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Motherhood: Arab States

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Mother (umm) and motherhood (umūma) are highly celebrated in Arab proverbs, poetry, folk-songs, fairy tales, and religious texts. These highlight the central role of the mother in raising children, managing the household, and producing and reproducing families, communities, and nations. They also highlight how mothers are to be loved, honored, and respected by their children. While rarely explored in any explicit way, various studies indicate some interesting variations based on age, gender, and social class in defining motherhood. Still, across all Arab societies, bearing and rearing children are central to notions of femininity and womanhood (Eickelman 1984, Inhorn 1994, Peteet 1997). From an early age, young girls are taught about the centrality of children in a woman's life and girls often actively participate in feeding and taking care of younger siblings. So important is motherhood that most studies take it for granted and rarely go beyond descriptive accounts of the roles of mothers in taking care of their families and children (Rugh 1997, Wikan 1996). Interestingly enough, studies of infertility and women's struggle to conceive a child teach us the most about the emotional value of motherhood and the powerful meanings that society invests in mothering. The equation between motherhood and femininity is clearly manifested in how a woman who cannot conceive and become a mother is viewed as dhakar or male (Inhorn 1994).

Bearing children is socially marked and celebrated in almost all Arab societies. A new mother is visited by neighbors and relatives and is usually given gifts (such as jewelry, money, and new clothes for her and the newborn). Special drinks and sweets are offered to the visitors. A new mother is also offered foods rich in protein and is helped by family members and neighbors in doing household chores. She is encouraged verbally and through some taboos (such as restrictions on her movement and leaving the home for up to 40 days after the delivery) to rest and sleep as much as possible. In many Arab countries, the new status of the mother and the importance of a male child are reflected in the custom of addressing a woman after the name of her first-born male child (for example Umm Aḥmad if the name of her first son is Aḥmad).

Unlike common negative images of the “stepmother” (zawāj al-āb) and mothers-in-law, many sociological and anthropological studies present a vivid view of the mother as selfless and totally devoted to her children. The strong emotional bonds between mother and child are often contrasted to the more formal relationship that exists between the father and his children. A mother not only nurtures and cares for her children on a daily basis but she also mediates the father's power and works to facilitate the fulfillment of her children's needs and desires when not fully approved by the father (Altorki 1986). She is especially seen as devoted to her male child, who is the source of power, social recognition, and stability in her life as a new wife and the source of emotional and financial support in old age (Rugh 1984, Rassam 1984, Joseph 1999). Studies also refer to the very strong relationship that binds a mother and her daughter and show how women feel sorry for a mother without a female child (Eickelman 1984, Joseph 1999). So strong is the bond between a woman and her children that many women endure difficult marriages and harsh living conditions to avoid the risk of separation from their children (Wikan 1996).

The role of the mother has been central to continuous attempts by governments and various groups to promote family planning, enhance child healthcare, build modern nations, and Islamize society, as well as to define the social, economic, and political rights of women. Many Muslim activists, for example, glorify motherhood and view it as key to a woman's existence and to the construction of the "true" Muslim umma (al-Mughni 1993, Sonbol 2003). They emphasize that it is a woman's moral duty to stay at home and raise her children properly. Motherhood becomes the main duty of a woman and must be cherished and embraced. Drawing on various traditions of the Prophet, such as, "Paradise is under the feet of mothers," these activists argue that motherhood is more valuable than any other job outside the home. Other groups see more room for women to work outside but always emphasize the priority of mothering over other activities. Some women's groups place greater value on working outside the home and downplay the role of motherhood. They tend to see women's liberation and empowerment as mainly linked to participation in public life and view motherhood as a tool that has often been used by different groups to restrict women to the domestic sphere.

Motherhood is closely linked with nationalism in various Arabic countries. This is especially true among native populations who fear being outnumbered by foreigners, like the Palestinians (in the context of their struggle for independence) or the Kuwaitis (given the presence of large numbers of foreign migrant workers and their families) (al-Mughni 1993). Accordingly, having children and raising them as Palestinian is seen as an essential part of the Palestinian national struggle. The umm al-shāhid (mother of the martyr) is a national Palestinian symbol (inside and outside the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) that is invested with great social and political value (Petee 1997). She represents cherished notions of sacrifice, resistance, and steadfastness. Despite this strong link between motherhood and nationalism, however, most Arab countries do not grant citizenship to children born to local mothers and foreign fathers. This issue, the custody of children and their support after divorce, and the provision of more facilities which would allow women to combine work and motherhood are some of the key issues that most Arab countries are struggling with.

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