact in building their personalities. Similarly, the gap between the family's way of thinking and the prevailing customs of society did not leave any mark on the children's lives. The children viewed their father as a role model and as an example to be emulated. The father insisted on fulfilling the specific financial, emotional, and social needs of each of the members of the family, which reflected positively on the way that the children acted with one another and on their family relationships in particular and their social engagements in general.

### **Story 8: Patience**

A widow was left to live alone with her son, who was just four years old when the woman's husband passed away in the prime of his life after suffering from an intense illness. The woman suffered alongside her husband during his illness, after he asked her to choose between staying beside him or separating from him when he found out about his health condition. The woman found within herself the strength and ability to serve her sick husband but she suffered from the bitterness of life with a sick husband and a young son who was in need of warmth, kindness, and care.

Days passed when the widow was aching to sleep but she decided to work and depend upon her own two hands to care for her child, who was all she had left in the world. She had no father and no mother to lean on and provide her with the strength to face the harsh conditions of life. She had her young son in her arms and no strength or power but God, as her husband's family had deserted and abandoned her.

After two years, there was a beacon of hope on the horizon as she married an educated man who was younger than her. This served as a kind of solution. It was the least harmful among a number of solutions that were all bad choices. She did not accept the idea of being married during the first year. It was difficult for her to acclimate to the marriage because her child was six years old and starting first grade. The first year of the marriage passed by despite all the blame from those reproaching her, and to the astonishment of her relatives.

Through all this, her new husband embraced the mother and her child. It was he who had made the decision to marry a widow with his full volition based on his faith in God and his personal conviction that age was merely a number and that a true marriage has new characteristics, including stability, affection, mercy, and a reward after the

exhaustion of a full day's work when you are received with a warm greeting, a loving reception, a smile, and a kind face.

The child grew up and became a handsome young man with a pleasant disposition. He had grown in the care of a loving mother who told him the sky was the limit; and an affectionate stepfather, chosen for him by fate, who had made him forget that he was orphaned, instilled noble morals in him and praiseworthy characteristics, and was very close to him. His father took care of him and gave him the best education, and he brought the son the most delicious food and the most luxurious clothes and colognes.

He was proud of his stepfather who even now covers him up during cold nights, as he worries that he will get cold. His stepfather also follows all the son's matters in life, whether big or small. The stepfather worried that the presence of a new child in the family might take away part of his love, kindness, and affection from this son that God had placed in his path. He opened his eyes to find himself in the warm arms of a father whose name is not on his birth certificate, but has instilled in him all his qualities and morals in addition to such a great amount of love, kindness, respect, and devoted appreciation.

The mother felt that she had chosen a suitable husband. Her husband is a man with a merciful heart. He is a man of values and morals and has an understanding mentality. He always has an unquenchable love for his wife and son, and she returns his love for her. She appreciated his love for her and her son greatly and with great love. She made the home like an oasis of security and stability for him, and she helped him deal with his presence in a foreign land. She was his nuclear family, his extended family, his country, and his entire world.

The core of their strength is the three of them staying together. They pray to God night and day to extend their blessings and complete their happiness by allowing their son to grow into a man of whom they can be proud and who will fill their life with joy and happiness. A man whose successes fill the sky and pays them back for their hard work, patience, and devotion to his upbringing. And as the mother said, the story can be summarized in following words: **“The fulfillment of the promise to those who are patient.”**

### **Story 9: Love**

A couple became acquainted with each other around two-and-a-half-years before getting married. He saw her for the first time during a social function after which he went back and saw her again a few months later. He was two years older than her but they both had a college degree. He took the initiative to talk to her though they had not met before. He was enamored by how she looked. After he talked to her, he became enamored with her personality. He felt that they were similar and she might get along with him. He was completely aware of the standards that he had set for choosing his life partner.

She liked him from the first moment she spoke with him and she felt there was mutual chemistry between them. She didn't want anyone else. She wondered if there were still people with these qualities of understanding and logical, rational thinking and

his cultural outlook. She felt that he was like her and that his qualities were similar to her father's.

They were married about ten years ago. They were brought together by great love, mutual understanding, and agreement in regards to their internal and external feelings about things and about different situations. They were surprised to discover that they loved the same things and these feelings have increased year after year. She learned to enjoy reading and was introduced to books by him as he was a good reader and he was well-cultured in a number of fields.

The family was blessed with a son and a daughter, which made the connection between the two loving spouses stronger and made their love grow. His love for his wife shows in his eyes when he looks at her, and she understands the language of his facial expressions before he speaks. She knows when he is being affected by the stresses of life. She felt that he was worried about her during her daughter's birth as he went with her into the operating room, holding her hand, and she felt his growing love for her.

The husband had to join an official assignment abroad. This assignment challenged the wife's ability to withstand her husband being far away from her. She was responsible for the home and the children. She went back and forth between her home and her family's home. He was the one who gave her patience and showed her strength through his willpower, giving her rays of hope so that she could look after the interests of the family and ensure that the necessary duties of life and the children's education were covered.

She tried to work in the private sector, but she was not able to adjust to the responsibilities of her work. She experienced multiple negative incidents at work and did not feel comfortable because of the stress of work practices. In addition, there were two children in the family who needed their mother to take care of them, raise, and teach them in spite of the fact that her husband had welcomed the idea of his wife working in order to build her character and increase her independence. However, he desired work that would not affect the house, the children, and his wife's emotional state in any negative fashion.

## CHAPTER FOUR: TUNISIA

### 4.1. The Tunisian Family

Each focus group discussion began with a question about the participants' families. Participants spoke about their own specific families and gave demographic information including size, structure, and family dynamics.

According to many of the participants, the family often includes extended family members, especially if they are single. One single participant said: **“I live with my immediate family of origin, meaning my elderly mother and father and my brother who suffers from a chronic mental disorder.”** Many participants spoke about their connection to extended family. One participant said: **“My family consists of three generations: my wife and me, my son, and the grandparents ... our blood and familial relations still bring us all together. So, you can say that we never fully left our extended family even if our residences are independent from one another.”**

Participants talked about taking on responsibility for family members. One participant talked about his brother having responsibility for the family in the absence of their father, and now he has the responsibility for his elderly mother and siblings, as well as his own family. Younger family members sometimes take on the roles of authority for older family members. One female participant who lived with her parents and one sibling said: **“I consider myself as the head of the family.”**

### 4.2. Family Strengths

When asked to identify the strengths of their family, participants gave a variety of answers. Overall, six especially important themes emerged across all focus groups:

- Good communication
- Love
- Conveying traditions
- Responsibility
- Family closeness
- Resilience

The theme of **good communication** was identified as a strength by statements including mutual understanding, compromise, finding solutions, tolerance, forgiveness, and honesty. One participant said: **“My family’s strength is discussion: we openly discuss things a lot, although there are three generations in our family. And, we try to not solve problems while causing other problems. We discuss everything without exception, even sensitive things when it is called for.”** Another person said: **“As soon as I notice any sign of disagreement between my husband and me, I recall my great love for him and I am more understanding and compromise and he does the same thing.”**

**Conveying traditions.** A strength mentioned by some participants was found to be in the conveying of traditions. Statements such as passing on values and morals, respect, and stability were mentioned. One participant stated: **“Our strength is the traditional way of raising and educating that includes solidarity and mutual respect.”**

**Family closeness** is identified by participants as a strength by statements that included harmony, security, belonging, support and co-operation. One participant said: **“One of the most important points of strength in our family is the unity between family members in times of happiness and also times of sadness and crisis.”** Another one said: **“A shared belief that family is a refuge for its members no matter what the circumstances is the strong point of my family ... it makes me very content.”**

The theme of **love** was identified through statements such as fondness for each other, showing affection and tenderness, and contentment. While some participants did not speak about love directly, their statements convey the idea. One participant said: **“We are content with each other ... we don’t go to sleep until we talk to and check on each other.”** Another said: **“The most important strong point in my family is the level of affection that brings us together.”** Another participant spoke of love more directly by saying: **“Every one of us is sure that the other loves him and appreciates the sacrifice of the family for his sake.”**

The theme of **responsibility** was identified through statements by the participants such as the following: taking care of things, generosity, sharing, and trust. One participant said: **“A source of strength of my family is the presence of someone who carries all responsibilities with willingness and contentment, and who is in the service of all.”** Sharing resources was also mentioned by one participant, who said **“We have one pocket”** to indicate that what one person has, belongs equally to the others.

**Resilience** was another theme that can be identified through statements such as working through problems. One participant said: **“In times of crisis, there is combined effort or synergy among my extended family and I consider that another strong point.”** Many of the stories that participants shared about both positive and negative experiences focused on the resilience of the family to rise above the situations that the family had faced and the lessons that were learned as they moved forward.

### 4.3. Family Challenges

Participants were also asked to identify and describe a time in their family that led to a negative experience, as well as to identify the ongoing challenges that their family experiences. Together these yielded five common themes:

- Changes in values and traditions
- Financial challenges
- Poor communication
- Negative outside influences
- Family conflict

Challenges can threaten the strength of families and prohibit them from reaching their potential.

**Changes in values and traditions.** Almost all of the participants spoke about changes in society as a problem for their country. Specific challenges mentioned were the tradition of keeping the family together and the lack of family closeness. One participant stated: **“For me, to succeed would be to continue to provide the same lifestyle to my children that we have now. This means a life in an extended family that**

**brings together four generations and keeps them from losing touch with one another later in nuclear families, separated without much communication with one another.”**

Another participant said: **“Our customs are part of our personality that differentiate us from others and doesn’t let us forget our roots. These have many positive effects on families, their level of co-operation, and solidarity.”**

Many of the participants spoke about their traditions as being important for society, but also recognized that society is changing and how adherence to the traditions has limits. One participant said: **“There are customs that unite families and strengthen their connections to each another, such as visiting one another and providing financial and spiritual support. And there are also customs that separate families and cause them to break apart ...”**

**Poor communication** is a challenge identified by several of the focus group participants. This challenge includes a lack of mutual understanding and co-operation within the marital relationship, as well as among extended family members. One participant said: **“One challenge is keeping the lines of communication open between the members of our family.”** Another participant said: **“I hope to acquire the ability to deal nicely with my son with whom I have great difficulty communicating.”**

When asked what they want to change about their family, some participants expressed the need to strengthen their communication with family members. One participant said that they had **“the desire to improve discussions between us, as this is a communicative weakness faced by our family members.”**

**Family conflict** is a concern for many participants. This includes their immediate family, but especially the extended family. Several participants would like their family to have more harmony among members. One participant said: **“My sisters don’t get along and are estranged. The greatest challenge was trying to keep my family together...”** Another participant talked about wanting to **“reduce the quarrelling between members of the extended family.”**

Some of the participants talked about issues with traditions that caused some conflicts. One participant said: **“I hope that the division of the inheritance from my father is done fairly and for me, as a female, to get my rightful share, which is not supported by my mother who wants the full inheritance to go to the males.”** Others talked about being able to make their own decisions and the dominance of family members. One participant said: **“My personal challenge is for me to make my voice heard and stand up for myself.”**

**Financial challenges** were identified by several participants. Some talked about financial challenges due to an inability to find and maintain stable employment. One participant said: **“I have to ensure my children’s good health and living conditions and overcome the difficult circumstances that we are facing. The solution is for me to find a job.”**

While most participants do not talk about being in poverty, they desire to have more resources to give their family a better life or more opportunities. One participant said: **“My family is simple and of modest means; we cover our expenses, thank God. However, the only challenge for me and my wife is to guarantee our children’s education and to take care of them until they can continue their studies and are successful, and living in circumstances better than our own.”**

**Negative outside influences** also present challenges for families in Tunisia. One specific area that was mentioned by participants was social media and the threat of that changing their family dynamics. One participant said: **“We want to change the way our children utilize technology and social media tools and to bring back our value system in dealing with one another and communicating with each other in our family.”** Another said: **“...For us to be successful in raising our son and our future children, God willing, and to protect them from the threats to the younger generation and youth in our fast-paced society that is unstable culturally, socially, intellectually, and in regard to security and safety.”**

Some participants see negative outside influences as affecting the cultural values between generations. One participant said: **“There is the challenge of our family losing touch with the values of our upbringing and the generational gap between members of our single family, and the negative influence of modern communication technology on children and young people.”**

#### 4. 4. Community Strengths

While neighbors and friends can be a source of strength for some, other participants said they received no support from their community and were not connected to their neighbors. The researcher who conducted the focus groups noted that there was a contrast between those who were from more rural areas as opposed to more urban ones. Those from rural areas are more likely to have relationships with their neighbors, and believed that the larger family benefits from those relationships. He states that in more urban areas participants **“lack a sense of belonging to the neighborhood and to the local community and are likely to see the people of each neighborhood as strangers.”** One participant from a rural area said: **“In the countryside, we are one clan and we are all in touch and connected to one another and we feel that this is our natural place where we fit in and belong and we want to make sure this continues.”** A participant from an urban area said: **“There is no support from the local community for our families. Everyone is busy with their own issues and problems, especially with the increase in the percentage of working women in the cities. We don’t have a sense of belonging to the neighborhood or the small community that we live in as we all moved here from cities and other neighborhoods. Instead, we feel like we still belong to our home neighborhood where we were raised and spent our childhood and youth.”**

## 4.5. Cultural Strengths

Participants identify their customs and traditions as defining the traditional family in society by keeping families close, increasing the time spent together, and strengthening relationships. One participant said: **“Our customs are part of our personality that differentiates us from others and doesn’t let us forget our roots. These have many positive effects on families, their level of co-operation, and solidarity.”**

Other participants see customs and traditions as outside the modern family in Tunisian society today. One participant said: **“Customs and traditions define the traditional family but these are alien to modern families, who do not enjoy their characteristics ...”** Others suggested that while some traditions may still apply, others are negative and can cause tension between family members. For example, one participant said: **“There are customs that unite families and strengthen their connections to one another, such as visiting one another and providing financial and spiritual support, and then there are those that separate families and cause them to break apart and cause great financial loss, for example the traditions that confiscate a woman’s rightful inheritance, or the cancellation of a wedding because a member of the family has died, after spending a large sum of money.”**

## 4.6. Individual Strengths

Participants shared a variety of individual strengths that they felt were positive for their families. Common among them were the following:

- Good communicator (listener, peacemaker, understanding, compromising)
- Responsible (helping, co-operating)
- Caring (affectionate, tender)
- Patience
- Accepting (tolerant)

## 4.7. Family Interview Findings

The following real-life stories provide a more in-depth look at the strengths and challenges of Tunisian families. These stories serve to connect and further illustrate the research findings of the focus groups and highlight examples of the findings within the families and individuals within those families.

### Story 1: Usurped Rights and Forgiveness

My father was a large-scale farmer. He had lands and properties and a very substantial bank account. We are five married girls and four boys – one of them lives outside Tunisia and two live in the countryside where my father lived. My father passed away and he didn’t divide his estate during his life. My two brothers who stayed in the village took over the division of the inheritance. They benefited from the land by selling the crops and seizing all the profits with the excuse that they were taking care of our father while he was sick and handling the land and farming. We girls and the other

two brothers were left empty-handed. They didn't even want to divide the rest of the inheritance – buildings and properties. They explained it as a mistake in the names of the inheritors. Indeed, some of our sisters were going through difficult financial times and didn't find any support from their two brothers, which was owed to them by right.

We found ourselves with two choices. Either we could complain to the judiciary to regain our rights (in which case we might win, but we would lose our brothers forever, and our relationship would be destroyed), or we could accept the reality of the matter, leave our rights to God, and protect our relationship with our two brothers. It wasn't easy to decide between these two choices.

After much hesitation and discussion between ourselves, we decided to prioritize our blood relations with our siblings above money and inheritance. For enmity not to stand between us, we decided as siblings that we would not stand up and make a claim in front of the judiciary. We sisters were convinced that this was the best solution, even if it wasn't the most just solution.

My husband helped me to reach that decision, although he was not convinced that I was right. However, he did not want to create any hostility between his wife and her siblings for the sake of money. He may have been right. But with time, matters may change.

And now, today, we visit one another, celebrate the holidays together, check on each other, and share in each other's happiness and sadness without getting into the subject of inheritance. Indeed, our values of family co-operation and familial bonds were victorious – even if it was at the expense of some of us. It was in this way that we saved our family from dissolution.

## **Story 2: Reason/Maturity and Justice Guarantee Family Cohesion**

I come from a big family – I have a paternal uncle and lots of paternal aunts. My paternal uncle passed away and the inheritance from my grandfather remained undivided between him, my father, and my paternal aunts. So, my father decided it should be divided and everyone should take his share. He consulted me about that and asked me to assist him with the procedures.

I was worried that there would be disagreement about the inheritance that might cause a storm in our family, especially as the value of the agricultural lands and their locations are different and that might be one of the reasons for a disagreement. Everyone would have an unspoken wish to receive the best land and property, but wouldn't request this from my father due to their respect for him and his decision-making. Further complicating matters, my aunts expressed their disinterest in receiving land and property, and suggested instead that they receive their inheritance in cash.

My father could have taken his share as he alone wished, and no-one would have opposed him because everyone respects him and doesn't disagree with him. But he surprised everyone by saying: **“We will draw lots for the land and I will be the last one to draw.”**

The children of my paternal uncle disagreed with that and begged him to draw first and then leave them the rest. But he stood firm in his decision and it went as he wished. The drawing was filled with tears of respect and appreciation for my father. After it was over and I returned with my father to our home, he turned to me and said: **“Do you know that all the land and the property aren’t worth anything compared to my nephew visiting me when I am sick or greeting me during Eid, and checking on me, even if it’s by phone?”**

This story makes me proud when I remember it, and it strengthened the relationship between my siblings and me on one hand, and my paternal cousins on the other, to the extent that we feel like we are all siblings instead of cousins.

### **Story 3: Taking the Time to Prioritize What's Most Important**

I have a sister who is married and she has two sons and a daughter who is little. One day, I met a young woman who lives in the neighborhood and she said that she had a son fathered by my brother-in-law and she was demanding that he recognize this son. It was a total shock for my sister, my mother, my father, and all my extended family. It was a disaster of monumental proportions. We didn’t know how to behave or whom to believe, because my brother-in-law denied it, and we were hesitant to perform a DNA test out of the fear that it may substantiate the woman’s claims.

My mother and father were set on the need for divorce, while my sister was lost between her love for her husband and her suspicion of his unfaithfulness. To everyone, it seemed like there were only two choices – either accepting the reality and move past his unfaithfulness as if it had not happened, which was a choice that no-one in my family would accept or even hear about, or a divorce, final separation, and the dissolution of the family. My husband and I decided to intervene. We made a plan including asking everyone to take their time, and not for anyone to make any decision which everyone committed to do while my brother-in-law stayed at his parent’s home. During this time, everyone calmed down a bit and the level of anger and tension decreased.

So, we took advantage of the opportunity – my husband and I – and we called the affected people in our family to speak with them individually. My husband spoke with the men and I spoke with the women. We focused on two elements: the best interests of the children, and the suspicion that the woman’s story was blackmail. This helped us in our efforts. We were finally successful at calming everyone’s concerns, mending the rift, and bringing back the trust little by little until things were back to normal and the family continued as usual.

That would not have happened if there had not been a number of factors among which the most important are: holding strong to family cohesion and not tearing it apart; co-operation among the extended family during difficult times as no-one made us feel that we had to stay out of the matter or not get involved; an unspoken desire among all of us for the family not to be torn apart despite our anger and discontent; the respect that my whole family, including its elders, have for my husband; and not rushing a decision, but dealing with crises calmly and rationally.

#### **Story 4: Times of Crises and the Return to One's Senses**

The relationship between the members of my extended family – my brothers, their wives, my sisters and their husbands – was characterized by strife. Although we could describe it as bad, it wasn't the same as before our marriages, when we all lived together.

A few years ago, my elder brother's health took a turn for the worse and he began a series of dangerous operations. Everyone became depressed, particularly as he is the eldest and holds a special position among all of us. Suddenly, there was a change in our relationships. We noticed that everyone forgot about any enmity or sensitivity between us, and everyone came together in an instant for my brother due to the bad situation that he was going through. Some of our family members got together after years of hostility and avoidance of one another, and everyone behaved as if nothing had ever happened.

It was our family duty to offer our brother financial and psychological support – that was the impetus for everyone coming together. We co-ordinated the intervention and support, and designated our roles. This had a huge impact on my brother's ability to overcome this crisis. It was a must and it was beneficial.

In analyzing this, we could say that all of us siblings had preserved some of the values and characteristics which had remained within ourselves, despite our disagreements. We renewed these during the difficult time that we went through. These characteristics were family co-operation during hard times, sibling duty, and solidarity during times of need. All of us felt this without ever discussing or agreeing on it.

#### **Story 5: Life Goes On, Even in the Face of Tragedy**

We had a young son, in addition to two girls who were disabled. Our only son died in a traffic accident. It was a monumental tragedy that destroyed our family. Everything changed. I suffered from a mental breakdown that caused me to undergo psychotherapy. As for my husband, he became a completely different person that I didn't recognize. He used to be quiet, having nothing but work and home.

My husband could no longer stand staying at home after his only son died. He stayed in bars drinking and had relations with people with whom he never could have imagined that he would spend time. He was rambling and had almost lost his mind, because he could find no explanation for what happened. He could not accept life without his son, who he thought he would be able to depend on to support the family one day, particularly in regards to providing care for his disabled sisters.

My husband rejected everything, including his family. So, he no longer stayed at home except for a few hours to just sleep and leave without thinking about anyone or anything else. He no longer cared if his family had enough to eat or to cover its needs. And if he didn't need to go to work so that he would have money to drink, he would have abandoned it, too. In this way, by turning to drinking he ran away from his painful feelings of being responsible for his son's death. He thought that if he had only taken more care of his son, paid more attention to him, and advised him when he was recklessly driving the way he did and so fast with his friend.

After a difficult time, I began to realize that if we continued down the same path, our family would be lost and I saw that our two disabled daughters had the right to be cared for by us, also. So, I decided to salvage the situation and my breakdown was transformed into great strength and resolution. So, I quit psychotherapy and took control of myself. I was patient with my husband and I didn't clash with my husband, especially as we don't have anyone but him and he is goodhearted to the point of sometimes being naïve. And, I made excuses for him, taking note that I don't have any other family, whether parents or siblings.

I began to read The Qur'an and gained strength from it. And I decided not to lose everything and to preserve my family and I started anew in taking control over things and particularly as my husband's case started to normalize. And, my older daughter returned to working in a beauty salon for women, which is the profession that she and her sister learned at the center for the deaf that is in the city. I was able to salvage the situation by relying on God, putting my trust in Him, drawing inspiration from The Qur'an, and thanks to what I had learned from life and from the experiences of others.

### **Story 6: Money is for the Family, not its Members**

In the beginning of our marriage, we had a car that was in my name and we didn't have a home that we owned. One of my husband's colleagues suggested that he sign up for a government program that provides homes. My husband wasn't convinced and he didn't have any desire to do that based on the justification that he didn't have the necessary amount of cash for the deposit. I tried to convince him to join in the project, taking into consideration that the symbolic effect of acquiring a home would support our family's stability and free us from the cost of rent. But he was afraid and he didn't have any solutions to finding the cash deposit.

Without notifying him, I made a decision. I sold my car and my gold jewelry and I surprised him one day by presenting him with the needed money. After at first being surprised, my husband applauded my initiative and two years later, we had our house. We learned through our family upbringing that owning a home is the first guarantee to family stability, just as my husband's understanding of the initiative that I undertook without consulting him helped us achieve our dream.

### **Story 7: Among Disaster and Destruction, a Few Flowers May Sprout**

This story alternates between the narration of a husband and wife.

**The husband begins:** When I got married, I didn't have a stable job as I didn't know the meaning of responsibility in my youth. My father passed away when I was six years old and my mother joined him when I was 13. Life shaped me and many times I was close to going astray.

But after marriage, I realized that I had duties and that I had to ensure a respectful situation for my wife and my recently formed family, and that I had to fulfill their needs. I decided to work on a naval base for one of the gas companies. The circumstances of the work were very difficult and I used to be away from my wife for weeks at a time,

but I sacrificed for years so that I could change my situation and that of my family. I used to refuse to take holidays so that I could work more and earn more.

My financial situation improved greatly when my children came along. I bought a house, agricultural land, a luxury car, and a truck. I went from one situation to another one that was a lot better. I was moved by the goals that I wanted to achieve, because I was an orphaned child, who wasn't educated and was raised without a family and almost lived out on the streets. But I was able to form a family and provide what we needed, to give us financial and social standing, and all of this was good. I consider that society's view toward me is of great importance, and that has given me the incentive to work hard and make sacrifices, just as the coming of my children instilled in me feelings of responsibility that I had never known before.

**The wife continues:** What my husband mentioned about the change in our financial situation a few years after marriage turned into a tragic nightmare for our family. He left his work and went through a period of wandering and spending on his personal vices, and taking part in deviant behavior as he thought that his responsibility was only to provide monetarily for his family. The children started to grow up and their father was not really present. He was always absent and going out at night until he started to lose his savings little by little on his vices outside the home.

Our relationship was strained, and the rift between us grew and the atmosphere in our family was ruined. It affected the children's schooling. Instead of trying to fix his situation after he lost all his money and sold his car and truck, he completely ran away from his responsibility and left me and the children and travelled to Italy illegally.

I wasn't working at that time and I found myself in a very difficult and complicated situation. I didn't finish my studies and didn't learn a profession. At the same time, I was responsible by myself to take care of my family and children's needs. That is what forced me to work as a household assistant for a number of families. This work, in addition to the financial support that I received from my brothers, didn't provide me with a stable income to handle the affairs of my family as the absence of my husband continued, and we didn't know anything about him, nor did we receive anything from him.

After a while, my husband was deported and he came back to us just as he had left us – without anything. The problems and the crises continued for our family, especially as he had become more tense and more violent than before all of these subsequent disappointments. We could not go on, so we divorced but we stayed in the same home while we were divorced because it is my home by law because I have custody of the children.

Besides, he didn't have a place to stay or a family to embrace him or any money or job to depend on. I could put up with people's gossip and innuendos, and I would not throw the father of my children out into the street. At the same time, I preserved my self-respect and my honor. Although it went against tradition, I did what I did for two reasons: the first is that that I know that my ex-husband had no family and would become even more lost if he left the house and would be completely out on the streets; the second is that this arrangement allowed my children to have their father with them. I had thought about their stability after I noticed a little bit of uncertainty and instability in their attitude and their behavior, particularly when they reached puberty.

We stayed like this for six years and I continued to work inside homes while my ex-husband started little by little to become more serious as he was prodded and grew older. Basically, things got slowly better after he changed his relationships and became acquainted with a group of men who were from a higher socio-cultural background who had better morals, behavior, and social esteem.

I know everything about him and I noticed that his new group of friends changed him for the better; they lifted him up from the moral and social level to which he had fallen. This is demonstrated by the fact that they worked hard to get us back together and encouraged us to marry anew, which is what happened. I agreed to return to him on a number of conditions: that he changed himself; that he became more diligent in looking for different, honest means to earn money; that he strengthened the wholesome social relationships he had begun to have; that we lived in the same home; and that getting remarried would make our situation as it should be.

I put my children above all else and that is what made me patient with his deviant behavior, caused me to work as a housemaid, made me let him remain in our home after our divorce, and led me to remarry him. But things didn't happen without us paying a price and this price was very high. During the time that my husband was lost in deviant behavior, during his absence in Italy, and throughout our divorce, I did not have complete control over my children and I was not able to provide them with structure and raise them on my own. I had focused on protecting my daughters and overlooked my son who, in the absence of his father as an authority figure, left school and began to have relationships with troubled youths, which affected his behavior. Today, he is in prison on a serious charge. We have ultimately been blackmailed financially by the party of the plaintiff. My son has fallen victim to what happened in our family.

### **Story 8: Who Said that There are Limits to Patience?**

From the day of our marriage and throughout its 27-year duration, my relationship with my husband has not been good; indeed, it has never even been normal. Usually in such cases a separation would occur, but my daughter was born during the first years of our marriage and she became a deciding factor in my thinking and behavior.

We have lived in the same home for many long years but without mutual understanding, or harmony, or ever a normal marital life. My husband does not carry any responsibility and does not care about the affairs of our family, or about his wife or his daughter, although his social behavior is normal and doesn't include any taboos, depravity, or immorality.

Yet he behaves as if he doesn't have a wife, or a daughter, or a family towards which he has responsibilities and financial or, in particular, certain moral and emotional duties. I ask myself sometimes: "What makes me put up with this abnormal situation without leaving him?" Even my daughter sometimes says to me: "Why don't you divorce him?"

So why didn't I divorce him a while ago, especially considering that I work and earn a decent income, and that I am able to handle my affairs, and deal with all life's circumstances? The reason I didn't divorce him was for the sake of my only daughter;

I don't want her living between separated parents because I believe that might affect her mental stability. Today, she is about to get married and I will not make any changes before she gets married.

In the eyes of society we are a couple, with all the respect and relationship stability that this entails. But, in our home, we are strangers separated by everything – even by rooms. I was brought up to have patience and with an undue appreciation of society's view of a divorced woman, and toward a girl who is raised by a divorced mother. These are the factors that led me to preserve my family structure – even if it is only superficially and socially – and at my own expense.

### **Story 9: The Family Sticks Together**

My son left his institute and didn't finish his studies. He was passionate about animal husbandry and had a desire to make a viable career out of it. Unfortunately, I didn't have the capacity to assist him with that. At the same time, I didn't want my son to remain unemployed as his behavior might become objectionable.

I decided to resort to taking a loan from the bank, and that is what happened despite the fact that I do not like taking loans from banks. However, for the sake of taking care of my son and helping him, I did that. Thanks to the loan, he was able to start a small chicken and rabbit farm. He worked on it for a period of time and made a profit while I paid off the loan by myself. Next, he decided to study the science of raising chickens and rabbits at a specialized center. After gaining the required knowledge and skills, he returned to work. Again, I was the one who was financially supporting him while he studied.

He was able to achieve an acceptable level of income that allowed him to marry, with some help from me also. However, his business yields decreased and so he sold everything and moved into small-scale, independent commerce, which allowed him to cover his family expenses after he had a daughter. But his income wasn't enough to pay the rent on their house, so I took over the rental payments. After I retired I took on work that allowed me to continue to pay off the loan I had helped him with, and to cover the rental sum for my son's home and to spend on my family.

All this took place through an agreement between myself and my wife. And, I still consider what I did as something important and a positive accomplishment. I helped my son who never despaired but was always trying to earn money, though he was always in need of support even after he got married and had a family.

It is my duty as a father to take care of my children as best I can. Life has taught me that when parents falter and do not help their children, this leads to the loss of their children and the dissolution of the family. Also, I am responsible in front of God and I must take care of my responsibilities to the best of my ability.

### **Story 10: Between Satisfying One's Wife and Honoring One's Parents**

When I got married, I lived with my wife in my paternal home with my mother, as my father had passed away a long time ago. I was not able to cover the cost of rent for an

independent home, just as it was not acceptable for me to leave my mother to live by herself in the house.

However, as the years passed by and my children were born, the relationship between my wife and my mother gradually began to worsen, and there were lots of disagreements between them until it escalated to the point that it was impossible for them to live together, despite my repeated attempts at reconciliation. My wife suggested that we live on our own independently; in fact she insisted on it.

I was between a rock and a hard place. I was unable to cover the costs of renting a house, but I am also attached to my wife and my three young children. At the same time, I don't want my mother to be angry with me or to be an undutiful son. This was a difficult time, that was resolved in the end by a solution that I suggested to my wife and that she accepted, despite its challenges. I asked her to take our children and travel to her family's home that is 500 kilometers away from the city of Tunis where we live. And I would search for a way out of this situation in the meanwhile.

This took place, and my wife moved to her family's home with my children who were transferred to new schools. Our family was separated for around two years. I used to visit them from time to time, and sent them money to live on. In this way, I was able to look after my wife and my children, as well as keeping my mother satisfied.

During this time I was able to gather together a sum of money, partly through saving and partly through borrowing. I worked at night in addition to my day job. I was able to own a small piece of land and began building a home on it. Before the home was finished I was reunited with my wife and children. Then, the construction was completed little by little. I behaved as our religion dictates, as it calls upon us to honor our parents, especially in their old age, and also to look after wives and children. I was a success at that, and I feel proud when I remember those days, despite their difficulty and being far from my children for a long time.

### **Story 11: A Family is Nothing if it Doesn't Work Together**

**Part 1.** When my wife underwent major surgery it cost us all of our financial savings. A short while later my father became sick as he was very old, and we needed to have him treated. We faced two choices: either send him to a public hospital where they don't provide high-level services and where the facilities are bad (especially in some of the states like ours, called governorates); or we could send him for treatment in a private hospital, which would require a large sum of money, especially as he would be staying there for a relatively long time.

My siblings made many flimsy excuses as to why he should receive treatment in a public hospital, even though they knew that the services would not be so beneficial and might prove damaging to his health. However, even though I had spent everything I had on my wife's treatment, I wanted my father to receive the most beneficial treatment under good circumstances.

I found the solution through my wife, who pleaded constantly with me to take a loan and pay for my father's treatment. My father was treated under the best circumstances

and his condition improved, and my wife and I paid off the loan over a period of two years. My esteem for my wife increased, although I had known that she was precious and that her upbringing was faith-based. Indeed, the piety that characterizes her and her faith regarding our duty to our parents and her regard for helping her husband are what motivated her to take this position, completely of her own volition and with the greatest of ease.

**Part 2.** I have a sister who has no job and no income. She was engaged and had set an early date for the wedding, but my family was not prepared financially to provide all the requirements for the wedding and the marriage, particularly as my father had passed away and their financial circumstances were modest.

We were in a tense situation as the fiancé wanted to get married quickly and the social structure in which we live requires that we respect our marriage customs or at least part of these, which is an expensive matter, and my family lacked the money. My husband surprised me—as there are no blood ties between us other than he is my husband—when he decided to cover all the costs of my sister’s marriage on his own, and that is what happened.

It was a somewhat traditional marriage, costly, and no one assisted with it but my husband. He made a considerate decision that was not asked of him, and if he hadn’t done it, no one would have blamed him. I couldn’t keep myself from asking him about his motivation for doing what he did, and he said: “I am one of the members of this extended family and your sister is like my own sister, and all I did was fulfill the duty of a brother to his sister.”

At that time, we had only been married for a relatively short period of time ourselves—not even five years. Despite that, my husband’s generous actions and his large gift was only motivated by his sense of family togetherness and mutual co-operation between the members of one family. Though it is true he was characterized as a giving person, I never thought it would be to that extent. A year later, I learned that my husband had taken out a loan for a sum of money to cover all the requirements of my sister’s marriage. He didn’t tell me about it, an event that left a huge impression on me and on all the other members of my family, even those who aren’t close to us.

### **Story 12: The Cow and the Pupil**

I come from a family from the countryside that is very poor and has many family members (nine people). My father was a non-landholding farmworker who would be able to find work one day but not the next. All we owned was a single cow that supported many of the nutritional needs of our family and it was an important source of income for us.

None of my siblings were able to continue even their primary school studies. When I successfully passed the test to move from primary school to middle school, which was rare in our little village, my father decided that I would continue studying, meaning I would move to town. And that meant expenses that my father could not meet.

So, he decided to sell the cow, which was a risky and courageous decision. A number of

men from the village even tried their best to change his mind but he insisted on it and said: **“He will be successful and buy more than just a cow.”**

My father’s decision controlled my actions from the time that I left the village for town. I carried the load of this responsibility from a young age. I realized that I had encroached upon my siblings’ rights. And it made me committed to the idea of succeeding, remembering this favor, and helping my family, which is a thing that only happens through sacrifice and success.

I used to save some of the small amount of money that my family would send to me. I deprived myself of a number of things for the sake of using the money instead to buy some necessities for my family, just as I used to work during summer vacation on agricultural farms in our area in order to help my father.

I respected my father’s stance with regard to ensuring my education – even if it was only for one of his children. Just as the feeling that my studies were a burden on my family never left me for a moment.

I didn’t enjoy my childhood or my adolescence or even my youth like others did, so that I could be successful, and that is what happened. I passed with distinction and entered the work sector. And the first thing on my mind was elevating my family’s financial level. I built a big, suitable house for them instead of their modest, cramped house. I bought three cows to atone for what I felt was my fault, even though it wasn’t. And my family benefited from my success and I was happy about that. Also, after I started working and made my home in the city, I was careful to visit my family every week.

My father was illiterate but he felt guilty for not being able to give my siblings the opportunity to continue their education, and he wanted to atone for that through me. So, he began a task but even he himself didn’t know its effects, but he insisted on it as his duty. As for me, I took into consideration my family’s sacrifice which kept them, as a poor family, from the daily income provided by its only cow. And I was motivated by the need to repay this favor, obey my parents, and my duty to take care of my siblings, to allocate the first years of my career entirely to my family and to continue taking care of them until today, after the passing of my father.

### **Story 13: Hard Times Show What One Is Truly Made Of**

In 2011, I got cancer and my health had deteriorated rapidly, and I underwent two major surgeries. It was a hard time and very painful for my nuclear and extended family. For a whole year I stayed in bed, suffering from weakness caused by the disease and the surgeries. I was in constant need of someone to take care of my affairs until I was cured.

My family surrounded me and supported me emotionally while my colleagues at work helped me financially. But my greatest support and assistance was from my husband, who would cry when he was far away from me, and lift my spirits when he was with me. He supported me and lifted my spirits and handled my affairs and was very careful always to lighten my load.

One such case, for example, was when he organized a birthday party for me in the hospital. At the party, he promised to find me a different car and covered me with affection. My love and appreciation for him increased and that has affected our current relationship a great deal. My family surrounded me and the care and affection that I received from my husband in addition to the financial support of my colleagues has had the greatest impact on my ability to move beyond these difficult circumstances, and to enjoy good treatment and great affection.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As discussed earlier in this report, previous research on families around the world over past decades has pointed to a common set of characteristics that can be called family strengths. **Though all families have strengths, not all families are strong.** And it is important to note that each culture and each family is unique in the way they display these characteristics and how they are lived out on a daily basis. The focus group studies and interviews of families that were conducted in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia fit seamlessly into the International Family Strengths Model.

The participants describe their families in a variety of ways that range from demographics to the family's place in their culture. These descriptions are similar to how people around the world describe their families. The descriptions convey the importance of the family in their culture. The descriptions also express the value they place on the sense of belonging and attachment they feel in their families.

The family strengths that were identified by the focus groups are strikingly similar to the strengths of families in every major geocultural area of the world studied in the past. As we read through transcripts of the interviews, we often found ourselves smiling. Even after decades of research around the world, it still always warms the heart to see once again how much more similar we are as members of the human family, than different. The strengths of Qatari, Jordanian and Tunisian families, and the challenges they face, sound remarkably similar to families talking in Russia, Kenya, Greece, Fiji, China, Brazil, America, Mexico, Botswana - literally all around the world.

Participants may have used different words to describe what makes their family a strong family; and because they are all unique individuals and families, the stories illustrating their family's strengths and challenges are also all unique. But, the descriptions and the stories all have strikingly similar meanings. In comparing the identified strengths of the three countries in this study with the strengths from the International Family Strengths Model, we can see the similarities in the table below.

International Family Strengths	Current Focus Group Study Family Strengths
Appreciation and affection	Respect; Love
Commitment to the family	Responsibility; Support
Positive communication	Good communication
Enjoyable time together	Responsibility; Support
Spiritual well-being and shared values	Conveying traditions
Ability to manage stress and crisis effectively	Resilience

In addition, the challenges that are faced by families in the three countries are also similar. See below the comparison of the family challenges identified by participants.

Qatar	Jordan	Tunisia
Societal changes	Financial needs and concerns	Changes in values and tradition
Inequality for women	Negative outside influences	Poor communication
Absent or disengaged fathers	Changing traditions and customs	Family conflict
Financial problems	Illness and Loss	Financial challenges
Interference from extended family members	Absent or disengaged fathers	Negative outside influences
Conflict in the family		
Poor communication		

For simplicity's sake, we will not be developing an Arab Family Strengths Inventory which also includes community strengths, cultural strengths, and individual strengths. But we would like to note that participants in the three focus groups spoke about these strengths. It is also interesting to note that there are many similarities with other regions globally. Similarities in community strengths in this study include: a supportive social environment that values families; living in safe environments; supporting families in need (within the extended family and supportive neighbors); and a connection to religious communities. Participants did not mention family-service programs for those who need help outside the family.

Cultural strengths were mentioned by participants as they talked about a rich cultural history and shared cultural meanings. The focus groups did not mention the stability of the political process or their understanding of the global society as a cultural strength. Some did mention the problems created for families by the economy.

Also, it is important to note that individual strengths are important for the health of the family. Many of the strengths identified by the individuals in the focus groups are common to individual strengths in previous studies.

The purpose of the focus group study was to identify any changes needed in the Family Strengths Inventory to more accurately delineate the family strengths of Arab populations. Since the first draft of the Arab Family Strengths Inventory has been generated by families in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia, it will be necessary to ask researchers in several more Arab countries to make sure that the words used in the inventory accurately describe the characteristics that participants will recognize within their own particular culture.

Over more than 40 years of family strengths studies around the world, we have found that getting questions on a Family Strengths Inventory right regarding the strength of Spiritual Well-Being and Shared Values can be challenging. Spirituality, religion, ethical values, and morality are all critical issues in every society, but there are countless ways that human beings talk about these concepts and describe these qualities as they are exhibited in families around the world. For these reasons, we strive as researchers to describe these concepts as much as possible in the words of the family members themselves. This can be difficult when translating complex concepts from one language to another.

## Limitations of the Research and the Next Steps in the Research

Going forward and based on the findings of the current studies in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia and other Arab countries, the Arab Family Strengths Inventory should be suitable to use on a larger scale to gather quantitative data with a few semantic changes. Qualitative analysis clearly shows salient similarities with previous studies on family strengths conducted earlier in other countries around the world in all major geocultural areas.

The qualitative research we have conducted in Qatar, Jordan, and Tunisia sets the stage. We have, in essence, developed a grounded theory based on the focus groups and family interviews in these three countries.

## Applying This Research in Governmental Social and Economic Policy, Family Services, Family Education, and Marital and Family Therapy

The information gathered about Arab families has relevance and purpose, and should serve to inform and expand our thinking about families in the region.

**Governmental Social and Economic Policy.** In the area of governmental social and economic policy, two important thoughts stand out:

**Governments need to constantly keep in mind that since the family is the foundation of all societies throughout history, the need to support and help strengthen families should be a primary consideration.** Governments commonly take action when businesses are in trouble or the military is in trouble. Similarly, the family is also too important to fail. Nations are strong only when families are strong. Families need to be encouraged to stand on their own two feet, of course; but at the same time, when family stability is threatened from outside forces or internal strife, the community and the nation needs to step in to help. We believe that a strengths-based approach to helping families is essential. This approach would focus on the internal family behaviors that strengthen the family, as outlined in this research. Educational programs can be developed to stress the importance of these research-based and demonstrated family strengths.

**When a nation's economy is in shambles and war threatens, families bear the brunt of the economic and social disaster. Therefore, programs for supporting families in dire need are essential.** This is not to say, of course, that families bear no responsibility for their success or failure. Families make mistakes just as every other social institution in the world makes mistakes. However, many economic disasters are not created by families but by international economic downturns and war. Families are the glue that holds a society together, and their well-being needs to be of central concern in difficult economic times or the tragedy will play out for decades to come.

**Educational programs and services for couples and families.** The information gathered in this study will have significant relevance to specific areas and particular fields in the effort to provide support for families. The results of the information gathered and conclusions about the Arab family strengths will focus on those aspects of Arab

families that are working well and are positive measures of the health and well-being of the region. The results will also be used to address what changes are needed in Arab countries to build on the strengths of families and to create a world that values and strengthens the family as the cornerstone of society.

Educational programs and services for couples and families range from relatively informal networks to couple and family therapy. The table below lists program types in order of their therapeutic impact, from least to most intensive. As couple and family issues become more serious and chronic, a higher intensity of treatment is recommended. For example, it would be more appropriate for a couple who has been having marital problems for several years and has seriously considered divorce to see a couple therapist rather than to attend a self-help group or couples education program.

### Programs for Couples and Families

	Service	Goal	Provider
Education courses for students	Functional marriage and family courses	Awareness and knowledge	High school and college teachers
Couple education programs	Premarital and marital programs	Insight and skills in communication and conflict resolution	Counselors, and marital therapists
Couple and family therapy	Marital and family therapy	Insight and change in relationship dynamics	Marital and family therapists, psychologists

Source: Olson, DeFrain, & Skogrand, 2018.

First, let's look at educational programs and approaches to strengthen couple and family relationships. First, a look at premarital and marriage programs that serve individual couples. These programs aim to build a strong foundation for couples in the early years of their relationship, and strengthen the connections of those couples who are not in the midst of a marital crisis but would like to prevent difficulties and enhance their love for each other in a group educational setting.

This section on educational prevention programs will be followed by a section on educational programs for parents, highlighting the amazing diversity of approaches and target audiences.

Next, the focus will be on therapeutic intervention: a discussion of marital and family therapy for those who have significant challenges. Research has shown that the vast majority of couples who have experienced marital therapy find the process useful in helping them to overcome difficulties they are facing and improving their communication and conflict resolution skills.

Finally, a few words on international efforts to link professionals around the world in their efforts to strengthen couples and families. This includes a discussion of the International Family Strengths Conferences that have been held, dating back to 1978, and the Global Consortium for Education in Family Studies that has grown out of the family strengths conferences.

## Premarital and Marriage Programs

Because the risk of divorce in the U.S. is still about 50 percent, and because of the high value couples place on a happy marriage, more couples are seeking premarital counseling from the clergy performing their marriage ceremony or from a professional counselor.

There is increasing evidence that skill-based premarital and couples education programs can increase satisfaction and enhance the maintenance of healthy, committed relationships (Halford, Markman, & Scott, 2008; Murray, 2006; Knutson & Olson, 2003). Marriage education evaluation studies indicate that participants from a wide variety of ethnic/cultural groups, levels of household income, and family structure types can benefit from involvement in these programs. These benefits include an increased knowledge of relationships, including the ability to identify unhealthy relationship patterns. Participants also can develop more realistic beliefs about relationships/marriages and decrease their level of verbal aggression (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paul, 2007).

An effective premarital program has at least three essential components:

- 1. A premarital inventory with individual feedback for each couple**
- 2. A skill-building component that focuses on communication and problem solving**
- 3. Small-group discussions in which couples can air their mutual issues.**

Interest in couple programs is on the rise in the U.S. There are two types of couple programs. One type, referred to simply as a couple enrichment program, usually lasts one or two days and often takes place on a weekend. The focus is on motivating the couple to increase the amount of personal information they share with each other. These relatively brief programs are helpful to some couples who already have a good marriage and want to improve it. However, for couples with more serious relationship issues, such programs can create problems by raising expectations for a better relationship, but not providing the relationship skills to achieve it.

The second type of program, couple education, focuses on teaching communication and conflict resolution skills. These programs are more effective than the one- or two-day couple enrichment programs. They usually last about six weeks and meet each week for about two hours. Skill-building programs have demonstrated their effectiveness and value to couples. The following four marriage education programs are high quality and have developed and been refined over the past 20 years:

- **Couple Communication Program** – Sherod and Phyllis Miller (2018)
- **PAIRS Program** – Lori Gordon (2018)
- **PREP Program** – Howard Markman and Scott Stanley (2018)
- **PREPARE/ENRICH Program** – David H. Olson and Peter Larson (2018)

## Parent Education

In meeting the challenges of raising children, parents often turn to professionals for guidance, either for education or for therapy. Parent education often involves a presentation of information in a group setting followed by a group discussion of generic parenting problems, such as communication, discipline, imparting values to children, sibling rivalry, and choosing adequate child care. The focus is on common issues that parents face and general principles that are useful for thinking about and dealing with these challenges. Increasingly, parent education programs are web-based. Written information is presented and parents have the opportunity to chat with each other online.

The National Council on Family Relations is the leading professional organization which focuses on educational programs for parents and families in the U.S. Founded in 1938, NCFR awards Certified Family Life Educator (CFLE) to qualified professionals. This is the only international program that certifies family life educators (National Council on Family Relations, 2011).

Parent education has a long history in America, and has been traced back to 1700 (Bjorklund, 1977). Given more than 300 years to do so, parent educators have developed a remarkable and evolving collection of educational programs for parents meeting almost every imaginable need. Here is a sampling of the diverse programs currently available:

**Abusive and neglectful parents.** The explosion of child abuse and neglect reports that began in the 1970s in the US, and the media attention that followed, prompted a nationwide response. Countless programs for parents under stress and in need of parenting advice and support were created and continue today.

**Adoptive parents.** Adoptive parent associations and adoption agencies are teaming up to form support groups for adoptive parents, including support for parents involved in transracial and international adoption.

**Alcohol and other drugs.** AA, Al-Anon, Alateen and countless other organizations have been created to help individuals and families deal with alcohol and other drug problems. Parent-child issues are common sources of discussion in these groups, of course. Special programs for adolescents who are chemically dependent abound, as well as programs for the adult children of alcoholics.

**Blue-collar parents and parents with lower incomes.** These parents have been unfairly criticized for lack of interest in parenting programs, but there is good evidence to indicate that if professionals design programs for the specific needs of these parents, the interest is there.

**Bereaved parents.** Many local and national organizations have formed across the country to provide support and education for parents who have lost a child.

**Business community programs for parents.** Increasing numbers of executives have begun to realize that worker productivity is intimately associated with how well the worker's family is doing. Employee assistance programs have sprung up in businesses and government to

deal with the stresses of managing home and work, and wellness programs to focus on social and behavioral health issues, including parenting, are common.

**Childbirth education.** Historically speaking, this has been one of the easiest types of parent education programs to get people involved in. Professionals complain all the time of how difficult it is to fill a meeting room with parents. But childbirth educators are enjoying tremendous positive response. Perhaps it is the fear of childbirth that motivates many couples to attend prepared childbirth meetings, For whatever reason they come, the classes can be very beneficial.

**Couple and family enrichment programs.** Professionals are aware that parenting does not occur in a vacuum. How well one's relationship with her or his partner is going has critical effects on how well one is doing as a parent. Many parent education programs target couple issues, for the couple is the foundation of a two-parent family.

**Crisis nurseries and respite care facilities.** Many social agencies around the country run crisis nurseries and other short-term care facilities for children and parents. The goals of each organization vary, but the general idea is that the parent is helped in tough times, and the professionals get a chance to teach the parent new skills and enhance self-esteem, so crises are not as common in the family.

**Farm and ranch families.** Programs for economically vulnerable and distressed farm and ranch families have been created by community-based mental-health teams, church groups, and the USDA's Extension Service. Economic problems of the family often have negative consequences for marriage and family relationships.

**Foster parents.** Many communities have developed approaches to helping foster parents, including kin, to understand and meet the challenges of this unique type of parenting.

**Grandparents.** The dramatic increase in past decades in the numbers of grandparents raising grandchildren has motivated the development of educational programs for grandparents.

**The mass media.** Much of what is seen on television, the movies, on the Internet, in magazines and newspapers, and on the radio are destructive to positive couple and family relationships. However, there are also some wonderful parent education programs available via the mass media.

**Military families.** Many families in the United States are relatively rootless, moving from base to base and assignment to assignment for the military. The stresses of picking up stakes regularly, and the enormous stress for families when a father or mother are serving in a war zone affect parent-child relationships in many ways. Family support programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense and many other governmental and private organizations bring needed resources to these parents under stress.

**Minority-group parents.** Support groups for parents of the various minority groups in the U.S. are relatively common and are affiliated with religious institutions, counseling centers, and associations of various ethnic and cultural groups. These groups unite to reaffirm the beauty and importance of their cultural heritage, to gain strength

through numbers in the quest for fair treatment, and to help each other deal with the problems parents of minority children face in America.

**Newsletters and Internet resources for parents.** One fascinating development is a series of newsletters for new parents, delivered in the mail or via the Internet. An agency puts a family's name on its mailing list and sends the newsletter each month as the baby grows. Research has shown that these newsletters can be very popular with the vast majority of parents who receive them.

Useful web sites with information on parenting are innumerable. Here are four of our favorites: Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle, Australia < [www.newcastle.edu.au/-/centre/fac](http://www.newcastle.edu.au/-/centre/fac)>; Kansas State University at Manhattan < [www.oznet.ksu.edu/Desktop-Default.aspx?tabid=22](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/Desktop-Default.aspx?tabid=22)>; the National Council on Family Relations < [www.ncfr.org](http://www.ncfr.org)>; University of Missouri at Columbia Extension < [www.extension.missouri.edu/-/main/family/index.shtml](http://www.extension.missouri.edu/-/main/family/index.shtml)>; University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension < [www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/-epublic/pages/index.jsp](http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/-epublic/pages/index.jsp)>.

**Decision making about parenthood.** To be a parent or not to be a parent? That is not an easy decision to make, and there are scattered reports in the professional literature of programs for people on the horns of this dilemma.

**Parents of children with developmental disabilities.** The unique aspects of raising a child with a physical or mental handicap have created a demand for programs focusing on these issues. Parent support groups satisfy a number of needs: to vent frustrations among people in the same boat; to band together to gain political clout in the struggle to improve programs for special needs children in the schools and society; and to educate members to the most successful ways of interacting with a special child and enhancing the child's growth and development.

**Preparation for parenting classes.** Colleges and universities offer classes for people who wish to become parents some day and for students who are already parents.

**Stepfamilies.** Local organizations have developed programs for stepparents and stepchildren, and national stepfamily groups have formed to provide educational materials and conferences.

**Welcome Baby programs and the first three years of life.** Motivated by consistent research findings in past decades on the importance of the early years of life, countless programs have been created to take over after the childbirth educators are finished with their work. These so-called Welcome Baby-type programs help the young family get off to a good start and stay with them until they are well-established.

It scarcely needs to be said that some parents will need therapy even though they have attended parent education programs. Such parents should not feel guilty or incompetent – their problems are simply more complex than those that most of us have to face. For the majority of parents, however, it is hoped that educational materials found in the library, on the Internet, and at parent support meetings will suffice to provide the information and emotional encouragement needed to be successful as a parent.

## Marital and Family Therapy

**“If you did nothing more when you have a family together than to make it possible for them to really look at each other, you would have already swung the pendulum in the direction of a new start.” - Virginia Satir (1988)**

In marital and family therapy, a therapist typically works with a single couple or family with one or more specific problems. Though the dividing line between education and therapy tends to be somewhat blurry, educational programs tend to involve more participants and representatives of many families, while therapy tends to involve a single family and fewer people.

Education for parents tends to aim at preventing problems before they begin, while family therapy tends to deal with more severe problems after they have occurred. The American Association for Marital and Family Therapy (AAMFT) is the leading professional organization in the U.S. which specializes in couple and family therapy.

AAMFT represents the interests of marriage and family therapists nationally. The organization argues that research studies have repeatedly demonstrated the effectiveness of marriage and family therapy for treating a wide range of mental and emotional disorders and health problems. Marriage and family therapists treat not only marital distress and conflict, but also adolescent drug abuse, depression, alcoholism, obesity, and dementia in the elderly (AAMFT, 2018).

The best evaluation study available in the research literature in the USA is a national survey of the practice of 526 marriage and family therapists from 15 states who commented on therapy with 1,422 clients. The researchers also surveyed 492 clients who rated their satisfaction with their marital and family therapy experiences. Marital and family therapy is a relatively short process, as compared to traditional individual therapy provided by psychiatrists and some psychologists. The median number of sessions for the marital and family therapists was 12. The average length of therapy was 11 sessions for couples, 9 for families, and 13 for individuals. Most clients were seen biweekly. The cost of marital and family therapy differs from place to place and region by region, but expect to pay at least \$100 to \$125 for each one-hour-long session. The process may last 10 to 12 sessions or more, depending on the problems encountered. Insurance may cover at least some of these expenses (Doherty & Simmons, 1996).

The outcome of the therapy was usually very successful from the perspective of both the client and the therapist. Overall, 83 percent of the clients felt the therapeutic goals had been achieved; 89 percent felt their emotional health had improved; 78 percent said their family relationships had gotten better; and 63 percent felt their relationships with their partners had also improved. In addition, most clients were satisfied with their therapy: 98 percent rated the service as good to excellent; 97 percent said they got the kind of help they wanted; 98 percent said they were able to deal with their problems more effectively; 93 percent said their needs were met; 94 percent said they would return to the same therapist again; and 97 percent said they would recommend the therapist to a friend. In summary, it appears that marital and family therapy is a rather cost-effective and efficient approach to dealing with a range of emotional and

relationship problems in individuals, couples, and families (Doherty & Simmons, 1996).

Strengths-based approaches are increasingly being found in marital and family therapy. Narrative therapy, for example, seeks to develop a new, more positive story for the individual and the family that works better than the old family story. The family, as storyteller, relates the current perspective on reality that the family holds. And then, the family therapist, in concert with the family members, helps create a new narrative, or story, that helps the family meet its goals in a more effective manner (White & Morgan, 2006).

Dr. Robert Coombs, Professor of Biobehavioral Sciences at the UCLA Medical School, has published what is perhaps the first book on marital and family therapy that is grounded in a family strengths perspective (Coombs, 2005). In marital and family therapy: “A strengths-based approach to couples and families has more promise than one focusing on failure and pathology. Looking to the future rather than the past, it focuses on where the family can go by working together, rather than assessing blame and how it got into the present predicament” (DeFrain, Cook, & Gonzalez-Kruger, 2005, p. 4).

### **International Efforts to Strengthen Couples and Families**

As the world shrinks, the need for international collaboration expands. Fortunately, advances in technology have made it possible to work together around the world in ways we could not have even imagined 20 or 25 years ago. This is extremely important, for we are now in a solid position to share our successes and challenges with each other from culture to culture and country to country. Rather than reinventing similar wheels independently of each other, we now can meet online and face-to-face regularly and the advances we can make together are genuinely amazing.

## APPENDIX A: OTHER PROMINENT FAMILY THEORIES AND PERSPECTIVES

The current study has been grounded in the International Family Strengths Perspective, but the research team is well-schooled in several other prominent family theories and perspectives. Seven of these were considered in the development of this:

- 1. Family Systems Theory.** This especially prominent theory grew out of the general systems theory, which was developed from the biological sciences. According to the Family Systems Theory, when something happens to one family member, all members of that family are affected. It is assumed that the members are part of the group or system and function as a system. Sometimes, of course, family members may be physically present in the family, but not psychologically present and active in the family. And, it is also well known that a family member can be physically absent from the family, but still psychologically present and actively contributing to the family.
- 2. Exchange Theory** focuses on how family members help and support each other through life's difficulties. Exchange Theory explains that families continue to exist because family members bring personal resources that can be used to maintain the family unit. Family members may participate in a type of cost/benefit analysis when they feel uncomfortable or unappreciated by other members. One area of concern for this theory is in analyzing the roles of children and dependents in the family, who have less power and in some ways less to contribute to family well-being.
- 3. Symbolic Interaction Theory** views families as unique creations of the participants as they spontaneously relate to one another. A challenge for using this framework is that focusing on the uniqueness of family realities lessens the generalizability of research findings.
- 4. Conflict Theory** surfaced as a popular framework in the 1960s and suggested that conflict is natural and expected in any human interaction including the family unit. Unequal power bases result in situations of competition, coercion, and conflict. The application of this theory challenges the view of families as stable and harmonious social units. For this reason, many researchers avoided using this framework in family research.
- 5. The Feminist Perspective** since the early 1970s has stressed that the widely used frameworks that describe families are often void of the women's point of view or experiences. The dictionary defines feminism as a theory focusing on the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. In the field of family studies it has been argued that even though some men today are offended and threatened by feminist thinking, feminism may have certain benefits for both men and women in family relationships. Some suggest that to be healthy, all human beings need to exhibit a full range of so-called masculine and feminine qualities. This viewpoint encourages men to express their feelings, to share wage-earning responsibilities with their wives, and to focus less on their careers and more on their children. For men, the pressure of being the only wage earner is reduced when both partners

are working outside the home. At the same time, working outside the home helps women enjoy an identity separate from their role within the family. It also provides them with independent economic security. Sharing the responsibility for child rearing allows men to participate in their children's development and women to pursue professional and personal interests. When work and power are shared, both partners have more opportunity to develop their full potential.

**6. Ecological Theory** as it relates to the family began as the ideas from the study of human ecology linked science or biology and the environment. Ecological Theory describes the family within the surrounding ecosystem, i.e., the family within the community within the region within the nation within the global community. While this perspective broadens research efforts, it also raises the level of complexity for researchers as they present their findings.

**7. Family Development Theory** is solely based in the discipline of family studies, focusing on the changing social expectations unique to each stage of a family's existence. From a traditional perspective, the stages include: courtship and dating; the newlywed stage; early marriage; parenthood; the middle years of marriage; the empty nest stage; the later years; and so forth. The theory works best when considering traditional families. However, when trying to apply the theory to include the considerable diversity in families, this theory becomes problematic. In essence, there are so many different types of families recognized today, it is exceedingly difficult to devise a family development theory that works for all of them.

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