

Cultures of the Middle East  
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**The Role of Children in Family and Society in the Middle East:  
Cases from Cairo and Syria**

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## **The Role of Children in Family and Society in the Middle East:**

### **Cases from Egypt and Syria**

#### **Introduction:**

This paper provides a brief overview of the traditional role of children in the family and society in the Middle East. It asks the questions of how these roles made some children vulnerable to harm and poverty as the region changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and what can happen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to equip children for life as adults.

Today, in the Middle East children are seen working long hours in jobs as varied as shining shoes, selling tissues in coffee shops and on the streets, and serving as apprentices in craft shops. Children, who not so visible, weave carpets, perform domestic chores, and sift through garbage as part of the labor force. Many children show the effects of poor nutrition and unsafe environments. Children do attend schools in rural villages and crowded cities; young Quranic students recite the Quran from the rooftops in the very old sections of Cairo; and young girls eagerly seek more knowledge of mathematics.

#### **What Are the Characteristics of the Traditional Family?**

In the Middle East, the family is the traditional basic socioeconomic unit. It is mainly patriarchal, hierarchical (with respect to sex and age), and extended. This holds true in rural, urban, and tribal structures. The structure of the extended family guarantees the maintenance of proper social protocols, and determines the social ranking and roles and responsibilities of each member. A critical role of this structure has been to ensure the continuance of the existence of the extended family/ tribe and its rights (including those to water, land, and mutual defense) and ensure the welfare (protection, economic assistance, and general support) of each member. Norms, which include line of passage of political authority, inheritance rights, custody of minor children, definition of

households, and observance of religious events, vary across the Middle East. The relationship between the various families or ethnic groups in a geographical region is influenced by the availability of resources, alliances and marriages, and the impact of outside (notably western) societies and governments,

Members of a family and the members of a given household are not necessarily the same. The definition of a “household” varies. Who lives with whom and for what period of time and which ties are maintained is an important part of the structure of the society and is determined, again, by the norms of a particular family or ethnic group. The most frequently encountered household is the nuclear family. In an “ideal” situation, the other households of the extended family live close by.

The honor of the family is critical. “Honor is, in brief, the ability to live up to the ideal expectations of the society.”<sup>1</sup> The actions of individuals determine the honor, or lack thereof, given the family or tribe. The success or failure of the individual reflects on the entire family. A misstep by any one member of the family reflects on the whole unit, hence the need to adhere to rigid norms. The honor of a man is closely tied to the sexual behavior and general reputation of his women kin.<sup>2</sup> Hence the roles of males and females are clearly defined and after an initial brief period of what might be considered a carefree childhood, children are indoctrinated into their respective gender roles. The roles and domains of men and women are distinct and usually very separate which results in segregation of children by gender at an early age.

Since the stability of the family depends on stable and productive marriages, the determination of who marries whom and under what conditions they start and continue their marriages are of interest to the whole group, not just the couple considering marriage. Parents are held responsible for facilitating good and stable marriages for both male and female children.

The birth of children makes the marriage of a man and wife more secure. Many men wait until after the birth of several children to take a job requiring migration. Women especially need children to establish their place in society. Children are seen not as economic burdens, but as economic assets.

### **What Changes Occurred in the Traditional Family in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century?**

Events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which impacted the traditional ways of life in the Middle East included: the colonial occupations, the disruption from regional disputes, the discovery and exploitation of oil and other resources, the rise of various Islamic movements, and the availability of technological advances. Each assertion of outside political control over land, water, or trade practices altered the relationship of the traditionally structured societies to the controlling political entity and to each other; and, in general, increased the authority of a political structure that was inconsistent with tribal/ethnic boundaries. The scarcity of land to be subdivided among each new generation, resulted in changes and practices and practices in kinship / tribal relationships, including depriving women of their land rights and impacting cousin marriages. The lack of extended family ties and resources exacerbated the situation of those families that had few resources to start with due to lack of inherited wealth or changes in local economies. When families were scattered across a region, the members of a more prosperous family tended to keep in closer contact with kin, had more stable households, and used kinship ties to their economic advantage more often than those of a less economically advantaged family line.

Children and women experienced a negative impact when urbanization replaced nomadic or rural society. Since they were surrounded by people who were not their kin in urban areas, the women were more isolated and had more restrictions on their lives. Visiting between women and their families was more difficult due to transportation issues; and the marketing and other domestic functions that required going outside the home were more often the man's responsibility, again due to the environment. The need of men to travel a distance to jobs and the possibility of migration jobs increased the isolation of women. In turn this often placed more household and caretaker responsibilities on the children due to the isolation from the extended family. The migration of a family from a rural agricultural area to an urban area, in anticipation of expanded economic opportunities for the adults, may result in the child working when the adult's opportunities do not become a reality.

Men in the Middle and East North Africa (MENA) region were more likely to have direct access to wage employment, while women were largely economically

dependent upon male family members. Gender discrimination concerning access to jobs frequently became codified in family law: women often needed permission of husband, father, or guardian before seeking employment, requesting a loan, starting a business, or traveling. Inheritance laws favored males and families tended to make larger investment in education of boys than for girls in rural areas, but not in urban areas.

### **How Have the Changes Affected the Lives of Children?**

#### **Children's legal rights:**

The legal rights of children and laws concerning education and employment are fairly new developments. In the traditional society, these were the responsibilities of the family or tribal unit and were prescribed by the customs, long established norms, and Islamic teachings.

Traditional practices and current law, especially Personal Status Laws, focus on inheritance and custody of minors and support of the elderly. (See Table 1.) The males have the dominant role in most areas. For example, when women have the right to inherent property in their families, their portion is, at most, half of their brothers. When issues of custody of young children arise due to death or divorce, the father's family plays the dominant role. In the case of divorce, the practice has become to automatically award custody of the children to the mother (unless the divorce was for reasons of honor). If the divorced Mother remarries, the custody goes to her mother. The third possibility is giving custody to the husband's mother. This applies to age 11, after age 12, the children decide for themselves. In most families, it is the role of the sons to ensure that the parents are cared for in their old age. The males have the responsibility to provide for the care of the women and children, and, hence, control over their lives. The rights and education of children are set in the context of these practices. Girls are expected to learn the skills necessary for roles as mothers and wives; and boys are sent to the fields, pastures, or shops to learn agricultural, herding, or technical skills

**Table 1 - Characteristics of the Legal Systems in Egypt and Syria**

category	Egypt	Syria
legal system history	Legal and judicial administration independence from Ottoman Empire in 1874. Judicial reforms began in 1875. From 1920 to 1950s Egyptian legislature enacted several important changes to family law. Personal Status Law amended several times up to 2000	After Umayyad caliphate, succession of Arab, Crusader, Kurdish, and Mamluk rulers then Ottoman until 1516. French mandate from 1922 to 1946. Ottoman Law of Family Rights continued until 1953. Syrian Law of Personal Status 1953 is based on authoritative doctrine of Hanafi school. Major amendments in 1975- polygamy, dower, maintenance, ...custody of children, and guardianship.
schools of Fiqh	Hanafi majority; significant Coptic Christian minority	Hanafi majority; Jafari, Druze, Ismaili, and Alawi; some Christian and small Jewish communities
Constitutional Status of Islam (ic Law)	1971 Constitution affirms Islam as state religion; 1980 amendment gives recognition to the principles of Islamic jurisprudence as principal source of legislation.	Constitution of 1973 requires President to be Muslim and Islamic jurisprudents to be main source of legislation.
Court System	separate courts for Muslims and Christians for family law	separate legal systems for civil and criminal matters and for personal status matters - separate courts for Muslims, Druze, and Christian and Jews
Marriage Age	18 for males and 16 for females	18 for males and 17 for females with judicial discretion for males of 15 and females of 13; judge may withhold permission due to incompatibility in ages
Marriage Guardianship	governed by Civil Code; rights of <i>wali</i> restricted	under age of full capacity, both parties need permission of <i>wali</i> ; judge may overrule <i>wali</i> for girls under 17
Marriage Registration	legal (obligatory) registration does not determine validity of marriage	obligatory; penal sanctions for failure to register
Polygamy	notification of existing and intended wives required; existing wife may file for divorce under specific conditions	judge may refuse permission unless husband establishes lawful cause and financial capacity
Obedience/maintenance	debt requirements deviate from classical Hanafi law; wife's leaving the home for lawful work not deemed disobedience under specific conditions	wife's financial rights are forfeited if she works outside the home without husband's consent, or is deemed disobedient in other matters
<i>Talaq</i>	restrictions on <i>talaq</i>	restrictions on <i>talaq</i>
Judicial Divorce	wife may obtain judicial divorce on specific grounds-polygamy, imprisonment, incompatibility, absence of husband without justification	wife may seek judicial divorce on specified grounds - defect in husband, absence without justification, imprisonment,
Post-Divorce Maintenance/Financial Arrangements	sets conditions for maintenance and requires accommodations/housing for former wife with minor children	judge has discretion to award maintenance under specified conditions
Child Custody and Guardianship	custody for divorced mother ends at 10 years for boys and 12 years for girls; judge may extend to 15 for boys and marriage for girls.	divorced mother has right to custody of boys until age of 9 and girls until age of 11; custody may be extended under specific conditions

<http://www.law.emory.edu/IFL/legal/syria.htm> (egypt.htm)

Within this context of laws affecting families and, hence, the status of children, the education of children and their participation in the labor force are of great concern to national governments and international organizations. The effects of the current situation are felt beyond the region. It may be helpful to look at some statistics on worldwide and regional literacy and child labor. As shown in Tables 2 and 4 -7, literacy has not been

universally valued, and there is some cause and effect relationship between literacy and child labor. It is also clear that the Middle East is not the worst area when child labor and literacy are considered.

**Table 2- Selected Socioeconomic Indicators in the Middle East and North Africa**

region	Percent of population over 15 yr literate		Percent of population ages 15 to 24 literate		Gross primary enrollment Percent		Gross secondary enrollment Percent		Percent of people 15 years and over in labor	
	female	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female	male
<b>MENA total</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>73%</b>
Algeria	57%	76%	84%	93%	107%	116%	73%	68%		
Bahrian	83%	91%	99%	98%	103%	103%	105%	98%	19%	65%
<b>Egypt</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>103%</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>74%</b>
Iran	69%	83%	91%	96%	85%	88%	75%	81%	11%	75%
Iraq	23%	55%	29%	59%	91%	111%	29%	47%	17%	75%
Jordan	84%	95%	99%	99%	101%	101%	89%	86%	22%	76%
Kuwait	80%	84%	93%	92%	95%	93%	57%	55%	43%	83%
Lebanon	80%	92%	93%	97%	97%	101%	79%	72%	27%	76%
Libya	68%	91%	93%	100%	117%	115%			23%	78%
Morocco	36%	62%	58%	76%	88%	101%	35%	44%	30%	79%
Oman	62%	80%	96%	100%	71%	74%	67%	69%	16%	79%
Palestine	84%	94%			109%	107%	86%	80%	10%	67%
Qatar	83%	80%	97%	93%	104%	105%	92%	86%	35%	92%
Saudi Arabia	67%	83%	90%	95%					15%	80%
<b>Syria</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>105%</b>	<b>113%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>83%</b>
Tunisia	61%	81%	89%	97%	115%	120%	80%	76%	24%	73%
Turkey	76%	93%	94%	99%	96%	105%	48%	67%	26%	72%
United Arab Emirates	79%	75%	94%	87%	99%	99%	80%	71%	31%	92%
Yemen	25%	67%	46%	83%	61%	96%	25%	69%	29%	82%

gross enrollment is number of persons enrolled regardless of age divided by number in the appropriate age range  
data on labor force participation may include foreign workers

for sources see: PRB MENA Policy Brief Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa 2003 p 5

Table 4 - ILO 2000 Global Estimates of "Economically Active" Children Ages 5 to 17

age group	total population ('000s)	number of EA ('000s)	EA as percent of total children
5-9	600,200	73,100	12.2%
10-14	599,200	137,700	23.0%
<b>5-14</b>	<b>1,199,400</b>	<b>210,800</b>	<b>17.6%</b>
15-17	332,100	140,900	42.4%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1,531,500</b>	<b>351,700</b>	<b>23.0%</b>

Every Child Counts: New Global Estimates on Child Labour  
International Labour Office Geneva April 2002

Table 5 - Distribution of EA Children under 15 Years of Age

region	1980	1985	1990
Africa	17.0%	18.0%	21.3%
Americas	4.7%	5.6%	na
Asia	77.8%	75.9%	72.3%
Europe	0.3%	20.0%	0.1%
Oceania	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>119.7%</b>	<b>93.9%</b>

Table 6- Comparison of Labor Force participation Rates of Children and

region	15 years and over	10-14 years
Africa	65.2%	22.0%
Americas	61.8%	7.9%
Asia	68.1%	14.3%
Europe	54.5%	0.3%
Oceania	62.7%	6.9%

Source: ILO 1993

[http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/hddflash/workp/wp\\_00056.html](http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/hddflash/workp/wp_00056.html)

Table 7 - ILO 2000 Regional Estimates of "Economically Active" Children Ages 5 to 14

region	number of children 5-14 (in millions)	number of children 5-9 (in millions)	EA as percent of total children 5-9	number of children 10-14 (in millions)	EA as percent of total children 10-14	Total number of EA children (in millions)	EA as percent of total children 5-14
Developed economies	119.0	59.6	1.4%	59.4	2.8%	2.5	2%
Transition economies	62.4	27.7	3.1%	34.7	4.2%	2.4	4%
Asia and the Pacific	665.1	335.4	12.3%	329.7	26.5%	127.3	19%
Latin America and Caribbean	108.1	54.4	10.6%	53.7	21.5%	17.4	16%
Sub-Saharan Africa	166.9	88.8	23.6%	78.1	34.7%	48.0	29%
Middle East and North Africa	87.9	44.2	10.8%	43.7	19.6%	13.4	15%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1,209.4</b>	<b>610.1</b>	<b>20.6%</b>	<b>599.3</b>	<b>23.0%</b>	<b>211.0</b>	<b>18%</b>

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## Education:

When political structures above the extended family assume responsibilities for education and create regulations, there are new opportunities for children, but also can



result in conflicts within the family. In most countries some level of compulsory education is the law. (See Table 3.) The resources allocated to this are varied and mostly inadequate.

**Table 3 - Compulsory Education and Minimum Age Work Regulations**

country	compulsory education required age	minimum age light work	minimum age dangerous work	basis minimum work age
Bangladesh	10	12	16-18	14
Chile	13	14	18-21	15
China	16		18	16
Costa Rica	15	12	18	12-15
<b>Egypt</b>	<b>14</b>			<b>12</b>
France	16	12-14	16-18	16
India	14	none	18	14
Iran	10		18	15
Iraq	12		18	15
Turkey	14	13	18	15

Sinclair and Trah 1991; UNESCO 1993

[http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/hnp/hddflash/workp/wp\\_00056.html](http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/hnp/hddflash/workp/wp_00056.html)

In many countries the content of the education is determined by the government in response to its goals, not to further enhance the lives of individual citizens. The curriculum and training of teachers depend on the goals and resources of the political system in control at a given time. Any changes from the tradition of rote learning and reliance on religious schools require time and resources. The access to jobs following graduation and maintenance of literacy in adults is a major challenge. In Egypt, for example, although a youth may be able to read at an acceptable level when he or she leaves school, without the daily need or opportunity to read or write the Standard Arabic learned in school, the level of literacy usually drops drastically to a non functional level.

Egypt's constitution mandates that education should be free for all children. The Education Law No. 139 (1981) calls for compulsory primary education through 8th grade and requires children to attend school until age fifteen.<sup>3</sup> In 2001 there were 6 years of primary education in Egypt (from 1990 to 1999 due to large number of students only 5 years were provided) followed by 3 years of preparatory education. Students start school between ages of six and nine and the compulsory attendance laws are not strictly

enforced. However, efforts to increase the percentage of rural children, especially girls, have yielded good results.

In 1996 the Ministry of Education established the Mubarak Program for Social Cooperation to provide school grants to families and /or provision of school uniforms, books, supplies, etc. <sup>4</sup> This aided 169,000 children in the 1996-1997 school year. Rural attendance was encouraged by building more one-room schools within walking distance, the hiring of more female teachers, and the provision of meals during the school day.

### **Labor:**

Although a man is expected to support his wife and children, most children are expected to contribute to the household as early as possible. Though restrictions on child labor exist in most nations, children still work. The International Labor Organization reports that children work the longest hours and are the worst paid of all laborers. The working conditions, health hazards, and potential abuse most often do not provide the stimulation for proper physical and mental development; children are deprived of a childhood; and usually relegated to a life of drudgery. Children work in the carpet, leather tanning, and textile industries. Apprenticeships are most often in auto repair, crafts, construction, brick making, and textile production. Many children, especially daughters of poor families, work as domestic servants in the homes of the wealthy families. In urban areas, street or homeless children, who are usually considered unemployable by people, sell items or resort to begging.

The abolition of child labor creates major problems if done in situations in which other financial support for the family and access to education for the children to ensure better paying jobs do not exist. Child labor is often necessary for the survival of the family and in many cases the child may be the major wage earner in a family. Even if a child's wages are not critical to the survival of the family, the wages are often put toward securing desirable marriages for the children – wedding costs in case of a son, and clothes and care to enhance prospects of the daughter. And, if education is not easily accessible, of poor quality, or does not guarantee future employment, child labor is seen as more valuable than education. As seen in several countries, the increased enrollment in Islamic religious schools is often based on the hard choice of a family between

subsistence earnings from the child and the offer of free room, board, and schooling by the religious school.

In Egypt in 1996, the minimum age children were allowed to begin working outside home was raised from 12 to 15 years to be in line with schooling expectations. Despite the law, a significant proportion of children continue to work. Multiple definitions of what constitutes work and methods of collecting data cause confusion and require careful analysis of the data. Table 8 shows levels of work as defined by the International Labour Organization in Geneva.

**Table 8 - Child Labour (as defined for the purpose of global estimates)**  
Age groups

Age groups	Non-hazardous work (in non-hazardous industries & occupations and < 43hrs/week)		Worst forms of child labour	
	Light work (<14 hrs/week)	Regular work (>=14 hrs/week and <43 hrs/week)	Hazardous work (in specified hazardous industries & occupations plus >+ 43 hrs/week in other industries and occupations)	Unconditional worst forms (Trafficked children; children in forced and bonded labour, armed conflict, prostitution & pornography, and illicit activities)
5-11				
12-14				

The shaded areas are considered as child labour in need of elimination as per ILO Conventions No. 138 and 182

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A study published in 2001 concluded that some work has no direct effect on schooling for boys, but has a strong negative effect for girls.<sup>5</sup> The report says these findings have important policy implications, but the resolution of the issues is difficult. They did not advocate that government stamp out all forms of more visible market work for boys. And it's even more difficult to regulate the work of girls, which are usually subsistence agricultural or domestic chores.

Another finding of the Economic Research Forum for the Arab Countries, Iran and Turkey (ERF) concerned the effect of the absence of one parent in the household on schooling and work. The absence of the father (temporary or permanent) did not have a strong effect on either work or schooling for boys or girls. However the absence of the

mother and whether or not there was a stepmother had a quite different effect on boys and girls. Boys with neither mother nor stepmother experienced no effect. Boys with a stepmother attended school less and were more likely to work. The school attendance of girls with neither mother nor stepmother dropped by 32 percentage points and the likelihood of substantial increase in amount of work (either within the home or paid labor) increased by 19 percentage points. Presence of a stepmother in place of mother had no effect on the girls schooling and work.

Agriculture is another area in which use of child labor is traditional and remains high. A major concern today is the employment in Egypt of over one million children between ages seven and twelve in cotton pest management. Under the authority of the agriculture ministry, they work long hours (without adequate protection) exposed to heat and pesticides. Although not subject to forced recruitment, many farmers do not resist such recruitment of their children. The Human Rights Watch notes that the size of children and the allowable wages make them most desirable for the work of leafworm control. Egypt's adoption of the Child Law in 1996 has been undermined by this tolerance of seasonal agricultural employment.<sup>6</sup>

### **Healthcare:**

Examples of government sponsored healthcare systems are found in Syria and Egypt. Table 10 provides some characteristics of how the systems work. In Egypt, the system is multi-tiered. Basic health care is free and medicines are available, even in the remote villages. However the pressures of the growing population are straining this system. Private clinics and specialized treatment are available only to the wealthy. Syria has a public and private health care system. Although progress is being made, rural areas have fewer doctors and clinics. Child immunizations in both countries receive considerable attention, especially for measles, polio, and diphtheria. Many Syrians and Egyptians use traditional health practices.

**Table 10 - WHO statistics on Egypt and Syria**  
indicator

	measure for Egypt	measure for Syria
total population ('000s) in 2002	70,507	17,381
<b>population ('000s) under age 18 in 2003</b>	<b>29,856</b>	<b>8,012</b>
<b>populaton ('000s) under age 5 in 2003</b>	<b>8,702</b>	<b>2,322</b>
annual population growth rate 1992 to 2002	1.9%	2.6%
total fertility rate 2002	3.3	3.4
total fertility rate 1992	4.1	4.9
life expectancy at birth (total population)	67.1 yr	71.2 yr
child mortality (probability of dying under age 5 yrs for males -per 1000)	38	26
child mortality (probability of dying under age 5 yrs for females -per 1000)	39	20
per capita GDP in international dollars, 2001	\$3,901	\$7,887
<b>percent of children (5- 14 yrs) in child labour (1999-2003)</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>8%</b>
per capita total expenditure on health in international dollars, 2001	153	427
per capita government expenditure on health in international dollars, 2001	75	188
out-of-pocket expenditure on health as % of private expenditure on health, 2001	92%	100%
total expenditure on health as % of GDP, 2001	3.9%	5.4%
<b>percent of central government expenditure allocated to education (1992-2004)</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>total adult literacy rate in 2000</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>74%</b>
<b>adult literacy rate, male 2000</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>88%</b>
<b>adult literacy rate, female 2000</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>60%</b>
<b>net primary school enrollment/attendance (1996-2003)</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>98%</b>
<b>percent of primary school entrants reaching grade 5, admin data (1998-2001)</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>92%</b>

[http://www3.whois/country/indicators.cfm?country =](http://www3.whois/country/indicators.cfm?country=)  
<http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry>

### **Increasing Education Opportunities and Reducing Child Labor:**

Any strategy for accomplishing this must address the economic situation of the family in the present time and in the future. “Child labor exists because education systems and labor markets do not function properly, because poor households cannot insure themselves against income fluctuations, and because perverse incentives exist that create a demand for child labor.”<sup>7</sup>

The complexities of the situation are apparent in the pottery factories of Cairo, one of the most hazardous child labor situations which results in multiple generations of nonliterate, non skilled adults. A pilot project at The Center for Studies and Programs of Alternative Development in Cairo was the site of a study that followed 44 child laborers from old Cairo and their families over a period of several years.<sup>8</sup> All of the children worked in the pottery industry in Kum Ghurab. Forty-seven percent of the children were the sole financial providers for the family, and the average family size was seven. Although the fathers were typically the decision-makers in the family, the mothers and children seemed to have a dominant role in determining that the child would work.

This pilot project was modeled on the work of the famous artist Mohamed Mandur, who had been a child laborer. The children were between the ages of six and fifteen and many of their parents had also been child laborers in the same industry. Quite a few of the fathers were disabled at an early age as a result of the employment and, hence, the reason that the family was dependent on the wages of the younger generation.

Half of the children in the study participated in The Center for Studies and Programs of Alternative Development, attending educational and recreational programs one day a week. Ninety percent of the children said they came to the Center to learn. This desire to learn was evident in one child who lived with his brothers and did not have electricity, so he finished his homework on the steps outside the center after it was closed for the night. In addition to literacy classes, the children were given art lessons to develop their skills so as to improve future job potential.

Most children in the study had never enrolled in school. Those, who had, dropped out for economic reasons, and/or because they were not successful in school. Many parents reported that children were mocked by teachers when they did not receive private lessons. (These private lessons not only supplement the meager pay of the teachers, but also indicate the lack of adequate public school instruction). According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace study in the 1999 Economist, 40% of the population of Egypt spend one-sixth of their income on private lessons, but one-quarter still drop out before grade five.<sup>9</sup> The practice by the government of Egypt of guaranteeing employment upon graduation from a college or institution has been discontinued. However, when jobs are available, a diploma is more and more a requirement for even the most basic jobs.

### **Outlook:**

In general, the prospects of a child depend on the families social and economic standing, same as in the past. Families with adequate resources have adapted to the new economic and political environment by traditional means – use of family ties and financial resources. The roles of the children may or may not follow those traditionally assigned to girls and boys. In many places the changing role of women means that girls

have more access to education and a wider range of employment. For children of families with more limited resources, the consequences are more dire than in the past.

It is rare today for a child's world to be limited to his/ her village when they enter the late teens. For example, Table 11 provides some evidence of outside influences on youth in Syria.

**Table 11- Syrian Youth (never married youth 15-24 years old) Characteristics**

<b>indicator</b>	<b>percentage</b>
currently enrolled in school	34%
illiterate	6%
currently working	39%
read newspaper almost everyday	16%
watch television almost everyday	87%
with families in which boys and girls get same treatment	74%
approve consanguineous unions	27%
declared they choose/will choose future spouse	71%
practice any type of sports	25%
declared having good health compared to friends	74%
ask for help from parents when sick (either or both)	89%
currently smoking	18%
ever had alcoholic drinks	5%
ever took any drugs	1%
watch television to fill leisure time during last week	66%
unconditionally approve the use of contraception	50%
mean number of desired children	4
ever heard about AIDS	85%

Syrian Family Health Survey (SFHS) conducted in 2001 4716 males and 3677 females

It seems inevitable that if a child will live in a world larger than a village as an adult, then literacy, employment, and health issues must be resolved. And, these require collaboration on a regional and global level. The prevalence of regional strife and its diversion of resources and its destruction of the environment and infrastructure exacerbate the problems afflicting children.

In his book, "A Child from the Village", Sayyid Qutb makes the point that the responsibility of the child is to restore and maintain the honor of the family at all costs.<sup>10</sup> An obvious (and rather naïve, but not impossible) strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be to:

Refocus the resources that go into maintaining regional strife into preventing military disturbances and developing infrastructure;

Focus the attention of governments and the appropriate non-governmental organizations on goals for a long term sustainable economy and societal structure;

And adjust the strategies as needed so that within a few generations, there would be children who would maintain the honor of their families in a manner that benefits them and society as a whole.



## Notes

1. Bates, Daniel G. and Rassam, Amal. *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001, page 236.
2. Ibid.,236.
3. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs. "Egypt." February 14, 2005), page 3.
4. Ibid., 3.
5. Assaad, Ragui. "The Effect of Child Work on School Enrollment in Egypt." *ERF Forum Newsletter* Vol. 8, No.2 , October 2001)
6. "Defending Human Rights Worldwide." retrieved on February 7, 2005, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/egypt/Egypt01.htm>).
7. (Rifaey, Tonia, with Mohamoud M. Murtada, and Mohamed Abd el-Azeem. "Urban Children and Poverty: Child Labor and Family Dynamics: Case Studies in Old Cairo." *The Center for Studies and Programs of Alternative Development, Egypt 2002*, p.9).
8. Ibid,
9. Ibid.
10. Qutb, Sayyid. *A Child from the Village*. Edited, translated, and with introduction by John Calvert and William Shepard. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004. page 135).

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