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Women from the Middle East and North Africa in Europe: Understanding their marriage and family dynamics

Shereen Hussein BSc, MSc, PhD

Research Fellow, Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London, UK

Jill Manthorpe MA, FRSA

Professor of Social Work, Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London, UK

Corresponding author: Dr Shereen Hussein

Social Care Workforce Research Unit

King's College London

Franklin Wilkins Building

150 Stamford Street

London SE1 9NN

E-mail: shereen.hussein@kcl.ac.uk

Tel: 0207 8483834

Women from the Middle East and North Africa in Europe: Understanding their marriage and family dynamics

Abstract:

The aim of this article is to explore what social workers in Europe might need to know about marriage and family dynamics among women from Middle East and North African countries who have moved to Europe. The focus of this article is on husband selection processes and family dynamics after marriage in Egypt, which is used as a case study reflecting culture and norms surrounding marriage in this region. This article reports on the findings of doctoral studies which examined marriage patterns and family dynamics in North Africa and in particular in Egypt where more in-depth data were available. The authors reflect issues surrounding values and process of marriage not only in terms of the implications for practice with social work clients or service users, but also in relation to the potential of women from this region who may join the social care workforce.

Key words: Women, Middle East, Egypt, social care workforce, marriage choices, family dynamics

Introduction:

There are long standing links between the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Europe. Over the last two centuries, populations of different MENA and European countries have moved between each other, as a result of colonial, religious, political, artistic and economic links. At the time being, it is virtually impossible to establish the exact numbers of migrants from the MENA region who live in Europe. However, several sources indicate the existence of sizeable populations from this region in most European countries. In many cases they have migrated due to economical or political forces. Moreover, with the introduction of high skilled immigration schemes in many European countries, it is anticipated that more-skilled workers will move with their families from this region. From another source, in just one year (2002) 41,254 grants of settlement and asylum were offered to families from the Middle-East (including Asian countries other than the Indian sub-continent) (Home Office, 2002) in the UK alone. The numbers of migrants from the MENA region and their families living in Europe may be in the range of hundreds of thousands.

There are several issues arising from population movements for social work and the impact of globalization has been explored in a variety of texts (Dominelli 2004, Williams et al, 1996, Robinson et al, 2003). However, social workers in Europe have little evidence to draw on in working with families from the MENA countries. In particular they have little information about marriage and family formation patterns, which may explain some of the needs and culture of women from these backgrounds. At the same time, better knowledge of culture and family dynamics may help to understand and be able to utilise the resources women possess when dealing with any difficulties.

The aim of this article is to explore what social workers in Europe might need to know about marriage and family dynamics among women from MENA countries. Rather than just seeing this as a simple presentation of the implications for practice with social work clients or service users, it is important to acknowledge that women from North Africa are likely to form growing numbers of the workforce in social care and thus there are human resource and workplace issues to consider for practitioners who are currently or may become colleagues of North African women.

This article reports on the findings of doctoral studies (Hussein, 2002), which examined marriage patterns and family dynamics in North Africa and in particular in Egypt where more in-depth data were available. The focus of this article is on husband selection process and family dynamics after marriage in Egypt. Although the data used in this study is from the last decade, it remains the most up-to-date detailed and nationally available data on marriage choices. The Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 1995 Women's Status Module provides unique, rich and detailed information on husband selection process, women's autonomy, and several indicators about marriage relationships, and many other background variables (El-Zanaty et al, 1996). Moreover, in demography, and in particular nuptiality transitions, a decade is not a substantially long period of time. The article acknowledges and explores evidence of more recent changes in family formation choices through further analysis of the literature.

The experiences of women from Egypt may be slightly, but not significantly, different from that of women from other countries in the Arab region. Thus, they provide an example or a case study to provide some insight into family dynamics within the region. Such information may be helpful in achieving cultural competence for social workers and other professionals working with families from this region as research evidence shows that many migrants from this region abide by their 'home' culture particularly in relation to family formation (Coleman, 2004). This is not to underplay some recent trends such as raising rates of Arab-American intermarriage observed among second generations of Arab-US born (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2002) that may be paralleled in Europe. However, such intermarriages are mainly observed among Arab men and non-Arab women, while for women marriages are still often governed by the 'home' culture influences (Roer-Strier and Ben Ezra, 2006).

Data and Methods

Within the Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) 1995, which is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Women Status Module provides information about married women (including those divorced or widowed). The data cover different topics such as how women have chosen their first (and second, if any) husbands and family dynamics after marriage. These are in addition to general background characteristics. The survey questions were aimed at women who were or who had been married and who were aged 15-49 at the time of the survey. A total of 7,123 women completed the survey, which was filled by interviewers and not self-completed.

This data was analysed within a framework that assumed that marriage patterns reflect both macro and micro variables. Macro variables relate more to the characteristics of the environment women were living in before marriage, such as type of area (urban or rural) and region and its characteristics (such as proportion of educated women within the region and whether the region has a high proportion of a specific ethnic group). The associations between marriage-related characteristics (such as age at marriage, divorce rate and so on) and different women and their families' characteristics were also examined. In particular, how women selected their husbands and how different characteristics affected the selection process were explored. Different multivariate and life table analyses such as logistic regression, multinomial regression, Cox regression and current status life-table models were used and the details of these are available from the authors. These analyses were used to confirm and explore further observations gathered through initial bivariate analyses.

Family Formation:

Arab kinship structure is mostly described as being one of 'patrilineal endogamy' (marrying within a particular group related to the male line) and the existence of parallel cousin marriage is widespread. Marriage and family constitution are essential parts of the lives of Arab men and women. It is generally through marriage and having children that adulthood

and self-satisfaction are achieved, for both men and women (Rugh, 1984 and 1997, Hoodfar, 1997). The MENA region is characterised by the centrality of marriage and childbearing, where marriage is usually not viewed as a partnership between individuals but rather as an association between two families. In such a context, it is likely that the families of potential partners are the ones who make marriage decisions and offer choices of suitable partners. In some countries, and regions within countries, parallel marriages are so common so that a male cousin has the 'right' to marry his father's brother's daughter (Abdelrahman and Morgan, 1987, Bener and Alali, 2004). However, the extent of such practices varies widely between and within countries in the region. For example, women from regions in North Africa which have a large proportion of Barbers, such as some regions of Algeria and Morocco, have different marriage patterns from other women living in different regions within the same country where the Barber population is smaller (Hussein, 2002). The context can determine the range of alternatives considered and influences the ultimate choices of a prospective couple (McNicoll, 1980; Ryder, 1983; Cain, 1985, Bener et al 1996, Joseph 1994). It worth noting that due to the laws that govern marriage in the region, which give men and women different rights, kin and in-group marriages have been regarded as common strategies for protecting women in case their husbands abuse their rights in terms of divorce or polygyny (Rugh, 1984, 1997)

Currently most Arab countries are going through some sort of 'nuptiality transition' from one pattern of marriage to another, and different countries are at different stages of such transition. Some observe that the universality of marriage which characterised the region for many decades is starting to decline (Rashad et al, 2005, Hussein, 2002). Other forms of non-conventional marriages in the Arab world are observed. One form is *muta'a* (temporary marriage), which is practiced in some areas in the region such as the Shi'ites in southern Lebanon and other areas (Hoveyda, 2005), where couples specify in their marriage contract the date upon which the marriage ends. In another emerging form of marriage 'Zawag Urfi', or undocumented marriage, the couple usually make a written declaration stating that the two are married and two witnesses sign it. In most cases, this type of marriage is not declared and kept secret between the partners thus, in case of divorce, wives have no rights to support and sometimes they are unable to prove the 'marriage' did exist. Some anecdotal evidence reports that this form is becoming popular among some groups of educated Egyptian youth (Rashad et al, 2005, Shahine, 2005, Anonymous, 2005). It is suggested that this is due to the increasing cost of marriage and also as a way of young couples achieving more autonomy in their marriage choices, albeit without declaring such choices and actions to their families.

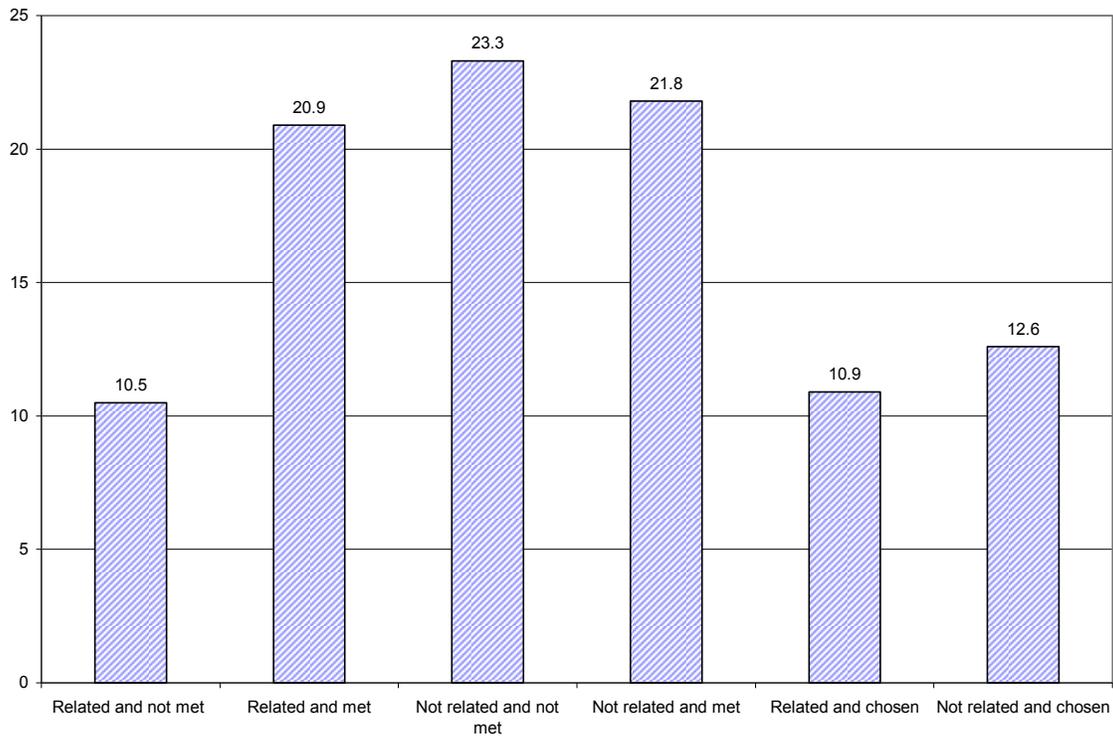
Husband Selection Process

In Egypt, around 41 percent of all women interviewed in the women-status module section of the DHS (7,123 women) reported that they did not know their husbands before their marriage at all. Less than a quarter of women reported 'choosing' their husbands, and over half of them knew their husbands through their family or their husband was a relative or a neighbour. Thus, the dynamics of the 'choices' of this minority usually came within the family context and 87 percent of them had their family's immediate approval.

These results suggest that even for respondents who report choosing their husbands, most probably, their decisions are influenced by their families' opinions.

Using a combination of variables to examine the degree of women's involvement in the selection process, we developed a new variable represented in figure 1. Nearly a quarter of women were not related to and had never met their husbands before marriage while only 13 percent reported choosing non-relative husbands.

Figure 1 Distribution of women by degree of involvement in husband selection (n= 7123) by percentages



Further analysis shows that some groups of women have a considerably different pattern of involvement in husband selection than others. In particular, women who had not been circumcised were significantly more involved in choosing their husbands (201 women). In relation to legality of female circumcision in Egypt, in 1969, a decree by the Minister of Health banned the performance of female circumcision without a clear medical indication, however, few steps were taken to enforce this edict and the practice remained widespread though rarely discussed in public (Toubia, 1995, 1998). In late 1994, the Minister of Health tried to undermine traditional practitioners of female circumcision by passing a decree allowing physicians to conduct the procedure under some circumstances in public health facilities. This action caused local and international controversy and was reversed in 1995 (El-Gibaly et al, 2002). However, in 1997 a court overturned this reversal due to pressure from some Islamic leaders and physicians were allowed again to publicly perform this procedure. Several research studies show that the practice is still

widespread in Egypt and suggest that it persists because of a belief that circumcision may moderate female sexuality, and may assure a girl's marriagability (El-Gibaly et al, 2002). It is worth noting that the prevalence of female circumcision in the Arab region varies widely between and within countries. The procedure is almost negligible in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia while very high (90 percent or over) in Egypt, Sudan and Mauritania (Althaus, 1997, Toubia, 1995). The prevalence is reported to be at least 50 percent in Yemen, and expected to be similar or higher in some areas of Iraq, Jordan and Syria (IRIN, 2005). According to Egypt 1995 DHS findings, the most commonly given reason (58 percent) for supporting the practice was the belief that this was a 'good tradition'. Almost three-quarters of Egyptian women felt that husbands would prefer their wives to undergo the procedure. More than one-third cited cleanliness as a reason, while a smaller number saw it as a way to prevent promiscuity before marriage and unfaithfulness within marriage. In the Egypt DHS 1995 women-status module, around 97 percent of women reported being circumcised and such proportion did not vary much according to their religion.

In relation to husband selection, around 36 percent of women who had not been circumcised were not related to their husbands and reported choosing them. In contrast only 12 percent of those who had been circumcised had such choice. The proportion of women who were married to a relative, irrespective whether they had met previously or chose their husband, is much lower among women who had not been circumcised when compared to those who had been, 17 percent compared to 43 percent.

Almost the same pattern of differences was observed when comparing women whose mothers could read and those with mothers who could not. Around one quarter of women with mothers who could read were not related to and had chosen their husbands, this proportion drops to only 10 percent among those with illiterate mothers. Only 6 percent of women with mothers who could read were related to and had not met their husbands compared to 11 percent among women with mothers who could not read.

Using cohort analyses some changes in the process of husband selection were observed. For example, women who had been married more recently were more likely to have met their eventual husbands and not be related to them. Women who married very young, under 16 years of age, were more likely to be related and never to have met their husband before the wedding than older women. The legal minimum age at marriage for girls in Egypt at the time of survey was 16 years; however, 1634 women reported being married before this age. Women whose mothers had ever worked were significantly more likely to be married to non-relatives and had either met them before marriage or chose them compared to women with mothers who had never worked. Women who were raised in the capital city, another large city or abroad, had significantly higher chances of being more involved in the marriage decision than women who had spent their childhood in the countryside.

Women with any education were more likely to have some degree of involvement in their marriage compared to non-educated women. In particular, those with at least secondary education had much higher chances of marrying non-relatives and of choosing their

husbands. This group was five times more likely to marry non-relatives and meet their husbands before marriage than non-educated women. Similarly, women who had worked before marriage, with some control over their earnings, were more likely to be not related and to have met or have chosen their husbands than those who were related to and had not known their husbands before marriage.

Christian women were significantly more likely to be related and to have not chosen their husbands compared to Muslim women. This might be because Christians are a minority group in Egypt and tend to manage marriages more within the family (around 6 to 10 percent of the Egyptian population are Christians). As Nisan (1991) observes, marriage among Christians is a very important family decision and the views of the Church about marriage are taken seriously.

After the marriage

The women-status module element of the survey also provides information on family dynamics after marriage. We focus on the following eight points to provide a picture of family dynamics:

- **Decision making;** whether the respondent alone or jointly with the spouse has the last word on: the household budget, visits, food, children's education, medical attention for children, and use of family planning methods.
- **Spousal communication;** reflects to what degree a husband regularly discusses different issues with his wife, including events at work, future plans, financial matters, gossip/news, and children's activities.
- **Abuse;** whether women had been beaten; 34.4 percent of women reported being beaten against 65.6 percent who did not.
- **Acceptance of wife beating;** where a women feels that a husband is justified in beating his wife for the following reasons; burning the food, neglecting the children, answering him back, talking to another man, wasting his money, refusing him sex, or any other reason.
- **Gender role;** reflects the degree of a woman's acceptance of traditional gender roles. The variable is a sum of agreements on the following 4 statements: women should be allowed to work, husbands should help at home if a wife has a job, if a wife disagrees with her husband she should speak up; *and* disagreement with the following 3 statements: men and women should not do each other's work, a woman with a full-time job cannot be a good mother, and women unmarried by age 25 with a good job should be ashamed.
- **Freedom of movement;** number of the following places where the women is allowed to go alone: just outside the house, market, health centre, in the neighbourhood for recreation, homes of friends and family.
- **Divorce equality;** reflects the degree to which wives and husbands have identical right to request divorce for different reasons. These reasons are; disrespectful to spouse's family, unable to have children, did not listen/disobedient, talked to other men/women, sexually unfaithful.

- **Access to money;** where respondent can take money without seeking permission or has own money to buy the following items; daily food, food stocks, clothes for self, and medicine.

Women who were surveyed were on average involved, either solely or jointly, in four household related matters out of seven possible. These matters are related to household budget, family visits, food cooked in the household, children's education, medical attention for children, and use of family planning methods. Just over half of the respondents, 52 percent, reported being involved in at least five household matters. Out of five possible topics, namely, events at work, future plans, financial plans, gossip and news, and children's activities, just fewer than half of the wives did not discuss any or discussed only one topic with their husbands, while 18 percent reported discussing regularly at least four of the possible five topics with their husbands. Around 72 percent of the wives were allowed to go to three or more places alone, while 5 percent were not allowed to go anywhere alone. One tenth of women did not agree that men and women have similar rights to seek divorce for similar reasons, and only 12 percent thought that they have similar rights in at least four situations. Only 13 percent of respondents thought that husbands were not supposed to beat their wives at all while 77 percent thought that husbands were justified in beating their wives in some situations. Above one third of women respondents had to seek permission before getting money to buy any household item, on the other hand, a quarter of women had direct access to money to buy any of the four items.

To study the association between the husband selection process and the different inter-spousal relation indices, looking at only first marriages and 6799 women, we categorised each index then used a series of logistic and multinomial regression models. Unsurprisingly, women who had been more involved in the husband selection process, especially women who were not related and had chosen their husbands, were more likely to have better spousal relations using these indicators. Women who were related and had any degree of choice, either met or chosen, were significantly less likely to be beaten than other women. However, the degree of involvement in the husband selection process did not significantly increase the chances of women having high levels of communication with their husbands.

Choosing a relative as a husband does not necessarily imply a higher level of autonomy in a husband selection process. This may suggest that some women report choosing a husband who was a relative but in effect had little or no choice. It could be that a woman was brought up knowing that she would marry her cousin in the context of strong kinship structure, and perhaps over the years she might have accepted such 'choice' and even perceived it as her own.

The analyses reveal that women who had been married longer, irrespective of other characteristics, had better inter-spousal relations than those who had been married more recently (in four years prior to the survey). However, these were more related to 'day-to-day' autonomy, such as direct access to money, freedom of movement and decision making, rather than gender or divorce equality indices. Other research observes similar 'autonomy' among older Arab women (Olmsted, 2005).

Women's education level was one of the main important characteristics associated with better relationships with their husbands. Women with any education, especially those with at least secondary education, were significantly more likely to have better relations than non-educated women, reflecting a well-documented association between education and women's autonomy (Mason, 1987, Dixon-Mueller, 1993, Kishor, 2000, Jejeebhoy 1995). Higher levels of education may disrupt traditional norms governing marriage preferences and identify new options for women. However, the results do not show any significant association between the respondents' education level and their post-marital freedom of movement. Working before marriage, on the other hand, did not show the same strong relationship as education. In fact, women who had worked before marriage but had no control over their earnings were in a worse position than those who had not worked at all regarding domestic violence and acceptance of beating. These results reflect the importance of the nature of work experience, rather than the work experience in itself, on women's status. Not being circumcised, which in itself is a sign of not accepting traditional gender roles by the respondents' parents, significantly reduces the chance of women being beaten after marriage and acceptance of beating. It also improves the acceptance of non-traditional gender roles.

There were almost no differentials between Christians and Muslims regarding inter-spousal relationships when other characteristics controlled for except that Christian women were significantly more likely to have higher involvement in the household decision-making.

Interpretation of the Results

Around one quarter of women in Egypt were married in consanguineous (blood tie kinship) unions, while only 3.6 percent were in polygynous unions (married to husbands with other wives). Marriage is almost universal, 95 percent of women were married by the age of 30. Around a quarter of ever-married women were married before the age of 16 while less than 10 percent married at age 25 or over. In general, the results reflect the existence of more traditional norms of marriage which favour early female marriage, consanguineous unions, and large age gaps between spouses among women living in specific regions within Egypt (Hussien, 2002). Some differences were evident among women from rural areas who were likely to marry at early ages and to marry family members, and were also observed in relation to ethnicity distribution, education and other human development indices in the region where they lived.

Women with higher status (more educated, worked for cash, or were living in urban areas with greater exposure to new ideas) tend to have slightly different marriage patterns than others. They tend to marry relatively later, with lower risks of polygyny, or consanguineous unions. However, female education level has a more pronounced effect on timing of marriage in both Egypt and Algeria than in Tunisia and Morocco (Hussein, 2002).

The effect of other elements was widespread, for example, while women's working experiences reduced their chances of early marriage, such experiences significantly increased their chances of divorce. The negative relationship between female working and prevalence of domestic violence and indeed the acceptance of it can be attributed in part to the traditional roles of women in marriage in the region. Research among Arab-Americans shows similar patterns of acceptance of domestic violence. Kulwicki and Miller (1999) found that 59 percent of a sample of Arab-American women approved of husbands 'slapping' their wives. Arab women are expected to carry out almost all the household and childcare work on their own without any consistent help from their husbands (Haddad, 1988, Roberston et al 2002, UN 2001). These domestic responsibilities are reflected before marriage, where Egyptian girls have much heavier domestic responsibilities than boys regardless of whether they are in education or not (Mensch et al, 2000). Ibrahim and Wassef (2000) observe that these gender-different roles are embedded in Egyptian educational and cultural systems. The female experience of work in the Arab region, in many cases, is regarded as a source of income rather than an empowering experience or as a right for women. Interestingly, similar observations of domestic and female work experience and perceptions are found among some Arab-American populations (Read, 2004). Work experience may over-burden the wife, add to her household responsibilities and may be a major source of disagreement and dissatisfaction between spouses. Such outcomes leave working wives more prone to the risk of divorce and may explain the high prevalence of marriage dissolution among them.

The husband selection process in Egypt is mainly carried out within the family context. Even when women report choosing their husbands themselves, the majority have made such choices within the families' pool of eligible partners and with the immediate approval of their families. These observations confirm the picture of marriage in the Arab region as a partnership between two families rather than two individuals, as has been indicated by many studies (Rugh, 1984 and 1997, Hoodfar, 1997, Abdelrahman & Morgan, 1987, Toubia, 1988, Davis 1993). In a more recent study of Egyptian adolescents' views about future spouses, Mensch and colleagues (2003) note that preferred spousal characteristics reflect strong gender differentials, with girls more likely to express less traditional attitudes. Other recent research indicates that young Egyptian women have high expectations in terms of marital living standards and they seek to achieve this by ensuring substantial support from their families, which in turn reinforces the tradition of high family involvement (Amin and Al-Bassusi, 2004, Mensch et al, 2000, 2003).

There appears to be a group of women with more autonomy who choose to delay their marriage in order to select a suitable partner or to pursue further study or work experience. However, if their marriage is delayed beyond a certain age, 25 years in this case, the family starts to re-enter the partner selection process and the women's involvement diminishes, irrespective of their characteristics. This reflects the social pressures on unmarried women at certain ages, whatever the reasons, including their sexual orientation. Women who married for the first time at ages 22-24 years, rather than those who had married at age 25 or over were the most involved group in the husband selection process. Since the median age at first marriage in Egypt is 19 years; those who

marry at age 22 to 24 years had married relatively later than the average but not very late, as at age 25 or more.

Discussion

The data reported above has implications for social workers in Europe at a number of levels and in a variety of ways. To facilitate an analysis of and reflection upon this huge area we group our discussion into three main areas directed to: social work practitioners supporting women and children from the MENA area who are living in Europe, social services personnel working as employers and in human resources work, social work practitioners working with colleagues from the MENA region. Clearly there are many overlaps and there will be differences between and within EU states, as well as wide diversity between families from the MENA region. Nonetheless, the data reported above suggests that there is much to be learned about women from this area who may be largely invisible because of gender, political and race factors.

Social work practice

The data reported above confirms the importance of marriage and outlines its distinctive traditional structures. These may be largely unfamiliar to social work practitioners, both in revealing the importance of marriage to the wider family and in the nature of choices available to women. Attitudes of *laissez-faire* and patriarchy (Fox Harding, 1997) have often been seen as damaging to children by social workers but mistakenly less applicable to contemporary women in western societies.

In terms of practice there are issues about the ‘acceptance’ of domestic violence and ways in which helping agencies are able to offer support to women and their families who risk severe social dislocation by seeking assistance. Since domestic violence is usually regarded and treated as a ‘family issue’ (Kulwicki and Miller, 1999, Douki et al, 2003), naming behaviour as domestic violence may be outside the expectations of many women and so publicity may need to be developed in ways that respect individuals’ experiences and not devalue their beliefs. Much remain to be known about the best ways to approach Arab families, especially women, and offer help and support, and some learning may stem from efforts to support women of South Asian backgrounds (see Humphreys 1999). There is an evident need to engage in dialogue and use preventive and educational strategies in relation to domestic violence.

Such cultural sensitivity may also be relevant to agencies that offer support to those whose marriages are breaking down or under stress. Women may find that being referred to helping agencies is not something that they would find easy. Publicity that includes stories from women who relate their own experiences may be helpful to women who doubt that such support will be respectful of their identity. Outreach services may be helpful in reaching women who are at risk of isolation and distress, with agencies that in primary care being another possible source of non-stigmatising advice or information. Women’s reliance on their kin for support may be particularly threatened by migration and resent risks of isolation. Social networks around those that are centred on children, such as schools and childcare, may have special value for women who are isolated.

The cultural competence of professionals and of social work agencies is, of course, a matter for training and policies, but these are reflected in the ability of front line professionals to work with individuals with some understanding of the challenges posed when considering what is 'normal' or accepted from different cultures' perspectives (Anis, 2005). These include knowing that women from regions such as the MENA may have ambivalent feelings about aspects of their culture and that migration may permit them to exercise more choices or to value more highly elements of their culture that they find supportive and morally or religiously desirable. In Europe the issues of forced marriages may be one area where cultural norms collide, particularly as there is often misunderstanding of the difference between arranged and forced marriages. Social workers may need to have a clear understanding themselves of the legal position of marriage and what advice they are able to provide for people for whom a forced marriage is threatened (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2004).

When families are already living in settled or established communities it may be easier to identify other families with potential future husbands early on, perhaps when their daughters are still in their teens or younger. The two families may then establish some relationships and arrange any future events. Such relationships are considered to provide some security for a daughter so they can resort to dialogue if any conflict between the spouses occurs. This identification process may not be as easy if a family is no longer in their home country, the selection pool will shrink considerably and one of two things may happen. Either the family may allow their daughters more freedom of choice or they may become more involved and perhaps look for a 'suitable' husband outside the immediate pool of eligible suitors. In the latest scenario the borders between arranged and forced marriage may be crossed. Among small size ethnic groups within Europe some second-generation migrants are reported as arranging inter-ethnic marriages between culturally compatible groups, such as Turks and Moroccans in Belgium (Lievens, 1998).

The data reveals that the more educated a woman, and her mother, the more freedom she has when choosing a husband. Post-migration behaviour may well still depend on educational background. However, the relationships between husband selection and family dynamics with education may not be similar after migration, since different cultural contexts will hold sway. Further research is needed between second-generation migrants from MENA countries to establish how these dynamics work when selecting spouses and whether there is cultural convergence or acculturation. A study among second-generation Arab migrants in London observes that they consistently identify themselves with their 'Arab' culture and its values, with high regard for family traditions (Nagel, 2002).

As with domestic violence this has particular impact on social work concerns about harm. While female genital mutilation (FGM) is unlawful in many EU countries, its comparative rarity in the EU means that most social workers lack practice experience in how to protect children from this and how to work with family members involved. The data reported above provides some indication of the extent of the practice in the MENA region and should alert social workers to the risk of this practice continuing after

migration. More recent data from the Egyptian 2000 DHS shows some progress in terms of percentage of daughters (aged 11-19) of women surveyed who have undergone this procedure (78 percent in 2000 versus 83 percent in 1995) and in the intentions of women surveyed to have their daughters subjected to one of these procedures (31 percent in 2000 versus 38 percent in 1995) (USAID, 2001). Some European countries, such as France, have similar experiences with FGM among African migrants (Gallard, 1995). However, as this article has demonstrated, the prevalence and degree of FGM practiced among many MENA countries vary considerably and should be taken into account.

Employers and human resources issues

The data suggest that a woman's participation in the labour force may be in the context of continued expectations of household and family caring duties and that work may not be experienced as empowering. The perceived importance of caring for her husband and children is often high and may cause stress to those who decide to join the paid workforce. Acceptance of traditional gender roles may curtail women's freedom of movement, and their autonomy as employees. While shortages in the social work and related workforces mean that migrant workers are of growing importance to all social work and associated employers (Hussein and Manthorpe, 2005), the data reported above suggest that if employers provide as much flexibility as they can for female employees to manage the demands of family and childcare and of work this may lead to greater retention or satisfaction. Workplace support for women who may have to take leave for family duties, or who need childcare, may be attractive to migrant female workforces. The workplace may also be an important source of information for women who are isolated from family networks, which, as others have observed, are a key loss on migration for many women (Leon and Dziegielski, 1999). Nonetheless, women migrants may be at particular risk of low status and low paid work, some of which is in social care. The European Women's Lobby (1999) took a gradual interest in such subjects during the 1990s and attempts to influence EU policy makers through a process of lobbying to improve conditions of work for migrant women.

Social work and social care colleagues

Social work is a profession that has generally valued its diversity and sees this as important for work in multicultural and multiracial Europe (Saleebey, 2006). Efforts to be culturally competent have been important for many years in the social work profession, often before other professionals have taken this on (NASW, 2001) although some admit this is long overdue (O'Hagan, 2002). Others argue that a model that acknowledges a lack of competence in cross-cultural understanding (Dean, 2001) might be more realistic currently. The data reported above emphasises that it is important not to stereotype women from MENA regions since there is such variety and because we know little about women's relationship with their culture and values post migration in respect of this region. It therefore suggests that cultural competence needs to accommodate an approach which acknowledges the difficulty of knowing generalities about culture but also demands a questioning approach about whose cultural values we are being introduced to and how these sit with social work values of promoting human rights.

The survey discussed in this article was, of course, conducted in Egypt and reflects the composition of the Egyptian population. Those who migrate to Europe may not comprehensively represent those surveyed. Depending on their reasons for migration they may cluster around some categories identified. For example, highly skilled women migrants will, most probably, reflect the experience of more educated women. In the UK the population born outside the UK is concentrated on the high end and low end of skills' distribution. Those born outside the UK are more likely to be highly qualified, with 19 per cent of working age people holding degrees, compared to 15 per cent among those born in the UK. However, a greater proportion of those born outside the UK have no qualifications (19 per cent compared to 16 per cent) (Haque et al, 2002). This may have implications for social care, which in some cases may be the only work available to those without skills but who possess some experiences in household tasks and care-work.

Conclusion

Population movements impact upon social work across the globe. When talking of migrants into Europe we may tend to see these as families, and less often take the opportunity to think about the position of women and their circumstances. We may be working alongside them or they may be specific or incidental *foci* of social work support services. In whatever capacity, a feminist analysis can help to see women in their environment (Orme, 2002) and to talk to them about their own lives and aspirations. Thinking about issues of race and place helps to broaden the focus from just individual social workers' practice with service users from different cultures to broader issues of migration and the impact this will have on the workforce. Race and culture affect social services agencies (Nybell and Gary, 2004) not simply service user encounters. The analysis discussed here provides important insights into the position of women from the MENA region and constitutes a springboard for developing understanding of what they may bring to the world of social work. Issues such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation will require confident and skilled responses but women may also benefit from skilled and empathic responses as work colleagues as they try to juggle work and family lives and as they deal with the positives and the negatives of migration.

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