

SHEIKH SAUD BIN SAQR AL QASIMI  
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# The Nature and Impact of Arab Father Involvement in the United Arab Emirates

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## Executive Summary

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In the Arab World, and in the Gulf in particular, the father has traditionally occupied a unique and integral place, both in his own family and in his wider kinship networks. While much has been written about the role and function of the patriarchy in the Middle East, most of this has been negative, in particular with relation to the impact on women and children. Most of this research has also been qualitative in nature, relying on small sample sizes that make it difficult to extrapolate findings to the general population. As such, information on Arab fathers living in the Gulf and the impact of their lives on their children remains limited.

In an effort to address the gap in the literature, this paper uses data from a pilot study<sup>1</sup> of 61 Arabs (both expatriates and Emiratis living in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates) to explore the nature and impact of Arab father involvement in their children's lives. The study finds that Arab fathers score highly on their role as good providers, in terms of the nature of their involvement with their children, but low in regards to their responsible paternal engagement, which refers to father involvement in the child's education and related activities. It was also found that the more positively involved a father has been in his child's life, the higher the child's self-esteem tends to be, consistent with Western literature on self-esteem. Future research aims to examine a much larger sample from across the Arab world to explore issues relating to gender, education, and career trajectory.

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<sup>1</sup> Collected in preparation for a larger, 11-country, 2000-respondent study of the Arab World



## Introduction

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The widespread changes in the perception of paternal and maternal roles that have been taking place across the globe (United Nations, 2011) have opened up possibilities for both men and women in the Arab world to redefine the nature of fatherhood (and motherhood) beyond traditional roles. However, historic cultural norms and current legal statutes require that an Arab father should be first and foremost a good provider (Joseph, 1994).

Historically, the tribal and familial leadership expected from males has been an enduring characteristic of the Gulf model of social organization, solidifying the importance of the father in a society where the family functioned as the most important unit within each of its tribes (Alshawi & Gardner, 2013). However, the rapid development following the discovery of oil in the 1950s resulted in the expansion of educational opportunities for both men and women, giving women unprecedented access to the labor market (Augsburg, Claus, & Randeree, 2009). This meant that the traditional model of the family, with the father as sole provider, began to shift dramatically.

Today, the changing labor market in the Gulf, a result of an oil-stimulated industrialization, has meant that the historically present father who was engaged in agriculture or trade has become an employee of the state and is often away from home. In the case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), one study estimates that only 2% of fathers are able to spend quality time with their children, as changing market conditions have led to the emergence of the “weekend father” phenomenon. This term was coined to describe fathers who travel to a different city for work, only spending the weekend living with their families (Tabrez, 2016). With the father more absent from daily family life, an increasing number of youth in the Gulf are left to grow up in disparate family settings. This is vastly different from the past, and means that families may not be able to wholly provide the necessary emotional and social support that children need (AlMunajjed, 2010).

While much has been written about the role and function of the patriarchy in the Middle East, the literature has primarily focused on its negative impact on women and children. The majority of the research has been qualitative in nature, relying on small sample sizes that make it difficult to extrapolate findings to the general population. As such, information on Arab fathers living in the Gulf and the impact of their lives on their children remains limited. It is against the complex social and economic changes in the Gulf region that this pilot study of father involvement in the UAE takes place. This study is an attempt to address the gaps in the literature to provide a more nuanced understanding of the role and impact of Arab fathers involvement as it is lived and experienced today.

## The Role of the Father and Factors Influencing Father Involvement

Defining the role of the father in any given society is no easy task. The majority of literature on fatherhood originates from the West and largely focuses on the role of fathers in Western contexts. Even in Western society, there is no universal agreement on the role of the father as the ways in which individual societies, or even sub-groups within societies, view the role of the father is shaped by varying social, cultural, and religious norms (Lamb, 2000). More conservative groups strongly adhere to the notion of the father as a provider, while at the more liberal end of the spectrum fathers' and mothers' roles are seen as more interchangeable. This holds significant implications for the ways in which fathers will engage, or not engage, in their child's life.

Research on father involvement (as a subset of fatherhood) is still a relatively new field which to date has typically been examined in terms of the amount of time fathers spend with their children. This is usually self-reported by the father or more often, the mother. Previous research has primarily revolved around the examination of factors affecting father involvement and its influence on children's socio-emotional development.

In terms of factors that both determine and impact father involvement, existing literature finds that socio-economic status (SES) plays a significant role. Studies on the impact of SES on father involvement have found that fathers from lower SES backgrounds are less involved with their children than those with higher SES. Research has also found that children living who did not live with their fathers were more likely from low-income backgrounds (The Centre for Social Justice, 2014) and that fathers from lower SES backgrounds were more likely to negatively impact their children's lives and development because they were under "economic stress" (Mosley & Thomson, 1995).

The gender of the child has also been found to both significantly determine and impact the nature of the father's involvement in their child's life. A study by Pleck (1997) indicated that fathers tended to spend more time with their sons than daughters irrespective of their age. Similarly, Mitchell, Booth, and King (2009) found that, in general, sons were more likely to feel closer to their fathers compared to daughters.

In addition to the research that explores the effect of SES and child's gender on father involvement, scholars have also sought to measure the impact that father involvement has on their children's socio-emotional wellbeing, in particular on self-esteem. Self-esteem is commonly understood as how one views and values oneself, both negatively and positively (Dick & Bronson, 2005). According to Kohut's self-psychology theory, "the quality of the father-child relationship is an inevitable part of the development of a psychological self-structure" and central to the psychological development for self-esteem (as cited in Dick & Bronson, 2005, p. 582). In a report on fathers in the UK, the Center for Social Justice (2013) observed improvements in the self-esteem and confidence of a child when the father was involved in his/her life. Dick (2004) also found that children of fathers with greater positive emotional father involvement showed higher self-esteem than those of fathers with lower emotional involvement.



## Fatherhood in the Arab World

There is currently a dearth of research on father involvement in the Arab world<sup>2</sup> and even the limited existing literature is problematic as it primarily focuses on the Egyptian context and is largely anecdotal and descriptive in nature. While there are key cultural and societal similarities between Arab countries, there is also considerable diversity in terms of socioeconomics, religion, educational systems, and government resources. Culturally, the Arab world places great importance on the father, stating that “one’s first loyalty” is to the father (Ahmed, 2013; Cohen-Mor, 2013). The role of the father in the Arab world, however, is more than just a cultural norm and historical construct as requirements for a married man to be the provider are enshrined in the family laws of at least nine Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Selected obedience clauses in family laws in MENA countries**

Country	Clause outlining wives and husband’s responsibilities
Egypt	Article 6 (bb) of Law 44 stipulates that if a wife refuses to obey her husband without any legitimate reason, she loses her maintenance. Refusal to obey without a legitimate reason refers to a situation in which the wife leaves the marital home and declines to return at the husband’s request.
Iran	Under Article 11.v, a husband must maintain his wife in return for his wife’s obedience (tamkin).
Iraq	Under Article 24/1, a husband must provide maintenance to his wife if she is not disobedient.
Jordan	According to Article 37, “Upon the wife who has received the immediate part of the dowry falls obedience . . . and if she does not obey she loses her right to nafaqa.”
Morocco	The Mudawanna (Personal Status Law) stipulates that a woman owes obedience to her husband.
Qatar	Under Shari’a law, the husband must maintain his wife as long as she is under his control.
Saudi Arabia	Under a law based on Shari’a principles, a husband must maintain his wife as long as she is under his control.
Syria	Under Article 73, a wife forfeits her right to maintenance if she works outside the home without her husband’s permission. Article 74 states that if the woman is disobedient, she is not entitled to maintenance for as long as her disobedience continues.
Yemen	Article 40 states, “The husband has the right to obedience from his wife in what brings about the family’s interest . . . [and] the husband cannot forbid his wife from . . . leaving to manage her money.”

*Note.* Adapted from *Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women in the Public Sphere* (p. 98), by The World Bank, 2004, Washington, DC: World Bank. Copyright 2004 by The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank.

<sup>2</sup> The Arab World includes 22 nations, which were home to approximately 359 million in 2010. For the this study, an Arab father is defined as someone who self-identifies as Arab from one of the countries in the region and/or speaks Arabic as a mother tongue.

Both existing laws and historic cultural gender norms require mothers to be the primary caregivers, while fathers are mandated to be the primary providers. Hence, fathers are generally more likely to spend time outside of the home for salaried work or other economic reasons (Barakat, 2005). In the UAE, these requirements go a step further as Article 66 of the Personal Status Law states that a husband must provide maintenance to his wife even after divorce, as long as the marriage was consummated (Maru, 2015).

The continuing cultural perception and legal requirements for fathers to be the primary providers in the Arab world are consistent with how father roles are perceived in other non-Western contexts. A study in the Caribbean found that regardless of the existing family structure, men are socialized, largely by other men, as first and foremost, providers for the family (Chevannes, 2006). Similarly, in Pakistan, research noted that the persisting definition of a father rested on his ability to provide (Rizvi, 2015). Russian fathers are also expected to perform the role of a provider, and “without money, men [in Russia] are seen as superfluous (Utrata, Ispa, & Ispa-Landa, 2013).”

In regards to what makes a more or less involved father, studies in the Arab region, including the Gulf, have found differences in terms of parents’ SES and child’s gender (Ahmed, 2013). Consistent with the findings from the Center for Social Justice (2013) in the UK, a study from Egypt found that children from lower SES backgrounds perceived their parents to be less accepting, more aggressive, and overall, less involved (Ahmed, Ronald, Khaleque, & Gielen, 2010). On the other hand, studies from Kuwait found that Kuwaiti fathers with better education and a stable job are more likely to spend time with their children (AlAzemi, Hadadian, Merbler, & Wang, 2015; AlJazzaf, 2012 ).

In terms of gender, females in the Arab World report having had more positive experiences with their fathers than males. One study by Ali (1992) examining Egyptian adolescents and their experience with fathers, found that males saw their fathers as more aggressive and associated them with more negative feelings than their female counterparts (as cited in Ahmed, 2013). Similarly, a study exploring the perceptions of Qatari fathers retrospectively through their daughter’s eyes found that Qatari daughters perceived their fathers to be highly involved in their lives (Shafiae, Mayers, Al-Maadadi, Coughlin, & Wooldridge, 2014).

A small number of studies have examined the impact of fathers on self-esteem in the Arab World. One study by Abou-el-Kheir (1998) surveyed a sample of 285 male and female university students in Egypt about their perceptions of fathers and self-esteem (as cited in Ahmed, 2013). The study found that for males, viewing their father as accepting was positively correlated with self-esteem, while for both males and females, perceptions of fathers as punitive or inconsistent were negatively associated with self-esteem.

## The Study

The pilot study on which this paper is based sought to expand the current literature on fathers in the Arab world and to test the applicability and usefulness of Dick’s (2004) Fatherhood Scale and Rosenberg’s (1965) Self Esteem Scale for the Arab world. The study analyzed the experiences of 61 Arabs in the UAE using a survey instrument that combines Dick’s Fatherhood Scale and Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale along with a variety of demographic questions. Interviews were also conducted with nine participants to gain a more in-depth understanding of key issues that emerged from the survey relating to gender, SES, and nationality.

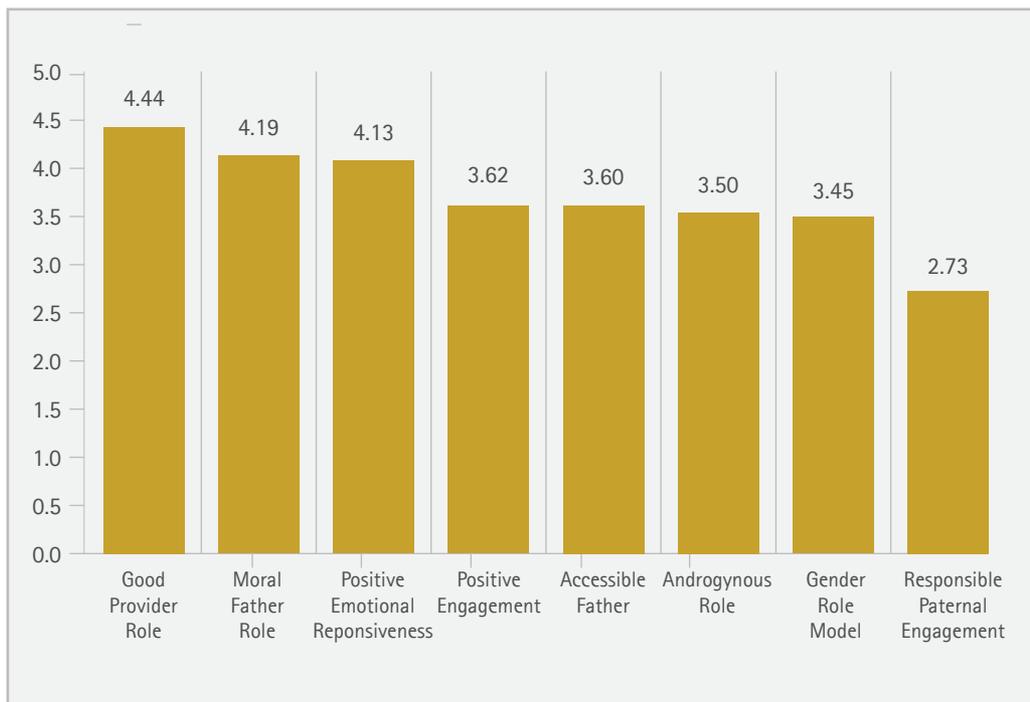


## The Results

### Mean Comparisons of the Fatherhood Subscales<sup>3</sup>

In regard to the Fatherhood Subscale survey responses, Figure 1 shows that the participants rated their fathers highest on the good provider role but scored them the lowest on responsible paternal engagement. These findings indicate that participants perceived that their fathers either often or always provided good financial support during childhood and adolescence, but were rarely or sometimes involved in schoolwork and activities.

Figure 1. Means of the positive components of the Fatherhood Scale<sup>4</sup>



Qualitative findings also supported the strong emphasis on a father's role as being first and foremost a good provider. When asked about what defines a father in three words/phrases, seven out of the nine interviewees mentioned aspects that related most to the good provider

<sup>3</sup> The Fatherhood Scale is composed of nine subscales: positive engagement (spending individual time with children); positive paternal emotional responsiveness (being involved in children's care and well-being); negative paternal engagement (being physically or verbally abusive towards children and wife); the moral father role (teaching and demonstrating religious and moral values and behavior); the gender role model (sharing thoughts about marriage and manhood); the good provider role (providing financially for the family); the androgynous role (showing paternal affection and sharing household chores with the wife); responsible paternal engagement (being involved in children's school work and activities); and the accessible father (being available when children need his support and help).

<sup>4</sup> For comparing the means of the Fatherhood subscales and examining their relationships with self-esteem, twenty-seven cases with missing data on either the Fatherhood Scale or the Self-esteem scale were excluded from the final sample. The t-tests comparing the means for participants with and without missing data indicated that there are no significant differences between two groups on any variables ( $t = -1.47$ – $0.66$ , ns). Thus, a total of 34 (14 male participants and 20 female participants) were used as a sample for these analyses.

role, with one interviewee stating:

“We used to rely on [my father] as he was the family’s provider. He was the safety net that would protect us whenever we needed shelter.” – Emirati male 1

## Gender, Nationality and Socioeconomic Status

Means for individual items of the Fatherhood subscales by gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status (SES) were also examined with the following results.

**Gender differences:** Survey data revealed that males were more likely than females to respond that their fathers took them out for activities. However, females were more likely to feel close to their fathers during childhood. Interview data further highlighted the greater perceived closeness of female interviewees to their fathers, with two female interviewees stating:

“We always talked and we were always sitting together, watching TV and eating and stuff. I think he is more close to us than he is to the guys... My dad was tough on the boys and he was nice to us girls. And he still to this day says, ‘I don’t know why your brothers are not like you!’” – Emirati female

“...I have a very good relationship with my father, very close, because I am the only girl, you know... I was spoiled by my father, very spoiled... I was never beaten, never. Maybe sometimes my brother. Very little only, very little. But he was very, very naughty!” – Egyptian female

**Nationality differences:** Survey data also showed that Emiratis were more likely than non-Emirati Arabs to feel close to their fathers during childhood and adolescence. Emiratis also perceived that their fathers took them on activities and, interestingly, to the doctor more often than non-Emirati Arabs. Interview results also confirmed that there were differences in the ways Emirati and non-Emirati fathers interacted with their children. In particular, all of the Emirati interviewees, regardless of age, suggested that their fathers were not actively involved in their school life/work, while fathers from the Levant and the wider Arab world were perceived to be more involved in their children’s education, as illustrated in the following quotes:

“[My father] rarely [visited school]. I was a good hard-working student Alhamdulillah (Thank God), and my parents didn’t have to visit the school.” – Emirati male 2

“[My father] used to visit the school, the teachers, and asked about me... He would follow up and ask. That is why we are five male sons and we are all doctors.” – Syrian male

**Socioeconomic differences:** Survey results revealed that high-SES participants had mean values higher than those of their low-SES counterparts except on one item which was “I told my father that I loved him.” This may indicate that low-SES participants were more likely to verbally express their affection toward their fathers, a finding that is consistent with studies of low SES family communication styles in the UK (Center for Social Justice, 2013). High-SES participants were more likely to feel close to their fathers during adolescence and more emotionally supported by their fathers. They also perceived their fathers to have more open communication with them.



In the interviews, participants from lower SES groups tended to report that their fathers were physically present during their childhood, whereas high SES participants stated that their fathers worked or lived away from them for at least one year during their childhood. However, high SES interviewees were also relatively younger than low SES interviewees, which may reflect the changes in economic and social conditions following the discovery of oil that have resulted in higher incomes and more education. One 33-year old interviewee from a high SES family highlighted her father's lack of presence and its influence:

"[My brother] needed a father figure in his life, because it wasn't enough that he was coming and going back, he needed to actually be with him...My mother couldn't handle him by herself...So when [my father] died, we didn't feel that there is a difference..." – Syrian female

## Relationship between Father Involvement and Self-esteem

Beyond exploring gender, nationality, and SES differences in father involvement, we also conducted correlational analyses to examine the relations of the overall and subscale scores of the Fatherhood Scale used in the survey with self-esteem. The study finds that participants who perceived their fathers as being more positively and responsibly engaged in their lives, more emotionally responsive, more accessible, and more androgynous showed greater self-esteem. Also, participants who were more likely to view their fathers as a good provider and a good gender role model tended to have higher self-esteem than those who did not.

## Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Overall, the findings from this pilot study are consistent with the existing literature in that positive father involvement is associated with higher levels of self-esteem. Also, our findings that socioeconomic status and gender of the child impact the nature and type of Arab father involvement were consistent with the existing literature. Furthermore, this study reveals the diversity of experiences of father involvement across the region with differences emerging between Emirati and other Arab fathers, particularly with regards to the areas where they are more or less likely to be involved. A key difference identified by the study was that while Gulf fathers were regarded as good providers and moral role models they were less involved (in comparison to other Arab fathers) in their child's schooling and in their day-to-day life. This has potentially important implications when considering the poor academic performance of boys in the Gulf, as a lack of father involvement in their schooling may be one reason for this. The study, however, confirmed the universal importance of the father for building self-esteem in his child, regardless of the father's nationality.

The study also raises several questions that deserve further consideration by policy makers. In particular, the impact of changing gender roles on how fatherhood is understood and lived is something that emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative findings. While fathers are still legally required to be the main provider for the family, the increasing number of women who are entering the workforce in the Gulf raises questions about how a woman's income should be treated. Traditionally in the Arab world a women's income has been thought of as her

own private fund<sup>5</sup>, but what happens if the woman earns more than the man or if the family's financial obligations exceed what the father can provide. As women become more educated and thereby more employable, should there be changes to the legal codes that relieve men of the responsibility of being the sole provider? Perhaps relieving men of this responsibility would help Gulf males have more time to spend with their children and be more involved fathers.

There is also the question of how governments can help fathers who work away from their families to have more time to spend with their children and be more involved with their child's schooling. There have been a number of changes to the Labor Law in the UAE to allow mothers longer maternity leave<sup>6</sup> and time for breast-feeding<sup>7</sup>, but there are no similar provisions for fathers that would allow them time to be more present in their children's lives in different ways. It would be beneficial for governments in the region to become more father friendly through offering paternity leave and/or other leave entitlements that recognize that fathers are not only a source of income for the family but are much more.

Moving forward, our larger, regional study will explore these areas in more depth as well as examine the impact of father involvement on educational attainment and career aspirations. These studies are intended to pave the way for future researchers to further investigate the role and impact of father involvement in the Arab world (and beyond) in the hope of creating greater understanding and knowledge of what is still a discourse dominated by negative stereotypes.

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<sup>5</sup> The responsibility of the husband as the breadwinner is enshrined in the Quran, in Surat An-Nisa, where it says that, "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend (to support them) from their means" verse 34.

While there is no research on this, anecdotally this is known to be the case. In Islam, a wife's salary is her property to spend however she wants. She does not have to give any of it to her husband or to contribute to household expenses with her husband, unless this is explicitly indicated in the marriage contract.

<sup>6</sup> As of September 2016, working women in Abu Dhabi are entitled a fully paid three-month maternity leave, as well as two hours of daily leave for the first year after delivery. The three months paid leave law was issued in Ras Al Khaimah in November of the same year.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to their standard breaks, working mothers nursing their infants should receive two breaks of 30 minutes each to breastfeed, until the infant is one and a half years old. This is stated by Article 34 of the UAE Labour Law.



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