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The Handbook of Marriage in the Arab World.

By Ahmed Aref & Md Mizanur Rahman (Eds).

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Abstract. This edited volume provides a comprehensive, holistic, and interdisciplinary analysis of the state of marriage across all 22 Arab countries, a crucial undertaking given the institution's central role as the primary social unit in the region. The book's core contribution is its in-depth exploration of marriage in the face of modern structural and emerging challenges, including declining rates, rising costs, delayed marriage, and the proliferation of non-traditional and informal marital types. By segmenting the analysis into distinct regional chapters (e.g., the Gulf, Maghreb, Mashreq, Egypt, Sudan, and Yemen), the book effectively overcomes the generalized approach of previous studies, capturing significant regional, cultural, and socio-economic differences. A key focus is the impact of major external factors such as war, conflict, internal displacement, and migration, which have led to phenomena like increased child marriage and altered spousal roles in regions like the Mashreq and Yemen. Drawing on the expertise of a large group of Arab researchers, the handbook consolidates knowledge to fill a critical gap, serving as an essential reference for academics and a vital guide for decision-makers developing family policies and interventions across the Arab world.

Keywords. Arab Family Studies; Marriage and Family Dynamics; Social Change and Conflict; Demography and Fertility; Non-Traditional Marriage.

JEL. J12; Z13; O15; I31; P46.

Book Review

The *Handbook of Marriage in the Arab World*, edited by Ahmed Aref and Md Mizanur Rahman, represents a monumental contribution to the field of Arab family studies. Published by Springer in the *Gulf Studies* series, this open-access volume is unique in its ambition and scope: it provides a holistic and systematic analysis of the institution of marriage across all 22 nations of the Arab world. Originating from an Arabic volume entitled *The State of Marriage in the Arab World* by the Doha International Family Institute (DIFI), the book's English translation ensures that this crucial body of research is accessible to a global audience.

The book's central thesis posits that the family remains the fundamental social unit in the Arab world, with marriage serving as its "solemn covenant" nucleus, but this core institution is under increasing pressure from modernizing structural forces and emerging contextual challenges. The editors set out to accurately describe and understand the phenomenon of marriage by combining multiple approaches—sociological, anthropological, economic, and legal—a methodology that acknowledges the phenomenon's multidimensionality. This review will examine the book's structure, key thematic contributions, methodological strengths, and final significance for both academic inquiry and policy development.

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II. Structure and Methodology: A Pan-Arab Mapping

The book is methodologically innovative in its approach to regional classification. It successfully navigates the complex and often flawed regional groupings used in international reports, which tend to combine geographical and development criteria arbitrarily. To remedy this, the editors commissioned seven distinct chapters, each dedicated to a precise geographical or geopolitical area, allowing for consistency in contextual data:

1. Arab Gulf States (UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait).
2. Arab Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Mauritania).
3. Arab Mashreq (Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon).
4. Somalia, Djibouti, and Comoros (grouped due to shared geopolitical, demographic, and social factors).
5. Egypt (separated due to its central geographical spot and unique context).
6. Sudan (separated for similar geographical and contextual reasons).
7. Yemen (covered separately due to its economic, political, and security disparities).

This rigorous segmentation is a significant scholarly strength, ensuring that the analysis remains sensitive to local differences while mapping commonalities in cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage. The research itself is drawn from a "disciplined review approach for published and unpublished literature and critical analysis" by a team of seventeen Arab researchers, thereby making the book a genuine intellectual product of regional expertise.

III. Key Thematic Contributions

The book comprehensively addresses the key sub-topics deemed most critical to the modern state of marriage in the Arab world. These themes can be grouped into economic constraints, legal/structural challenges, and the impact of conflict.

A. The Economic Burden and Delayed Marriage

A recurrent and overarching theme is the phenomenon of delayed marriage (and subsequent rise in celibacy), largely attributed to profound economic factors. The chapters on the Gulf States and Egypt provide compelling evidence of this.

- **High Costs:** In Saudi Arabia, for example, official bodies have had to take steps to address the crisis of delayed marriage due to high dowries, which sometimes exceed 250,000 riyals (US\$66,000), coupled with exorbitant wedding and related costs. The cost of marriage in Egypt can amount to up to six years of a young man's salary.
- **Labour Market Factors:** In Egypt, high unemployment rates among youth, particularly graduates, and the weak labor market absorption have severely hampered the ability of young couples to save for and enter marriage. The increasing education of women, while a factor in changing family values towards emotional nucleation and late marriage, is not sufficient to overcome the economic barriers, especially amid a tough job market.
- **Rational Choice:** The Maghreb chapter highlights that marital choices have become increasingly rationalized based on economic criteria, making high financial resources a prerequisite for starting a family. This economic

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reality has led to the proliferation of extramarital practices that are under religious and social scrutiny.

B. The Rise of Non-Traditional and Informal Marriages

The book meticulously documents the emergence and re-emergence of marriage types that defy traditional norms, often driven by poverty or a desire to circumvent financial and social obstacles.

- In Conflict Zones (Mashreq): The chapter on the Arab Mashreq notes a rise in forms that occasionally defy religious and customary norms due to poverty, migration, and conflict. Examples include *muta'a* ("pleasure") and out-of-court marriages in Iraq, driven by increasing religious trends and poor living conditions. In Lebanon, the meaning of *khatifa* ("bride kidnapping") has transformed into an agreement used by families to reduce marriage costs.
- In Non-Conflict Zones (Egypt & Sudan): In Egypt and Sudan, non-traditional types such as *urfi* (customary), *ithar* (sacrifice), and *misyar* (traveler's) marriages are on the rise, demonstrating societal adaptation to economic pressures and changing social dynamics. In the Maghreb, while legislative efforts have restricted polygamy and underage marriages, traditional social structures continue to resist, leading to a coexistence of modern laws and traditional practices.

C. Conflict, Migration, and Changed Gender Roles

The analysis of marriage in regions affected by war and political crisis (Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Sudan) is one of the volume's most sobering and important sections.

- Child Marriage: The war in Syria, leading to massive displacement and emigration, resulted in increased child marriages as families sought to protect their girls and family honor amid security risks and rising conservatism. Jordan, hosting many refugees, also saw a rise in child marriages. The Yemen chapter also confirms that the political and social crisis casts shadows over the family, particularly affecting women.
- New Roles for Women: The conflict in Sudan is shown to have altered marital relations as women take on a greater productive role, reflecting changed socio-economic realities. The war in Iraq also led to a sharp increase in early marriage among younger people due to the spread of conservatism and security concerns.

D. Marital Relations and Compatibility

The book delves into the internal dynamics of marital life, focusing on concepts like marital harmony, satisfaction, and violence.

- Educational Compatibility: In the Gulf, educational attainment has become a significant factor in marriage choices, with women often setting the completion of education as a premarital condition. The authors highlight that educational compatibility aids understanding and cooperation between spouses.
- Marital Harmony: Defined as the relative agreement on vital issues, participation in joint activities, and the exchange of emotions, marital harmony is analyzed both as an independent variable (affecting child upbringing) and a dependent variable (affected by factors like free choice, emotional maturity, and lack of a major age gap). The concept of marital

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satisfaction is presented as the ultimate goal, with compatibility being the means to reach it.

- Violence: The discussion of marital relations includes the "negative side," where conflict and misunderstanding can escalate into domestic violence, a reflection of traditional mindsets that still grant men complete power to punish women, a practice socially acceptable in some regions like Mauritania.

IV. Analytical Strengths and Scholarly Significance

The book's scholarly significance rests on several key strengths:

1. Holistic Coverage and Comparative Value: By dedicating resources to cover all 22 Arab countries, the *Handbook* ensures that no region is omitted, addressing the scarcity of data on countries like Somalia, Djibouti, and Comoros, or those in conflict like Yemen and Syria. This comprehensive mapping provides the raw material necessary for rigorous future comparative studies, moving beyond the anecdotal evidence often relied upon.
2. Bridging Research and Policy: The Doha International Family Institute's commitment means the book is explicitly designed to serve as a guide for decision-makers. The detailed analysis of marriage costs, delayed marriage, and the effects of conflict directly points to areas requiring policy intervention, such as financial assistance programs, legal reforms (e.g., against child marriage), and support for families affected by displacement.
3. Regional Authorship and Authenticity: The use of seventeen Arab researchers and authors of reference papers ensures that the analysis is grounded in local knowledge and cultural nuances. The editors even note the "distinct linguistic footprint" in each chapter, reflecting the local authors' proximity to the subject matter, thereby increasing the book's authenticity and depth.

V. Limitations and Conclusion

While the *Handbook* is an invaluable resource, its vast scope inevitably introduces a few limitations, which the editors themselves acknowledge. Data scarcity remains a challenge in conflict zones and less-developed countries, requiring reliance on literature reviews and critical analysis rather than up-to-date primary statistics in all cases. Furthermore, as a translated work, the editors admit that not all the nuances and cultural references from the original Arabic text may be fully captured, advising readers to consult the original for complete accuracy.

In conclusion, *The Handbook of Marriage in the Arab World* is an essential, authoritative academic text. It successfully charts the diverse and complex landscape of marriage in a region undergoing profound social, economic, and political transformation. By providing rich empirical detail on everything from rising dowries in the Gulf to the scourge of child marriage in conflict-stricken areas, and the spread of non-traditional unions, the editors and contributors have created an unparalleled resource. The volume fulfills its mandate to fill a significant knowledge gap and will undoubtedly serve as the intellectual foundation for future research on Arab family issues and a crucial tool for those seeking to develop effective social policies.



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