



Suad Joseph

In the process of building a research network, the Arab Families Working Group became a family itself.

Finding a Home in the Arab Family

A group of 15 scholars whose life's work has focused on Arab families came together in 2001 to form a core team of researchers dedicated to developing a shared conceptual framework for interdisciplinary research. The group, based in the Palestinian West Bank, Lebanon, Egypt, England, the Netherlands, and the United States, has been meeting at least twice a year. Their project, the Arab Families Working Group, is partially funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Not only have the researchers developed a shared

understanding of how to approach the study of Arab families — an understanding they are continuously developing — but in the process they have also themselves become a family.

For decades Arab families have endeavored to function and maintain a sense of normalcy and stability in politicized, polarized, and conflict-ridden environments. Children, youth, mothers, and fathers have all felt the negative impacts of living in such environments, as has the family as a whole.



Suad Joseph, AFWG's founder and facilitator

Nadia El-Awady

Displacement is chief among these, as families uproot themselves from their ancestral lands and move to other parts of the country or to other parts of the world. The needs, means of self-expression, and roles of family members are also rapidly changing. In the midst of this upheaval, Arab families are often under attack by the media and the political establishment.

“The family is often blamed as the source of societal problems in the Arab world,” says Suad Joseph, professor of anthropology and women and gender studies at the University of California, Davis (UC Davis). Social problems such as a stagnant economy and lack of political participation are often blamed on the presumed stifling of creativity in the family as a result of “Arab patriarchy,” she explains.

Joseph and other colleagues around the world studying Arab families decided to find out what was really happening on the ground. How do families function? What social, cultural, and economic conditions do they encounter? How do wars, mass migrations, and economic turmoil affect Arab families and youth?

Consolidating a Network

The researchers felt that existing research on Arab families “did not give us theoretically sophisticated concepts and ideas to understand the family,” explains Joseph. In 2000, a conference on Arab families organized in Cairo, Egypt, jump-started the formation of an interdisciplinary network of 15 scholars, which was formalized in May 2001 as the Arab Families Working Group (AFWG).

The AFWG is co-hosted by the American University in Cairo (AUC) and the University of California, Davis. In addition, AFWG includes scholars from Bir Zeit University in the

Palestinian West Bank; Cairo University; the Lebanese American University; the American University of Beirut; the University of Amsterdam; the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor; the University of Manchester; and the Global Fund for Women.

AFWG core group members are trained in a variety of disciplines — economics, gender studies, political science, literature, linguistics, history, anthropology, sociology, and health. In 2001, two of the members were still graduate students; others were assistant professors or adjuncts, senior scholars, full professors, and heads of research organizations. “This range of knowledge and experiences has been invaluable,” says Joseph, AFWG’s founder and facilitator. “While senior scholars could mentor junior scholars, junior scholars were often ahead of senior scholars in knowledge of new theories and research.”

The AFWG is funded by IDRC, the Ford Foundation, the Population Council, and the UC Davis. It was also initially funded by UNICEF and the American University in Cairo’s Social Research Center.

Research in the Making

In 2001, the group compiled a bibliography of more than 2,000 works on Arab families from the late 19th century to the present and evaluated cross-cultural literature on families. The results, *Framings: Rethinking Arab Family Projects*, will be submitted for publication to Syracuse University Press in December 2009. The bibliography is also available on the AFWG website (www.afwg.info). “We think this is the single largest bibliography on Arab families,” says Joseph. The website will soon also include a database of researchers focusing on Arab families and youth.

Early on, the group decided to focus subsequent research on youth and families in the West Bank and Gaza, Lebanon, and Egypt, as well as in their diasporas. All three countries had researchers and institutions whose work focused on Arab youth and families and decades of research that could be used as a springboard.

Starting in 2004, AFWG’s activities focused on two research projects.

The first, “War, violence, displacement, migration, and families,” investigated the impact of life-changing events on families in the face of the failure of most Arab state-building projects. The research highlights the ways in which family structures and dynamics under these conditions contribute to or hinder peace/conflict, reconstruction, and democratization. Six studies have resulted from this project.

The second research project “War, violence, displacement, migration and youth,” focused on the consequences of these disruptions on Arab youth and the coping mechanisms they employ. Seven studies have arisen from this project.

Focus on Results

For example, Mona Khalaf, professor of economics at the Lebanese American University, studied the effects on the Lebanese family of migration of the male head-of-household. The research compared the roles of women before and during the husband’s migration, and how those roles changed when he returned. Khalaf found that, regardless of the husband’s income, how much time elapsed after the husband’s migration, or the educational levels of the spouses, the wife took charge of the family expenses when her husband left. Family property decisions, however, remained the husband’s responsibility. This sometimes changes, however, if the husband remains abroad for more than five years. Khalaf also reported that the women in such cases shifted from the private to the public spheres as they dealt with a variety of life issues. As a result, they felt more empowered and independent.

Penny Johnson, associate researcher at the Institute for Women’s Studies at Bir Zeit University, has been studying the ways in which changing economic and political conditions in West Bank and Gaza have affected marriages and their ceremonies. Working with her are Lamis Abu Nahleh, associate professor at the same institute, and Annelies Moors, chair of the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World at the University of Amsterdam. “In our region,” says Penny Johnson, “war is not an event; it’s a condition.” The study’s point of departure is comparing marriage arrangements and ceremonies in the first and second intifadas. The group is examining, for example, how partners are chosen and how weddings reflect and deflect war. “Marriage is a way to resist war. It’s a celebration,” explains Johnson.



Research team meeting in Beirut,
June 2008

Nadia El-Awady

The researchers found that new ways of choosing marriage partners and new ceremonies were developing. Choosing partners based on political affiliation, for example, has become desirable. They also found that women had more power to choose a partner than in the past. This was not necessarily part of a generational rebellion, however, since their families supported these choices.

Ray Jureidini, associate director of the Migration and Refugee Studies Program at the American University in Cairo, interviewed Lebanese families to uncover the relationships between family members and domestic workers over the past half-century. Before 1948, he found, around 50% of domestic workers were Lebanese and included girls as well as women. After

1948 and until the civil war began in 1975, Syrian, Palestinian, and Egyptian domestic workers entered the market force.

“The civil war changed everything,” says Jureidini. As the Palestinians became stronger, Lebanese families became afraid to employ them. The Egyptians left. When Hafez Al Asad came into power, Syrians stopped coming into the country in large numbers. There was also mistrust among the Lebanese themselves. Thus, as early as 1978, there is evidence of Sri Lankan domestic workers in Lebanese households. And as the foreign domestic market flourished, the number of young girls working in homes decreased.



Research team meeting in
Cairo, December 2007

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Proposal writing workshop for graduate students at AUB, June 2008

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Jureidini also found that in the past, Lebanese families considered themselves responsible for their domestic workers beyond their salaries. Families paid for weddings and for their domestic workers' children; sometimes for their whole lives. With the influx of foreign domestic workers this changed. "There were a lot of trade-offs..." says Jureidini. "There were no more obligations."

Other research conducted by the group includes a project focusing on displaced Sudanese elites in Cairo; postwar displaced poor urban Lebanese families in Beirut; a historical analysis of youth in the Arab world; the development of the ideas of civic service and charitable giving among youth leaders in Egypt; and the impact of competing national television channels targeting youth in the aftermath of the civil war in Lebanon.

The researchers are submitting the results to Syracuse University Press for publication and are preparing a series of articles for the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* and another journal for publication as special issues.

Training Future Generations

For the past three years, AFWG has organized stakeholder workshops in Egypt, Lebanon, and the West Bank to exchange research and experiences on youth and Arab families with representatives of non-governmental organizations, practitioners, policymakers, and other scholars.

In March 2007, it held its first international conference in Cairo, bringing together a number of distinguished scholars to share research results. Also in 2007, AFWG launched a series of seminars with key media representatives: two have been held to date, in Cairo and Beirut.

To broaden its pool of researchers, in 2008 the team held a proposal writing workshop for graduate students at AUB in Beirut: similar workshops are planned for Cairo and Ramallah. Each AFWG researcher has also agreed to mentor one or more graduate students. In addition, the AFWG will hold seminars in Cairo, Beirut, and Ramallah to train graduate students in the leading theoretical frameworks and ideas on Arab families.

The team has already started planning for the next phase of the project by discussing their research ideas to be implemented over the next three years. A special session was held in Beirut in July 2008.

"A lot of the [future] projects seem to be about global flows of people," reflects Suad Joseph. "Flows of ideas too," adds Penny Johnson. AFWG is expanding beyond the initial three geographic areas of study — Egypt, West Bank and Gaza, and Lebanon — to countries such as Morocco, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates.

Joseph sums up her experience with the AFWG in this way: "We have learned from each other, become uplifted and humbled," she says. "We became a family," adds Lamis Abu Nahleh, associate professor at the Institute for Women's Studies at Bir Zeit University.

For those researchers yearning for a similar experience, Joseph advises, "Think about networks. All of us feel we've been enriched by working together. Think of ways you can do collaborative research. You can conduct seminars together, research together, design and run a website together. There are many ways to enhance your work and we're glad to share our experience."

This story is a condensed version of a longer feature by Cairo-based journalist Nadia El-Awady.

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