

## (Re)defining Family: How is Household Formation Linked to (Shifting) Economic Conditions in the Arab World?

NOTE: THIS PAPER IS VERY PRELIMINARY. DO NOT CITE.

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An examination of household structure is key to understanding economic well-being, since household structure and economic conditions are often inextricably linked. Often single headed and extended family households for example are poorer than nuclear households. Very little recent work has examined changes in household structure in the Arab region, despite the fact that there has been speculation that household and family structures have been shifting in recent years, due to economic and social factors (eg rural to urban and international migration, later and fewer marriages, higher divorce rates, etc.) Using data from Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Egypt, this paper will compare household structure patterns across time and space, with an emphasis on how household formation patterns are linked to employment and poverty patterns. The primary data sources to be analyzed are micro level Household Integrated Economic Surveys (HIES). Except in the case of Lebanon, two years of data, spaced about ten years apart, are available, making it possible to look at how household structure varies both across time and space, within various Arab communities. The data sets contain detailed information on household make-up, as well as information about employment and income, allowing for an analysis of household formation in conjunction with economic status (labor force participation, employment status, sector of employment, household poverty, etc.). The objective of the paper is to shed light not only on recent trends in the Arab world and to answer a very fundamental but unanswered question: are the number of nuclear and single parent households rising as some have hypothesized, and how does this vary across countries, as well as by sex, age, location etc.? In addition the paper will examine how household structure is related to employment conditions. How economic conditions and household make-up are linked is theoretically ambiguous. On the one hand, unemployment and poverty may destabilize households, leading to their dissolution. Conversely high levels of unemployment or poverty may reduce opportunities, in particular for youth and women, thus reducing their ability to set up their own households. An examination of micro level data is needed, in order to answer questions about the link between economic opportunities and household formation, with a focus on how age, education, sex and other individual characteristics interact with labor market outcomes, to shape individuals' and households' economic realities.

## Introduction:

Economic, political and social factors together shape household composition. One of the primary factors of course is culture, since culture generally defines socially acceptable living arrangements. In many societies patriarchal, patrilocal, patrilineal multi-generational households were considered to be the norm until recently. In the Arab world, the assumption has historically been that multiple generations of male relatives typically lived with their wives and children. Intergenerational expectations were clearly gendered, with parents generally helping provide their sons with land or other forms of capital to help them become economic contributors to the household, while daughters were expected to marry out of the family and to live with their in-laws following marriage. As a result sons also had a far greater responsibility when it came to caring for aging parents.

With various economic shifts, including increased urbanization and industrialization, traditional household structures began to break down. Migration not only has reshaped family structures, as children may move away from rural communities in search of employment, but also because one spouse may migrate in search of work leaving the rest of the family behind. In particular, in the 1970s international migration became popular in countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Yemen, with men in particular migrating to the Gulf States. This migration peaked in the 1980s (Baldwin-Edwards 2005) but various forms of internal and external migration continue to the present. As lucrative migration opportunities in the region have diminished, and the demographic boom has reached its peak, rising youth unemployment in much of the region has become a primary concern of policy makers, another phenomenon that has implications for household formation patterns.

Marital traditions also shape household formation. Since marriage is often the event that leads to changes in household formation, changes in marital expectations such as reduced or increased pressure to marry, changes in the expected age of marriage, changes in societal views of divorce, as well as expectations about what an individual's post-marriage household arrangement should consist of may all play a role in shaping household formation. Economic factors may also impact marital decisions, if society frowns on the idea of marriage prior to a certain degree of economic independence. Changes in women's employment options may also play a role in reshaping households. Finally, expectations about who and how to care for the elderly may also shift with time, leading to different household formations.

## Literature review:

Surprisingly few quantitative analyses of contemporary household formation in a third world community context have been carried out. With the exception of South Africa, which has been the subject of a startlingly high number of studies on household formation relative to other countries, (see for example Klasen and Woolard 2007), and a handful of studies of other African countries, economists for example have written very few studies that use large data bases to examine household formation outside of the context of Europe and the US. Sociologists and anthropologists have spent more time trying to understand household dynamics, but many of their studies have been non-

representative, relying on qualitative field work rather than large statistically representational surveys.

As remarked on by Yount and Rashad (2008), studies of Middle Eastern families are particularly sparse. What work has been done has focused primarily on fertility trends and demography more generally. On the issue of household formation, various authors (eg Moghadam 2003, World Bank 2004) assert that household structure, as well as marital trends, have been changing, without providing data or citations to back this claim. What information we do have about family formation in the Middle East is either extremely dated and/or gleaned primarily from examining the work of anthropologists and sociologists, who provide important insights, but may be unable to draw conclusions about national trends, due to their focus on particular communities.

In the 1970s there was some interest in examining the question of whether Arab societies were shifting from a predominantly extended to a more nuclear family structure. Barakat (1985) argues that the “Arab family is not usually extended in the strict sense; it is rare for three or more generations to live together in the same household, (37).” The only data he provides though are for Iraq, where he says the percent of extended households declined from “82 percent in the 1940s to 34 percent in 1975 (37).” He also cites a study by Prothro and Diab, who stated that “the majority of wives interviewed who married in the 1960s never lived with their in-laws (37)” but it is not clear what the scope of that study was.

Another exception is a more recent study of Egypt. Khadr and El-Zeini (2003) use the 1995 Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) to look at household patterns. They found that the percent of extended family households was 19.5 in 1995, with another 5.4 percent of households consisting of a single person. The remainder (75.1 percent) were nuclear households. Single person households were primarily females (63%) over the age of 60 (55.8%), most of whom were widows.

Not only is it important to examine whether households are primarily nuclear or extended, but it is also important to understand marriage patterns in order to get a better sense of household formation and dissolution patterns.

Divorce for example may lead to a higher proportion of female headed households. Interestingly Fargues (2003) points out that divorce rates in the region have actually been declining over the last century, he argues primarily because the legal structure has made it more difficult for men to divorce. (See also Cuno (2009 for a discussion of divorce trends in Egypt.)

Another trend that Fargues remarks is the ‘birth of female celibacy’ (Fargues 2003:262). As documented by Rashad and Osman (2003), changes in laws, rising female education, and rising female employment have been linked to rising age of first marriage. These authors also document the fact that in a number of countries the number of women who never marry is also rising.

My previous research on Palestinian households (Olmsted 2005) suggests that the reasons women do not marry are complex and may involve a shifting of gender norms in a number of ways. On the one hand higher number of women who never marry may be linked to women’s increased ability to have their own careers and become economically independent. Some women with increased employment opportunities may simply be choosing not to marry. But family and demographic pressure may play roles in this outcome as well. As fertility rates decline, for example, parents are less likely to have

sons, and so the expectation for daughters to care for elderly parents may be rise. Higher rates of male migration may also contribute to shifting gender norms. In the case of Palestine, as well as, I suspect, elsewhere in the Middle East, married women are expected to care for their aging in-laws and so are not available to care for their own parents. Thus parents may pressure one of their daughters to remain unmarried, in order to help care for them.

Another factor that may contribute to women remaining unmarried is the educational mismatch between men and women, the higher migration rates of men and the higher propensity for men to marry outside of their community (particularly in the case where they migrate). Although men tend to marry women with equal or lesser amounts of education, women in many Arab countries now have higher college attendance and completion rates than men. Although up to a point education may improve women's marriage prospects, highly educated women may become less marriageable. Such trends are exacerbated by the fact that the more educated men are more likely to migrate in some communities, further reducing the pool of 'eligible' men.

Two issues that are directly relevant to the question of household structure and have received the most attention among scholars studying the Arab world are fertility trends and the problem of youth unemployment. For a long time scholars were puzzled about the slow decline in fertility rates in the Arab world, and various theories were put forth for why this was the case. But in the more recent period, this 'puzzle' has for the most part become a less interesting question, since, as illustrated in Table 1, with a few exceptions, fertility declines while late, were extremely rapid, so that a number of countries in the region are now at the replacement fertility rate.

The problem of youth unemployment is in some sense directly related to fertility trends. Because child and maternal mortality rates declined faster than fertility rates did, the region is now subject to a massive demographic bulge, which is putting pressure on labor markets in a number of Arab countries. At the same time, migration to the Gulf, which for a number of poorer countries in the region had been a release valve, is less willing to serve that function.

As I will argue below, the issues of the fertility transition and youth unemployment are both relevant in asking the question – how has household formation changed in a select number of Arab countries, in recent years, and what role have economic and social factors played in (re)shaping household structures?

#### Data Analysis:

In order to get a better understanding of how household structures vary across time and geographic location, I examine Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) data for Egypt (2000 and 2009), Lebanon (2005), Syria (1996 and 2007) and Yemen (1998 and 2006). Except in the case of Lebanon, two years of data were available, and so I can compare household patterns across time. The HIES have information not only about household characteristics and consumption patterns, but also about many personal characteristics of individual household members, including their age, education level, marital status, employment status, etc.

Because of the detailed consumption and income information, it is possible using these data to construct poverty lines and to examine how poverty and household structure

are tied. In this draft though I will be spending minimal time discussing the poverty results, because the poverty analysis is still very preliminary.

In addition to comparing across time, it is useful to compare across countries, since countries in the region are at differing levels of development. Of particular interest is a comparison of Lebanon and Yemen, which provide two extremes. As indicated in Table 1, Lebanon has very high education levels, and is highly urbanized. Yemen remains fairly rural and still has high rates of illiteracy. Comparisons between Egypt and Syria are also of interest, since in Egypt and Syria are at similar levels of development in terms of urbanization and per capita GDP, although differences in terms of poverty and literacy rates and household formation emerge despite this, suggesting that level of development and level of urbanization are not the only factors determining household formation..

I find considerable differences in household patterns across countries and by sex, but not much variation across time, suggesting that at least in recent years, household structure has remained fairly stable. In a few cases I am able to compare the data I have with previous published studies, that make use of earlier data or that report on related trends, in order to take a longer/more comprehensive view of the question of what factors determine household structure/dynamics.

As can be seen in Table 2, the country with the largest percent of extended family households is Yemen, which remains the most rural and poorest of the four countries being studied. At the other end of the spectrum is Lebanon, which is the most urbanized and has both the highest level of per capita income and literacy rate. Not surprisingly, large differences also are evident if one compares male and female headed households, although the patterns also differ considerably across countries.

Egypt and Syria are somewhere in between Lebanon and Yemen in terms of extended family household rates, with Egypt having a rate of about 15% and very little change during the 10 year period (or even in the past 20 years, since the 1995 data reported by Khadr and El-Zeini (2003 suggest a similar pattern), while Syria is the only country where there appears to be a fairly sharp decline in the percent of extended family households, with a drop from 20 to 12 % between 1996 and 2007. (Yemen and Egypt by contrast show a small rise over time, although the change is so small it most likely is an artifact of the data.)

In Yemen over a third of all households contain three generations, with a small portion of those (3%) containing four generations. Most extended family households are three generation male headed households, but about 5 % are female headed. In Lebanon by contrast only 10% of all households include three generations, and a minute portion of those are larger than three generations. Interestingly a much larger percent (24) are female headed households. In fact, extended family structures are more common among female headed households (15% of female headed households are three generation, while only 8% of male headed households are) in Lebanon, which reflects the fact that women tend to outlive men, so a number of extended family structures include a widowed mother with her children and grandchildren.

Egypt has the highest proportion of female headed households. In 2009 that number was estimated as 16.6%. (The 2000 figures are not discussed here, since a large number of female headed households are coded as couples with children, suggesting some problems with the coding.) This number is somewhat higher than the estimate

provided by the World Bank for 2004, illustrating the degree of inaccuracy inherent in such statistics particularly in terms of the ability to measure female headship. Given that the female headship rate in the US is 12.8% the number for Egypt is fairly high, particularly in a society where the assumption is that conservative gender norms prevail. The majority of female headed households are widows. Most of the remaining households are either extended families with a female head (19%) or households where the husband is a migrant (19%). Divorced and never married women make up considerably smaller proportions of female headed households.

The country with the next largest percent of female headed households is Lebanon, at 14%, although again there appear to be some coding problems, since divorced women show up as by far the largest group of female heads. Yet an examination of one person households reveals over 20,000 widowed women who for some reason do not show up in the data reported in Table 2.

Syria has the third highest rate of female headship, at 9 percent. The distribution in Syria looks very similar to that in Egypt, with most female heads being widows, and with equal portions of the remainder being extended family or male migrant households. While the Egypt data may not be comparable because of coding issues in the 2000 data, the Syrian data do appear fairly consistent across time, and suggest that apart from a small rise in the percent of widowed households and a small drop in the percent of female headed households that are of the extended family type there appears to be very little change over the 10 year period.

Yemen is the country with the lowest rate of female headship, and female headed households where the husband has migrated are far more common in the case of Yemen than the other countries. Since male migration is generally a temporary phenomenon, this suggests that the more permanent type of female headship that is often of concern to policy makers is relatively rare in Yemen. Differences in the household structure between Yemen and the other countries are not that surprising, given that it is a country with relatively high rates of illiteracy, it is considerably poorer, more rural and higher fertility rates continue to prevail.

But it may also be the case that the percent of female headed households is underestimated, particularly in Yemen. A number of previous researchers have argued that cultural norms (both of the respondent and the interviewer) are such that in many cases, if an adult male is present in a household, that person will be identified as the head of household. If this norm remains stronger in a country such as Yemen, that might in part explain the different results being observed in Yemen, although it is also possible that rather than a reporting issue, this really does reflect the fact that Yemen remains a more traditional society, compared to the other three countries to which it is being compared.

It should also be noted that while concerns have been raised about the underreporting of female headship, according to the HIES data, between a third and two thirds of female headed households (depending on the country and the year) in all four countries also report having an adult male present, suggesting that fears that social norms may preclude individuals from naming a female head in cases where an adult male is present may be overstated.

Another type of underreporting is likely also occurring, in the case where either a husband has abandoned a wife and she does not want to admit that fact, or where the

husband is unable or unwilling to support the family, due to drug addiction or other social problems, a phenomenon that in particular has been remarked on in the case of Iran, but likely is also occurring elsewhere as well. For example in Yemen qat consumption contributes to low levels of male productivity, which could in turn mean that women cannot rely on their husbands for economic support, even though they are titularly the household head.

Another pattern of note in these data is the difference in the proportion of households headed by divorced individuals, both across countries and by sex. In all countries a higher proportion of female headed households are headed by divorced women, than is the case among men. This is in part due to the fact that the number of female headed households is generally much smaller than the male headed ones, and therefore divorced households make up a large proportion of female headed households. But it is also true that in all cases except the earlier data for Yemen (1998) the raw number of divorced households headed by women was higher than the number headed by men. This can be explained by the fact that divorced Arab men are far more likely than women to remarry. In fact an examination of the general statistics suggests that the number of divorced women is far higher than the number of divorced men not only in terms of household headship, but also in terms of the overall population, in all four countries. For example, in Lebanon, 73% of all divorced individuals are female. Since divorce, except in the case of polygynous men, who are a very small minority in these four countries, results in the addition of both a male and a female to the ranks of the divorced, this finding provides strong statistical evidence to support the assertion that men are far more likely to remarry than women.

Also not surprising is the fact that the vast majority of widows who head households are female. This is due to multiple reasons: women tend to marry men who are older than them and they also tend to live longer. For this reason, women are far more likely to outlive their spouses. In addition, widowed men, like divorced men, are more likely to remarry than widowed women are. Thus it is no surprise that in Lebanon among widows, 87.8% are women.

Although they only represent a small portion of the total number of households, also of interest are those that consist of either a single head and/or a one person household, because trends in this category may be particularly suggestive of changes in household formation that may be occurring, as well as differences across countries and by sex. Single headed households consist of never married individuals leading households. In all four countries, about half of all single headed households were also one person households. Also of interest is to examine one person households, which consist primarily of individuals who were never married or formerly married, and who presently live alone. Examining the age breakdown of this group is of interest for two reasons. First, a number of one person households consist of elderly individuals who have never married and thus are very unlikely to have children of their own (out of wedlock child birth is highly taboo and therefore very rare in Arab societies). There is considerable evidence (Rashad and Osman 2003) that this group is growing in size and I have argued elsewhere (Olmsted 2005) that this group may be particularly economically vulnerable, in societies where the primary form of old age support is children. The HIES data confirm that the number of never married women is growing and that this group is making up a growing proportion of the one person households. In Yemen for example the percent of

never married women grew from being 3 to 13 % of all female headed one person households over the ten year period being examined. In Syria the change was less stark but still noticeable, with the proportion of never married one person female households rising from 13 to 16%. Since 94% of the Syrian women living alone are over the age of 40, it is likely these women will never marry and will continue living alone throughout their lives.

Another group of one person households consists of widowed and divorced individuals who either did not have children, or who no longer live with their children. But perhaps most importantly in terms of understanding how household formation patterns are changing, is to examine another group, consisting of young people who are living alone, which historically would have been a very unusual phenomenon, particularly for women.

An examination of the Lebanese data is of particular interest, since a far larger proportion of households in Lebanon (5% as opposed to 1% on average in the remaining countries) consist of a single heads. (In contrast, in the US in 2000 25% of household consisted of one person living alone.<sup>1</sup>) Similarly the proportion of one person households is larger (6% versus 5% in Egypt and only 2 percent in Yemen and Syria). In addition, youth make up a far larger proportion of all one person households. For example, while in Egypt only 7% to 10 % (depending on the year) of all one person households are aged 30 or less, in Lebanon 22% fit that category. Also of interest is the fact that while they remain a minority, a number of single women below the age of 30 appear to be living alone, not only in Lebanon, but also in Egypt. In fact, while the percent of one person households run by youth is lower in Egypt, the proportion of those that are female is higher, at 33% (compared to 10% in Lebanon.) In the case of Yemen there may be some coding problems, since 20% of those identified as one person households are also coded as married.<sup>2</sup> so these results may not be reliable. But even in Yemen, which in other ways appears very conservative, 17% of one person households are identified as having a head below the age of 30, with about a third of those being women. Thus Yemen looks in some ways more similar to Egypt, with its relatively large proportion of young females living alone, while in other ways it looks more similar to Syria in the sense that only a small percent of households contain only one person. Traditionally it has been very hard for young women to set up their own households so the fact that in Egypt and Lebanon

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.censusscope.org/us/chart\\_house.html](http://www.censusscope.org/us/chart_house.html)

<sup>2</sup> It is not impossible for a portion of the one person households to consist of married individuals, for a number of reasons. For example, because in Islam marriage is a two part process, involving first the signing of the marriage documents and then the actual consummation of the marriage, which generally occurs when cohabitation begin, it is possible that individuals who have signed their marriage documents, but are not yet cohabitating identify themselves as married. In addition, some of these one person households may be ones where a couple recently married, and where one spouse has migrated for work or educational reasons and therefore was not in residence when the survey was conducted. But whereas in the other countries the number of one person married households was quite small (5 to 8%), in the case of Yemen 20% of all households fit that category, so it is not clear if this is a coding error or a real phenomenon.



and possibly also in Yemen, some women appear to be doing so at a fairly young age suggests a fairly drastic shift in social norms.

In Syria by contrast it remains almost unheard of for young unmarried women to set up their own households, suggesting that despite higher levels of literacy and lower rates of poverty than Egypt, social norms in Syria are more conservative in some ways. About 10% of one person households (13 in total) were below the age of 30 and all but one were men. And yet, in Syria it is also the case that the majority of one person households do consist of women. Almost all of these women though are older widowed women. Widowed women make up 50% of all one person households, with never married men being the second largest category at 17%. Even divorced women are unlikely to live by themselves in Syria. But the other interesting finding is that a number of older Syrian women who never married also live alone. In fact, 16% of all women (and 10% of all individuals) living alone are women over the age of 30 who never married.

Similar trends can be seen in the other countries in the study as well. In Egypt 74% of all one person households are women, of whom 85% are widows. Widowed men and single men by contrast, make up less than 10% (each) of the total number of one person households, while never married women make up 6% of all female one person households, and 5% of all one person households. In Lebanon 55% of all one person households are women, and among women, 23% are never married, while 71% of widowed. By contrast among men 70% of all one person households consist of never married men with again widowed women followed by never married men and then never married women being the three largest categories of one person households.

These data shed light both on the ways that age and gender norms have historically interacted in the context of Arab societies, as well as hinting to changes that are occurring in terms of gender norm expectations. As I (Olmsted 2005), as well as numerous other scholars, have argued elsewhere, patriarchal family structures while defining women as dependents, have also given considerable power to older women. So while it is very unusual to observe young women as household heads, even in the case where they are divorced and widowed, since the cultural expectation is for them to rejoin their parents' household, older women are far more likely to be identified as household heads, even in cases where an adult male is present in the household.

But the data, particularly for Lebanon and Egypt, suggest that youth are increasingly having the chance to set up their own households. While this is far more common among men, with the exception of Syria, it appears to be an increasing option for women as well, suggesting that some easing in gender norms that proscribe close supervision of young females.

In fact this finding is in some ways surprising, particularly in light of a growing literature that argues that economic conditions have precluded youth from transitioning to adulthood. Singerman and others have described what they call a period of 'waithood,' where Arab youth, because of high unemployment and housing shortages, are unable to marry and start their own families. HIES data though suggest that some youth are striking out on their own, not only by marrying and setting up their own households, but also by establishing households independently even in the absence of marriage. It may be true that if economic conditions were more conducive, we would see an even larger portion of youth setting up their own households, so perhaps the problem of 'waithood' means that the transition that often accompanies urbanization and modernization has been slowed by

high unemployment. Still norms do appear to be changing, not only in terms of youth behavior but particularly in terms of young women.

Another interesting question worth exploring relates to the issue of female labor force participation. Again a number of analysts have stated categorically that female headship is rising in the region, although as Table 3 illustrates, the HIES data do not suggest this is the case. In tandem with this assertion, it has also been argued that female employment rates have risen, as pressure has been put on women to increase their economic contribution. Again though it is not clear whether rising female participation rates are linked to economic hardship or other factors.

In fact, one phenomenon worthy of note is that although women head between 8 to 20 percent of all households, even among women household heads, labor force participation remains quite low. Econometric results do suggest that being a female head increases the chances of being a labor market participant in all four countries, but only in Egypt is the difference between heads and non-heads large. While the overall labor force participation rate among all adult women in Egypt in 2005 was 32% (a figure that is considerably higher than the official figures reported by the World Bank, which was 24.5% for 2004), the participation rate among female heads of households was 50% among non-poor households and 57% among poor ones. By contrast, among male headed households the labor participation rate of the male head was 95%.

And Egypt is the case where female heads are the most engaged in the labor market. In Lebanon female heads have a participation rate of only 20%, which is actually lower than the overall female labor force participation rate of 23%. Similarly, among female heads in Syria, labor force participation is around 20%, which is similar to the overall rate of participation for women. Because they are unlikely to work themselves, many female headed households depend on income that comes from non-household members, particularly from their male relatives, suggesting that even when male kin are living elsewhere, they still feel a responsibility to support their female relatives.

Another important finding, which illustrates how vulnerable female household heads are is that even if they do work, they are less likely to be working for wages. Among poor female household heads in Egypt, only about 10% of female heads work for wages, with the majority instead relying on self-employment income. Among non-poor women the rate of working for wages is higher (about 20%) but even among these women, self-employment is the norm. In Syria wage employment is also elusive for poor female household heads, but is more common among non-poor women. Thus female headed households are vulnerable either because they rely primarily on self-employment income, which is likely to be volatile and indicates a lack of access to retirement and other types of benefits that generally accompany wage employment, or, despite being defined as 'heads' of households, they still rely on male kin for their economic well-being.

The finding that so many female headed households are dependent on non-resident males for their primary income source is noteworthy for two reasons. First it points to the vulnerability of these households, which must depend on contributions from non-resident family members. In addition, it is of interest because it raises the question, what, if anything, can changes in household structure tell us about changes in family relationships? Yount and Rashad (2008) argue that rather than assuming that all countries are following the same trajectory in terms of changes in household structure

that were observed with the increase in urbanization and ‘modernization’ in the West, it is worth speculating about whether there may be some similarities, but also some differences in how that transition takes place. In the Arab world, my data suggest, there does seem to be a slow shift towards nuclear households. This shift though shows up more when looking at differing countries (eg Yemen versus Lebanon) rather than in looking at the same countries over a ten year period, suggesting that while a transition in household structures occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, changes in household structure have slowed down in the more recent period.<sup>3</sup>

Also worth noting is that the shift from extended to nuclear households does not necessarily imply an end to support being provided even when family members no longer co-reside. Particularly in the case of female headed households there appears to be a continued reliance on male kin for economic support, although those kin members do not live in the same household.

It is also possible that the transition to more nuclear based households has been stalled precisely because of the problem of youth unemployment, so that if the economic situation in the region were more robust we would have seen more of a shift towards nuclear, as well as one person households. Still, while no further reductions in extended family households has been observed in recent years, there is some evidence that the number of young people setting up their own households, even before marriage, is growing.

#### Conclusion:

The examination of household level data in four Arab communities suggests on the one hand that the level of development/urbanization is tied to the proportion of female to male and nuclear to extended households. Increased income levels, urbanization and literacy rates are linked to declines in the percent of extended family households and a rise in female headed households. On the other hand, looking at the same countries across a ten year period it appears there is quite a bit of consistency across time, with these ratios remaining fairly stable in recent years. This may reflect the fact that there is no dominant social norm concerning the ideal household structure exists. For some the nuclear family may be preferred, while other households continue to favor the extended household structure. In some cases the household structure may not be regarded as a choice, but rather as a necessary economic strategy. But it could also be that individual desires concerning the ideal form of households may have shifted, with youth wanting to set up their own households, but economic realities making it difficult for them to do so. In particular, in light of high rates of youth unemployment, the lack of changes that are being observed when it comes to household structure, may reflect economic realities, rather than individuals’ desired outcomes.

Or the opposite could also be the case – smaller households may be emerging due to migration decisions or changes in marital outcomes, which may or may not be a matter

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<sup>3</sup> It is possible that ten years is too short to observe such changes, but for the US between 1990 and 2000 a number of changes in the composition of household structure are observed indicating that, if changes are in fact occurring, ten years is sufficient time for those to become visible in the data.

of choice. Either way, although the rate of nuclear/one person household formation is not changing quickly, there is some evidence that young men and even to some degree young women are breaking free of their families and setting up their own households even as the age of marriage has been increasingly delayed. There is also evidence of a growing cohort of older individuals, particularly women, who are living alone.

On the issue of the link between household formation and economic well-being, a number of questions have been raised that require further investigation. One is the role that poverty plays in shaping household structure. Although further research needs to be done on the poverty estimates using these data, I argue that on the one hand female households may be particularly vulnerable to poverty, due to their precarious access to wage employment. On the other hand, there is evidence that male kin, even when not in residence continue to support women heads of households. How long this trend will continue though remains, and requires, along with the question of how rising youth unemployment may be affecting household formation, more in-depth research.

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