

GENDER AND FAMILY SUPPORT IN ARAB SOCIETY AND ITS IMPACT ON WOMEN'S STATUS AND STRENGTHENING THEIR PERSONALITY

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Abstract : *This paper examines the role of gender norms and family support in shaping women's empowerment, social status, and personal development in Arab societies. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature from gender studies, sociology, psychology, and political science, the study explores how family structures function as both enabling and constraining forces in women's lives. While patriarchal systems continue to influence gender roles across education, employment, political participation, and personal autonomy, family dynamics emerge as a central mediating factor that can either reinforce inequality or facilitate empowerment.*

The analysis highlights the paradox between women's increasing access to education and their continued marginalization in labor markets, emphasizing the role of family attitudes, institutional barriers, and informal networks such as wasta. It further examines women's social and political participation, particularly in the context of legal reforms, civil society engagement, and digital activism, demonstrating that family approval and protection remain critical for women's public involvement. At the psychological level, the paper underscores the impact of family support on women's self-esteem, mental health, and identity formation, contrasting supportive environments that foster autonomy with restrictive contexts that contribute to internalized oppression and psychological distress.

Overall, the findings suggest that women's empowerment in Arab societies is a multidimensional and relational process that cannot be understood through individual-level indicators alone. Sustainable gender equality requires not only structural reforms and expanded opportunities, but also transformative shifts within family norms and relationships. Strengthening family-based support for women's education, economic participation, psychological well-being, and civic engagement is therefore essential for advancing gender equality and promoting broader social development in the Arab world.

Keywords: *Gender roles; Family support; Women's empowerment; Arab societies; Education; Economic participation; Political participation; Mental health; Patriarchy*

Gender roles in Arab society

Gender roles in Arab society are deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and social structures, shaping expectations regarding masculinity, femininity, and family responsibility. The family operates as the primary social institution through which gender norms are transmitted, reinforced, and negotiated across generations. Family support, therefore, plays a decisive role in shaping women's social status, self-perception, and capacity to develop autonomy and strong personal identities. This paper examines how gender dynamics within the family intersect with broader social structures to influence women's empowerment, participation in public life, and personal development.

The concept of gender in Arab societies is historically embedded in patriarchal frameworks that assign men the role of economic providers and authority figures, while positioning women primarily as caregivers and moral guardians of the family. Moghadam (2003) argues that patriarchal gender regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are sustained not only through cultural traditions but also through legal systems, labor market structures, and state policies that limit women's access to economic and political power. These structural constraints contribute to persistent gender gaps in employment, leadership, and decision-making.

Sharabi's (1988) theory of "neo-patriarchy" further explains how modern institutions, such as education and wage labor, coexist with traditional gender hierarchies. While women's educational attainment has increased significantly in many Arab societies, this progress has not necessarily translated into equal participation in the labor market or public sphere. Instead, women often face a contradiction between modern aspirations and traditional expectations, resulting in constrained autonomy and limited life choices.

Within this context, the family unit occupies a central and ambivalent role. Joseph (1999) emphasizes that Arab kinship systems are characterized by "relational patriarchy," in which individual identity is deeply embedded in family relationships. Women's mobility, educational choices, and employment opportunities frequently depend on family approval, particularly from male relatives. While family support can provide emotional security and social legitimacy, it can also function as a mechanism of control that reinforces gender inequality and dependence.

At the same time, socio-economic transformations, including urbanization, women's increased access to higher education, and economic necessity, have begun to challenge traditional gender arrangements. El-Said and Harrigan (2009) note that economic restructuring and labor market changes

have led to a growing recognition of women's productive contributions, particularly in middle- and lower-income households. Similarly, Kandiyoti (1988) highlights how women actively negotiate patriarchal constraints through adaptive strategies, balancing conformity with subtle forms of resistance in order to expand their agency.

Recent scholarship also underscores the diversity of women's experiences across Arab societies, rejecting monolithic representations of Arab women as passive or uniformly oppressed. Abu-Lughod (2013) argues that women's empowerment must be understood within specific cultural and socio-political contexts, recognizing both structural limitations and women's capacity for agency. Consequently, family structures can serve as both barriers and resources, either restricting women's opportunities or enabling empowerment through support, encouragement, and social capital.

In sum, gender roles in Arab society are shaped by a complex interplay of patriarchal traditions, family dynamics, and socio-economic change. Understanding women's empowerment requires a nuanced analysis of how family support, cultural norms, and structural conditions interact to shape women's life trajectories, aspirations, and participation in society.

The Role of Family Support in Women's Empowerment

Family support in Arab societies functions as a double-edged sword, simultaneously offering opportunities for empowerment while also reinforcing traditional constraints. On the one hand, families can serve as critical sources of emotional, financial, and social capital, enabling women to pursue education, develop professional skills, and gain confidence. On the other hand, family structures often operate as mechanisms of social control, regulating women's behavior, life choices, and conformity to gender norms. This ambivalence places women in a constant negotiation between personal aspirations and collective expectations.

Al-Hassan Golley (2004) notes that although many Arab families increasingly value girls' education, this support is frequently conditional. Families may encourage academic achievement while simultaneously expecting women to prioritize marriage, motherhood, and domestic responsibilities. As a result, education is often framed not as a pathway to autonomy, but as a means of enhancing women's roles within traditional family structures. This conditional support creates an internal tension for women, who are encouraged to aspire but discouraged from fully exercising independence.

Kabeer's (1999) conceptualization of empowerment as the ability to make strategic life choices is particularly relevant in this context. In Arab societies, women's capacity to exercise choice is deeply

shaped by family attitudes and approval. Supportive families can expand women's "choice sets" by legitimizing higher education, labor market participation, and delayed marriage. Empirical studies indicate that women who receive familial encouragement are significantly more likely to pursue professional careers, engage in public life, and develop a strong sense of self-efficacy (Rizzo, Meyer, & Ali, 2002; Moghadam, 2013).

Conversely, in more conservative or patriarchal family settings, women's aspirations are often narrowly defined. Metcalfe (2011) argues that organizational and societal barriers facing Arab women are reinforced at the family level, where expectations of obedience, modesty, and domesticity limit women's engagement in paid employment or leadership roles. In such contexts, marriage and family formation are frequently constructed as women's primary sources of identity and social value, reducing the legitimacy of alternative life paths.

Moreover, Joseph (1999) emphasizes that family support in Arab societies is relational rather than individualistic. Women's achievements are often evaluated in terms of their impact on family honor and cohesion, rather than personal fulfillment. While this relational framework can offer protection and belonging, it also restricts women's autonomy by prioritizing collective interests over individual choice. Nevertheless, recent research highlights that women actively negotiate these constraints, leveraging family support strategically to expand their opportunities while maintaining social legitimacy (Kandiyoti, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 2013).

In sum, family support plays a decisive role in shaping women's empowerment in Arab societies. It can function as a catalyst for education, professional development, and self-realization, or as a barrier that reinforces traditional gender hierarchies. Understanding women's empowerment therefore requires a nuanced analysis of family dynamics, recognizing both their enabling and constraining dimensions.

Education and Economic Participation

Education is widely recognized as one of the most powerful mechanisms for transforming gender norms and expanding women's opportunities in society. Over the past decades, Arab countries have witnessed substantial improvements in female literacy rates and women's access to higher education. According to the World Bank (2013), women's enrollment in secondary and tertiary education has increased significantly across much of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in some cases surpassing that of men. This educational progress reflects shifting social attitudes toward women's education and growing recognition of its economic and social value.

Despite these advancements, women's educational gains have not translated proportionally into labor market participation. Sidani (2005) identifies persistent structural barriers that limit Arab women's economic integration, including gender discrimination in hiring and promotion, occupational segregation, limited childcare infrastructure, and weak enforcement of labor protections. As a result, highly educated women often remain excluded from stable employment or are concentrated in a narrow range of "acceptable" professions such as education, healthcare, and clerical work.

Family support plays a critical mediating role in bridging—or widening—the gap between education and economic participation. Moghadam (2013) demonstrates that women from educated and supportive families are more likely to seek paid employment, negotiate workplace boundaries, and enter non-traditional or male-dominated sectors. Familial encouragement not only provides practical resources, such as financial assistance and childcare, but also offers social legitimacy that reduces stigma associated with women's employment outside the home.

In addition to education and family attitudes, informal social networks significantly shape women's access to employment. Hutchings, Lirio, and Metcalfe (2012) emphasize the importance of *wasta*—the use of personal and family connections—in Arab labor markets. While *wasta* can facilitate job entry and career advancement, it also reinforces inequalities, as women without strong family networks or influential male relatives face limited access to opportunities. In many cases, women's career paths are determined less by merit and qualifications than by the reach and orientation of their family networks.

Furthermore, Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam (2006) argue that labor market institutions in the Arab world often fail to accommodate women's dual roles in paid work and family life. Rigid work hours, lack of maternity protections, and limited flexible employment options disproportionately affect women, particularly those without strong family support systems. Consequently, family support becomes a compensatory mechanism that enables some women to remain economically active while others are excluded.

Overall, education constitutes a necessary but insufficient condition for women's economic empowerment in Arab societies. Women's labor market participation is shaped by the interaction between educational attainment, family support, labor market structures, and informal social networks. Addressing gender inequality in economic participation therefore requires not only investments in women's education, but also institutional reforms and cultural shifts that support women's sustained engagement in the workforce.

Social and Political Participation

Women's social and political participation in the Arab world remains a complex and uneven process shaped by the interaction of legal reforms, cultural norms, family dynamics, and broader political structures. Although many Arab states have introduced legal measures such as electoral quotas, constitutional guarantees, and policy reforms aimed at increasing women's representation, these formal changes have not fully translated into substantive political empowerment. Deeply rooted gender norms continue to frame leadership, public authority, and political engagement as predominantly male domains (Tripp, 2013; Moghadam, 2013).

Family support plays a pivotal role in enabling or constraining women's entry into political and civic life. Tripp (2013) emphasizes that women's political participation in the Middle East is often contingent upon the approval or tolerance of male relatives, particularly fathers, husbands, and brothers. Opposition from within the family can significantly limit women's mobility, visibility, and capacity to engage in public activities, even when legal barriers are absent. Conversely, supportive families can provide women with legitimacy, protection, and access to social networks essential for political engagement.

The Arab Spring marked a critical turning point in women's social and political activism across the region. Al-Ali (2012) documents how women played visible and active roles in protests, grassroots mobilization, and civil society initiatives, challenging traditional gender norms surrounding public participation. Importantly, family and kinship networks were instrumental in facilitating women's involvement, offering logistical support, protection, and collective legitimacy. These networks allowed women to navigate the risks associated with political activism in contexts characterized by state repression and social surveillance.

Beyond formal politics, women's participation in civil society organizations, community initiatives, and social movements has expanded, often serving as an alternative pathway to political influence. Jad (2010) argues that women's engagement in non-governmental organizations and local activism has enabled them to develop leadership skills and political consciousness, even in restrictive political environments. However, such participation remains socially negotiated and often framed as an extension of women's familial or community roles rather than as an assertion of individual political agency.

The rise of social media and digital platforms has further reshaped the landscape of women's participation. Howard and Hussain (2013) highlight the role of digital technologies in amplifying

women's voices, enabling political expression, and facilitating mobilization beyond traditional gatekeepers. Online spaces have allowed Arab women to challenge dominant narratives, share experiences of discrimination, and advocate for social and political rights. Scholars such as Khamis, Gold, and Vaughn (2012) note that social media has been particularly significant for younger women, who use digital activism to circumvent physical and social constraints.

Nevertheless, online activism is not without risks. Women who engage in digital political expression frequently face harassment, surveillance, and moral policing, both online and offline. These forms of backlash often reinforce existing gender norms and highlight the continued importance of family protection and support. As Al-Rawi (2014) argues, women's online political engagement is closely tied to offline power structures, including family authority and social reputation. Without familial backing, women may face heightened vulnerability and social sanctions.

In conclusion, women's social and political participation in the Arab world is shaped by a complex interplay of legal frameworks, cultural expectations, family dynamics, and technological change. While reforms, activism, and digital spaces have expanded opportunities for participation, family support remains a critical enabling factor. Understanding women's political empowerment therefore requires moving beyond formal indicators of representation to examine the relational and social contexts that condition women's access to public life.

Psychological and Personal Development

Family dynamics play a central role in shaping women's psychological well-being, self-concept, and personal development in Arab societies. A supportive family environment can foster emotional security, self-confidence, and a sense of agency, enabling women to explore their identities and aspirations beyond prescribed gender roles. Conversely, restrictive or controlling family structures may hinder psychological development and reinforce dependency and self-limitation.

Research by Nasser and Abouchdid (2006) demonstrates that young women who grow up in supportive family environments tend to exhibit higher levels of self-esteem, autonomy, and emotional resilience. Such families encourage dialogue, validate women's experiences, and provide space for self-expression, which are critical components of healthy psychological development. These findings align with self-determination theory, which emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In contrast, restrictive family environments often contribute to processes of internalized oppression. Dobash and Dobash (1992) argue that prolonged exposure to rigid gender norms and unequal power relations can lead women to internalize subordination, accepting traditional roles as natural or inevitable. This internalization limits critical self-reflection and may suppress women's aspirations, leading to diminished self-efficacy and reduced motivation for personal growth. Kandiyoti (1988) further highlights how women may adapt to patriarchal constraints through compliance strategies that ensure survival but constrain psychological autonomy.

Mental health outcomes are deeply influenced by these family dynamics. Ghubash and Eapen (2009) report elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms among Arab women, often linked to societal pressures, gendered expectations, and limited control over life choices. Family environments that emphasize obedience, honor, and conformity can exacerbate psychological distress, particularly when women experience conflict between personal desires and familial demands.

However, supportive families can serve as protective factors that buffer against mental health risks. Families that promote open communication, emotional validation, and problem-solving provide women with coping resources that mitigate stress and enhance psychological resilience (Dwairy & Menshar, 2006). Such environments encourage women to articulate their needs, seek help, and engage in reflective processes that support emotional growth.

Moreover, recent scholarship underscores the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to psychological well-being. Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2011) argue that mental health interventions in Arab societies must account for the centrality of family and collective identity. Empowerment and personal development are most sustainable when they occur within relational frameworks that respect cultural values while promoting women's autonomy and mental health.

In summary, psychological and personal development among Arab women is profoundly shaped by family support systems. Supportive family dynamics enhance self-esteem, autonomy, and mental well-being, while restrictive environments increase the risk of internalized oppression and psychological distress. Understanding women's empowerment therefore requires integrating psychological perspectives with analyses of family, culture, and social structure.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the multifaceted relationship between gender roles, family support, and women's empowerment in Arab societies, demonstrating that family structures occupy a central and

decisive position in shaping women's life trajectories. Gender roles in the Arab world remain deeply embedded in patriarchal cultural, social, and institutional frameworks. However, these structures are neither static nor uniform. Rather, they are continuously negotiated within families and across social contexts, producing both constraints and opportunities for women's personal and collective advancement.

The analysis has shown that family support functions as a critical mediating force across multiple domains of women's lives. In the realm of education, increased access to schooling and higher education has significantly expanded women's aspirations and capabilities. Yet, as discussed, educational attainment alone is insufficient to guarantee economic participation or autonomy. The transition from education to employment is heavily conditioned by family attitudes, labor market structures, and informal networks. Supportive families can legitimize women's engagement in paid work, facilitate access to resources and social capital, and enable women to navigate male-dominated spaces, whereas restrictive families often reinforce occupational segregation and economic dependency.

Similarly, women's social and political participation is deeply shaped by family dynamics. Despite legal reforms and growing visibility of women in political and civic spaces, cultural norms continue to frame leadership and public authority as masculine domains. Family approval—or opposition—often determines whether women can engage in activism, leadership, and political representation. The experiences of women during and after the Arab Spring highlight the dual role of family networks as sources of both protection and control, underscoring the relational nature of women's empowerment in the region.

At the psychological level, family support emerges as a key determinant of women's self-esteem, mental health, and personal development. Supportive family environments foster emotional security, autonomy, and resilience, enabling women to challenge internalized gender norms and develop a strong sense of self. In contrast, restrictive or controlling family contexts contribute to internalized oppression, psychological distress, and diminished agency. These findings emphasize that empowerment is not solely a structural or economic process, but also a deeply psychological and relational one.

Taken together, the findings of this paper underscore that women's empowerment in Arab societies cannot be understood through isolated indicators such as education, employment, or political representation alone. Rather, it must be approached as a dynamic, multi-level process shaped by the interaction between family structures, cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and individual agency.

While patriarchal systems continue to impose significant limitations, ongoing social, economic, and technological changes are creating new spaces for negotiation and transformation.

As Arab societies continue to evolve, strengthening family-based support for gender equality emerges as a crucial pathway for sustainable change. Policies and interventions aimed at women's empowerment must therefore engage families as key stakeholders, promoting norms of equality, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Encouraging families to support women's education, economic participation, psychological well-being, and civic engagement is not only essential for advancing women's rights, but also for fostering broader social cohesion, economic development, and democratic participation.

In conclusion, empowering women in Arab societies requires moving beyond individual-focused approaches toward relational and structural strategies that recognize the central role of the family. By transforming family norms and strengthening supportive environments, Arab societies can facilitate women's full participation as autonomous, resilient, and active contributors to social progress.

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