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Handbook of Families in the Arab Gulf States.
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Abstract. This open-access Handbook of Families in the Arab Gulf States offers a comprehensive, interdisciplinary analysis of the profound transformations affecting family life across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, the UAE, and Bahrain. The volume successfully collates and advances scholarship on Gulf families, moving beyond previous Western-centric or Middle East-generalist perspectives to address the region's unique socio-economic, cultural, and political context. The collection is divided into thematic sections focusing on the intersection of globalization and deeply entrenched traditions. Key areas explored include shifts in family formation, marriage, and fertility dynamics, with dedicated chapters on the rapid decline in family size, the enduring practice of consanguineous marriage, and the impact of the digital age on partner selection. Furthermore, the Handbook provides an analytical look at evolving gender roles, covering topics such as the distribution of household labor, the role of domestic workers (Al-Khadam), and the gender gap in STEM fields. Crucially, the volume examines the influence of family policies, economic diversification, migration, and the widespread adoption of social media like TikTok on the structure and function of the contemporary Gulf family. By highlighting both continuity and change, the Handbook serves as an essential resource for academics and policymakers seeking a holistic understanding of this rapidly evolving social institution.

Keywords. Arab gulf families; Gender roles; Fertility Dynamics; International migration; Social change.

JEL. D10; F22; J12; J13; 51; J81; K36.

Book Review



The *Handbook of Families in the Arab Gulf States* is a timely and significant edited volume that addresses a critical gap in contemporary social science and Middle Eastern studies. While the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have garnered extensive attention for their economic diversification, geopolitical influence, and urban development, the intimate space of the native family—the fundamental social unit—often remains

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under-researched or obscured by broad, pan-Arab generalizations. This volume, a product of collaboration among scholars predominantly based in the region (notably Qatar University's Gulf Studies Center), positions itself as a crucial corrective, providing an interdisciplinary platform to document the complex changes and persistent continuities within the Gulf family institution. It is explicitly designed to advance local scholarship and offer a non-Western perspective on the processes of modernization, globalization, and policy-making in GCC societies.

The editors successfully frame the Gulf family as an institution simultaneously subjected to sweeping economic transformation, educational reforms, rapid urbanization, extensive migration, and the proliferation of digital media while simultaneously striving to retain its traditional roles and functions. The book is structured around key thematic areas: Family Formation, Marriage, and Gender Roles; Socio-cultural Dynamics and Wellbeing; and Family Policies, Economy, and Family Research. Its open-access format further ensures that its findings, which are vital for both academic understanding and policy intervention, reach the widest possible audience.

Analysis of Core Themes: The Contested Space of Family

The core strength of the Handbook lies in its detailed, empirical engagement with the central tensions defining modern family life in the GCC. The first and perhaps most demographically crucial tension addressed is the dynamic of Fertility and Family Formation.

Demographic Shifts and Fertility Dynamics: Several chapters meticulously document the paradoxes of demographic change in a region known for high fertility rates and pro-natalist policies. The volume highlights the "Rapid Decline in Family Size" in countries like Oman and the UAE, a trend linked to rising female education, changing marriage patterns, and urbanization. For instance, the chapter on the UAE investigates "Family Formation and Ideal Number of Children," suggesting that modernization has recalibrated the desired family size, while another study meticulously "Unpacks the Decline" in Qatari fertility, identifying specific social determinants. These studies effectively use micro-data to move beyond macro-level demographic reports, providing the nuanced, ground-level sociological analysis necessary to understand the drivers of this decline. The continued and persistent practice of consanguineous marriage in Qatar is also given dedicated attention, illustrating how deep-seated cultural traditions persist even amidst rapid modernization. The volume expertly navigates the theoretical space between demographic transition theory and Islamic cultural exceptionalism, concluding that while global forces are influential, they are refracted through a unique cultural lens that often cushions or modifies their full impact.

Gender Roles, Labor, and the Domestic Sphere: The second major pillar of the Handbook focuses on the dramatic restructuring of Gender Roles within the family and the domestic sphere. The influx of high levels of educational attainment among native Gulf women, combined with changing social policies, has generated new forms of intra-household negotiation.

The chapters examining "Gender Role Belief Predictors of Spousal Distribution of Household Labor" in Kuwaiti and Qatari families provide empirical evidence for the renegotiation of domestic duties. Crucially, the analysis does not simplify the issue to an absolute adoption of Western

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egalitarian models but examines the emergence of what one chapter implicitly terms "Neo-Gender Balancing" in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the context of divorce under social exchange theory.

A particularly compelling contribution, and one unique to the Gulf context, is the analysis of the phenomenon of "Al-Khadam" (domestic workers). The chapter titled "Housekeepers or Catalysts of Change in the Family? 'Al-Khadam' and the Evolving Role of Qatari Women" addresses how the ubiquitous presence of live-in, affordable domestic labor fundamentally alters the domestic production function. It provides native women with unprecedented freedom from household chores and childcare, allowing them to pursue higher education and professional careers. This analysis is vital for any global comparative family study, as the large-scale reliance on migrant domestic labor in the GCC—often a silent and overlooked factor—is arguably the single most important mechanism facilitating the transformation of the native elite female role.

The volume also explores gender roles in the public sphere, specifically addressing the "Reverse Gender Gap in STEM Disciplines at Qatar University" and linking this phenomenon directly to familial influence and educational support. This highlights a fascinating regional trend where, unlike in many Western countries, female participation and success in technical fields are often higher than male participation, a pattern deeply rooted in national educational investment strategies and distinct social incentives.

New Frontiers: Technology, Migration, and Policy

A notable strength of the Handbook is its successful engagement with two new, cutting-edge themes in Gulf studies: the intersection of Technology and the Family and the complexities of the Transnational Family.

The Digital Family and Social Media: The book dedicates space to the profound impact of the digital age. The chapter on "Choosing Marriage Partners in the Digital Age" in Qatar provides insight into how matchmaking platforms, social media, and digital communication are mediating traditional family gatekeeping roles in the process of family formation. This points to the increasing individualization of choice, though still within a culturally constrained framework.

Furthermore, a specific chapter, "TikTok: The Young Saudi Females' Village," is a highly contemporary and relevant inclusion. It examines how global social media platforms are appropriated by Gulf youth, particularly women, to create spaces for identity negotiation, social commentary, and the formation of virtual communities—a kind of "village" away from the physical gaze of the extended family. The volume recognizes that this shift is not without its costs, noting that the rise in social media usage has been shown to "strain relationships within families" and affect the cohesion of spousal and sibling interactions.

Migration and Policy Context: While the GCC's native family is the focus, the context of International Migration—the region's demographic reality—cannot be ignored. Beyond the domestic worker issue, the Handbook touches upon the challenges faced by immigrant families and the "transnational generation" in the GCC countries.

The third part of the book, focusing on Family Policies and Law, is crucial for grounding the sociological discussions in the state's institutional framework. The inclusion of an analysis of the UAE Personal Status Law

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provides concrete evidence of state efforts to "protect and strengthen the rights of wives" through provisions on financial protection, dowry, alimony, and compensation in cases of arbitrary divorce. This demonstrates the evolving legal and policy environment that aims to modernize and standardize family structures while upholding Islamic principles. These chapters serve as a vital reminder that social change in the Gulf is often not a purely organic process but a carefully managed, state-guided evolution.

Analytical Assessment and Critique

The *Handbook of Families in the Arab Gulf States* is an outstanding achievement in its field, characterized by its empirical rigor, regional specificity, and thematic breadth.

Strengths:

- **Decentralized Scholarship:** The collection successfully champions the work of Gulf-based and Gulf-focused scholars, fulfilling its goal of providing a perspective rooted in local knowledge and experience.
- **Interdisciplinary Coverage:** By incorporating demographic studies (fertility), sociology (gender roles), law (Personal Status Law), and media studies (TikTok), the volume achieves the holistic understanding of Gulf families that the editors aimed for.
- **Focus on Nuance:** The book excels at avoiding simplistic binaries (tradition vs. modernity). It demonstrates that the Gulf family is engaged in a selective, adaptive process—adopting digital technology and higher education while preserving core tenets like consanguineous marriage and strong family support networks.
- **Policy Relevance:** The systematic analysis of key themes, including divorce rates, elderly care, work-family balance, and family law, provides tangible data and insights directly useful for policy interventions in the region.

Areas for Further Consideration (Future Research):

- **Intra-GCC Comparison:** While the volume covers multiple GCC states (Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia), a more explicitly comparative framework in some chapters would have been beneficial. For instance, a side-by-side comparison of the socio-economic drivers of fertility decline in Qatar versus Oman could illuminate the effect of hydrocarbon wealth versus the size of the native population.
- **Methodological Depth:** Though many chapters appear to be empirical studies (as suggested by the methodological notes in the systematic review), a consolidated discussion on the challenges of quantitative and qualitative data collection on sensitive family matters in the Gulf would have strengthened the volume's methodological profile.
- **The Second Generation of Expatriates:** While the issue of migration and domestic workers is addressed, future editions could deepen the analysis of the second and third generations of non-national expatriate families (e.g., long-term South Asian or Western residents). These families form an integral part of the "Gulf society" and their family structures, though not *native* Gulf families, significantly interact with and shape the policy and social environment.

Conclusion

The *Handbook of Families in the Arab Gulf States* is an indispensable academic contribution. It is not merely a collection of essays but a systematic,

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multi-faceted engagement with a social institution undergoing rapid yet culturally filtered change. For researchers, students, and practitioners interested in the sociology of the family, Middle Eastern Studies, Demography, and International Migration, this book serves as a foundational text. It successfully chronicles the current state of families, highlights their intricacies, and provides the intellectual and empirical stimulus necessary to carry this line of inquiry forward across the Arab Gulf states. The editors and contributors should be commended for producing a work that is both academically rigorous and deeply relevant to the social dynamics of one of the world's most economically and culturally unique regions.



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