



Introduction—Arab Masculinities: Anthropological Reconceptions

Men and Masculinities

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Marcia C. Inhorn¹  and Konstantina Isidoros² 

Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2011 “failed” Arab uprisings, anthropologists have been exploring the ways in which ordinary Arab men have been living through these precarious times, while also attempting to maintain some semblance of their former lives and fundamental humanity. Instead of relying on familiar scholarly tropes of “men in crisis” or “hegemonic masculinity,” anthropologists working in a variety of Arab countries and Western refugee settings have pointed to new conceptualizations of Arab manhood, thereby questioning dominant notions of “traditional” Arab masculinity and patriarchy. “Emergent masculinities” in the Arab world foreground new forms of male agency, as well as the emotional and moral worlds of Arab men living within larger familial, community, and national structures. In this special issue, anthropologists from six different countries explore Arab men’s lives in the post-revolutionary period of refugee crisis. Their cutting-edge anthropological scholarship reveals three pivotal themes: First, Arab masculinity and male breadwinner roles have changed dramatically in the post-revolutionary period, particular in Egypt, where conflicting stories of courage and corruption abound. Second, men who have been forced to flee their home countries, especially Syria, work hard to maintain a sense of masculine responsibility and dignity within stigmatizing refugee conditions. Finally, “doing” masculinity now requires special care and creativity on the part of Arab men. Arab men’s articulations of masculinity in practice, as revealed through

¹ Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

² University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Corresponding Author:

Marcia C. Inhorn, Yale University, 10 Sachem Street, New Haven, CT 06520, USA.

Email: marcia.inhorn@yale.edu

detailed ethnographic accounts, highlight their everyday efforts to be “good men,” as well as “good at being men,” while living through these politically dangerous times.

Keywords

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In the seven years since the 2011 Arab uprisings, the challenges facing Arab men across the Middle East have been profound. They include various forms of war and displacement, political and economic instability, and social upheaval and societal rupture. Indeed, this special issue comes at a time when millions of Arab men, women, and children have been driven from their homes by conflict. In its annual reporting of “10 Conflicts to Watch,” *Foreign Policy* described 2017 as a year in which “the world is entering its most dangerous chapter in decades” (Guéhenno 2017, p.1). Of the ten most serious conflicts facing the world, seven of them were occurring in and around Muslim-majority countries, with the most devastating conflict involving the conjoined Arab nations of Syria and Iraq.

It is fair to say that no other region of the world has suffered so much war and population disruption due to protracted conflict. For example, by 2011, fifteen of the twenty-two Arab League nations—comprising 85 percent of the region’s population—had already suffered from complex emergencies due to protracted conflicts (Mowafi 2011). As a result, by 2011, the Middle East had the largest percentage of migrants in the world, the majority of whom had fled from ongoing conflict, persecution, and political instability by crossing international borders as refugees or by becoming internally displaced persons (IDPs) within their own countries. However, in the aftermath of 2011’s “failed” Arab Spring, those numbers escalated dramatically. In a grim pronouncement on World Refugee Day, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that 65.3 million people were now forcibly displaced in the year 2015, the majority from the Middle Eastern countries of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Conflicts in those countries were responsible for a ten-percent increase in the total number of refugees and IDPs worldwide in 2015—the first year since World War II in which more than 60 million persons worldwide were forcibly displaced.

Furthermore, Arab men, women, and children who have remained in their politically tumultuous home countries have often faced disappearing labor opportunities, high unemployment rates, rampant corruption, military rule, and increasing (although often internalized) rage against governing forces. For ordinary people in many Arab societies, the certainty of daily life has diminished because the second decade of the new millennium has brought with it unprecedented levels of economic, political, and social upheaval.

How have Arab men responded? In 2016, a gender-advocacy, nongovernmental organization called Promundo partnered with United Nations Women to conduct the “International Men and Gender Equality Study in the Middle East and North Africa”

(IMAGES MENA), in collaboration with local research partners in four MENA countries (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine). Based on quantitative and qualitative research with nearly 10,000 men and women aged eighteen to fifty-nine, the study was the first large-scale survey of its kind to assess the lives of Arab men on a comparative basis—as sons, husbands, and fathers; at home and at work; and in public and private life—to better understand how Arab men see their positions as men and to assess their attitudes and actions toward gender equality.

According to the survey, “traditional” attitudes about gender equality still prevail, including among younger generation men. However, the study authors also stressed that at least one-quarter of Arab men surveyed held more “open” and “equitable” views, supporting women’s economic, social, and political equality. Personal histories, family influence, and life circumstances were among the factors that impacted men’s support for gender equality. Perhaps not surprisingly, men with higher incomes, higher education, whose mothers had more education, and whose fathers carried out traditionally feminine household tasks were more likely to hold gender-equitable attitudes. Most interestingly from the standpoint of “care,” the study saw cause for optimism:

On the positive side, there is also evidence for inter-generational cycles of care: although many traditional norms are reinforced at home, fathers can have a powerful role in breaking these norms. Fathers who encouraged daughters to take on non-traditional professions or to work outside the home, or who allowed daughters to choose their husbands, seemed to contribute to the emergence of more empowered women. (Promundo 2017, p.1)

Having said this, the study highlighted the tremendous levels of stress in Arab men’s lives, mainly the challenge of finding paid work and fulfilling the traditional masculine role of a provider in times of economic uncertainty. Unsurprisingly, this was particularly true in those countries affected by conflict. The effects of conflict and unemployment were frequently cited as the main reasons for, or aggravating factors in, men’s depressive symptoms. One-third to one-half of men in the four countries surveyed reported being ashamed to face their families because of their lack of work or income.

Although the study report attempted to highlight positive directions and signs of hope for gender equality across the Middle Eastern region, the Western media—in typical fashion—reported the study results in highly negative terms. For example, the British journal, *The Economist*, led with this nested series of headlines in its May 4, 2017, edition: “Down and out in Cairo and Beirut,” “The sorry state of Arab men,” “They are clinging to the patriarchy for comfort.”

Given these ongoing, stereotypical Western media portrayals, it is important to counter with empirical research showing how real Arab men, under considerable stress from revolution, war, impoverishment, and flight, are responding in unexpected and surprising ways as they continue to enact their roles as sons, fathers,

husbands, and community members. Furthermore, as a result of these new circumstances, Arab men are also taking on a new set of roles as they are forced to become protestors and revolutionaries, refugees and forced migrants.

In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, a number of anthropologists began to examine the ways in which ordinary Arab men were living through this precarious historical moment—worrying about their own welfare, as well as the welfare of their families, communities, and nations—while attempting to maintain some semblance of their former lives and fundamental humanity. Instead of relying on the now-hackneyed scholarly tropes of “men in crisis” or “hegemonic masculinity”—discourses that have been thoroughly analyzed and critiqued for the Middle East by Amar (2011) and Inhorn (2012), respectively—a number of anthropologists working in Arab countries have pointed to new conceptualizations of Arab manhood, ones that question dominant notions of “traditional” Arab masculinity and patriarchy.

In her book, *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East* (2012), Inhorn forwarded the trope of “emergent masculinities” to capture all that is new and transformative in Arab men’s lives, both before and after the 2011 revolutions. Inspired by Marxist scholar Raymond Williams’s (1978) concept of “emergence,” Inhorn argues that the term emergent masculinities—intentionally plural—can be used to embrace historical change and new patterns of masculine practice. Emergent masculinities thus encapsulate individual change over the male life course, change across generations, and social change involving men in transformative processes (e.g., male labor migration, new forms of political protest, the harnessing of social media). In addition, emergent masculinities highlight new forms of male agency, of the kind to be highlighted in this special issue. For example, these include men’s desire to enter into romantically committed relationships before marriage, men’s desires to live in nuclear family residences with their wives and children, men’s struggle to find and furnish their marital homes, men’s use of the latest technologies, from mobile phones to reproductive technologies, and men’s involvement in political and gender equality activism. All of these masculine practices are emerging in the Arab world as will be shown in this special issue. But, they are rarely noticed by scholars or media pundits. Analyzed as emergent and transformative (Inhorn and Wentzell 2011), this understanding of Arab masculinities questions not just the patriarchal dimensions of a mode of social life but foregrounds the changing local and emotional worlds of Arab men within larger social, kinship, and community structures.

The local, social, and emotional worlds of Arab men are similarly highlighted in Ghannam’s (2013) book, *Live and Die Like a Man: Gender Dynamics in Urban Egypt*. Based on more than twenty years of ethnographic research in a low-income neighborhood in northern Cairo, Ghannam shifts the attention away from gender oppression and patriarchy to explore how men are collectively “produced” as gendered subjects. Forwarding the conceptual analytic of “masculine trajectories,” Ghannam traces how masculinity is continuously maintained and reaffirmed by both men and women under changing socioeconomic and political conditions. In the

economic aftermath of Egypt's 2011 revolution, Ghannam shows how adult men struggle daily to provide for their families, often engaging in physically taxing, backbreaking forms of labor to do so. Focusing on the stories of ordinary, working-class Egyptian men, *Live and Die Like a Man* considers the extraordinary efforts that many men make to care for their families but also how the masculine caretaker role has been complicated by the challenges generated by Cairo's rapid urbanization, neoliberal policies, and the current unstable economic and political situation. Ghannam's sensitive study clearly underlines the affective dimensions of men's lives, exposing the vulnerabilities, dependencies, and inner conflicts faced by poor and working-class Egyptian men, particularly as they struggle to put food on the table.

In a similar vein, Naguib (2015) questions the so-called public-private gender divide her book, *Nurturing Masculinities: Men, Food, and Family in Contemporary Egypt*. Based on long-term fieldwork in Egypt among men of a variety of social classes, Naguib explores men's practices of food provision, nurturance, and care in the domestic realm. Egyptian men's practices of food provision are one measure of their lives as active and caring family members. Attention to individual men's aspirations as providers and ideas about masculine fulfillment capture the variety of ways in which Muslim men conduct themselves in a caring, nurturing mode as sons, husbands, fathers, friends, and community members. Developing the concept of "nurturing masculinities," Naguib argues that humanizing ethnographic portrayals of ordinary Arab men render legible the social realities of gender relations, including how the lives of Arab men and women often intersect on a much different, more humane level in relation to care, respect, love, nurturance, and intimacy in domestic life. Furthermore, beyond the domestic sphere, *Nurturing Masculinities* focuses on the tumultuous days of the Egyptian revolution, revealing how male protestors managed to feed and care for one another while occupying and defending Tahrir Square.

As these anthropologists argue in their recent volumes, many Arab men have found themselves to be living in precarious times, especially since the 2011 uprisings and the wars that have followed. Nevertheless, most Arab men still have heartfelt hopes and desires for economic security, political rights, and overall human dignity. In the midst of such life-shaping uncertainty, most Arab men still hope and dream to find love, build families, engage in meaningful employment, and live in political security. Anthropological examination of these emergent, nurturing, masculine life trajectories amid precarity seems extremely important at the present time. In this new millennium, when so many Arab men have been forced to leave their homes, either as migrants or refugees, thick ethnographic description of how Arab masculinities are shaped in transit, as well as in new refugee and resettlement communities across neighboring Middle Eastern and European host countries, is also vital.

To that end, the six articles comprising this special issue on "Arab Masculinities: Anthropological Reconceptions" exemplify cutting-edge, anthropological

scholarship on Arab masculinities, critically reengaging and reconceiving hegemonic discourses on Arab manhood. Each study is based on immersive, ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Arab home countries and diasporic settings. Furthermore, all of these studies are recent, having been carried out since 2011. Thus, they highlight Arab men's responses to the profound social and economic changes occurring during this historical period of heightened uncertainty. Together, these six papers reveal three pivotal, crosscutting themes.

In Part 1, "Masculinity in Revolutionary Times," articles by Mari Norbakk and Carl Rommel examine the lives of Egyptian men during and after Egypt's 2011 "failed" revolution. Norbakk's ethnographic study finds young men reciting their "revolution stories" of danger and courage, interspersed with highly valued joking and humor, to consolidate male friendship and establish shared "masculine capital." These men's stories become reiterated orally at important moments in the male life course, such as during weddings, when speeches given by other men are designed to convey the groom's value and success to the bride. This is especially important now, given that Egypt is in the midst of a postrevolutionary economic depression. In these uncertain times, young men struggle to meet the economic demands of marriage and family building, and the merit of their "revolution stories" has lost ground in a very authoritarian political climate. Still, Egyptian men can reminisce about their youthful revolution. Similar nostalgia for days of yore resurfaces in Carl Rommel's study of Egyptian youth football coaches who must construct new notions of being "productive men" in the revolution's aftermath. Seeking to develop alternative sources of income to stabilize their families, while at the same time avoiding rampant discourses of "corruption," these youth football coaches reminisce about the quotidian pleasures of football in the prerevolutionary period. However, they also find ways to adjust and cope with new realities. Thus, these two articles from postrevolutionary Egypt invite us to rethink old arguments about the "breadwinner" model. In these examples, men who are encountering national economic collapse seek new ways of constructing—verbally and visibly, if not financially—their "manhood" as successful and stable homemakers. These articles also trigger images of regional and geopolitical forces "running away, out of control" in contradistinction to the street-level momentum of Egyptian men literally running through the streets in revolutionary protest. Both authors demonstrate how men endeavor to root themselves in alternative readings of their personal lives and productivity. To be "good at" being a man, not just being a "good man," men's meaningful labor and employment must be allowed.

In Part 2, "Masculinity in Refugee Worlds," we are introduced to Arab men's interventions and compromises as they are forced to leave their national home contexts. Magdalena Suerbaum and Árdís K. Ingvars and Ingólfur V. Gíslason bring insights from male Syrian refugees in Cairo and Athens, respectively, as these refugee men negotiate different spatial temporalities during displacement from home countries and resettlement in host communities that view them ambivalently at best. Suerbaum finds Syrian men in Cairo self-ascribing themselves apart from

both “lazy” Egyptian men and “pitiful” Syrian refugee men in Europe, by trying to stay economically independent from the host government and international aid organizations. Similarly, in Greece, Ingvars and Gíslason observe youthful male Syrian interlocutors differentiating themselves from other refugees by becoming political protestors who gain ground by staging a successful sit-in in front of the Greek parliament building to protest European Union resettlement policies. In both cases, these Syrian men visibly perform their masculine “responsibility,” attempting to communicate a very different image of what it means to be a refugee man. Indeed, it can be argued that in both cases, men are negotiating the contradictory and stigmatizing character of “refugeeness” in order to assert their own ways of reframing forced mobility as a marker of masculine pride and success.

Part 3, “‘Doing’ Masculinity in Precarity,” offers further analytical juxtapositions between adult men and unaccompanied male migrants, both of whom are seeking economic security. In the Basque region of Spain, Karmele Mendoza Pérez and Marta Morgade Salgado capture rare insights into the lives of unaccompanied minors from Morocco who are living in Spain’s juvenile detention centers. These teenagers (fifteen to seventeen years of age) are too young to legally work and thereby fall ambiguously between the lines of economic migrant or asylum seeker within the Spanish state. Navigating precarious migration and legal identity, these youth develop their own ways of “doing masculinity” in the creative, corporeal expressions of fashion, hair, and physical grooming. Choosing bodily esthetics, especially hairstyles that would otherwise be culturally frowned upon back home, is a main way for these unaccompanied youths to reframe their masculinity and experiment with permissible individualities. Moving from self-care to conjugal commitments, Sandra Nasser El-Dine draws attention to a “caring Arab masculinity” in the many ways that young, middle-class Jordanian men sacrifice for love. Material gifts in Jordanian society have come to symbolize material security and are strongly expressed as male commitments when solidifying love and romance. However, in the contemporary period of economic depression, material gifts also become used to convey male success at being “productively caring” within limited financial means.

Taken together, all six of the articles in this special issue point to Arab men’s myriad struggles, but also their articulations of commitment, love, connection, caregiving, and creativity, even under the most trying circumstances. As Middle East scholar Boddy (2007, 14) once wrote, “Studies about women are never only about women.” So it is that studies about men are not only about men. Bringing together the spaces that Arab men inhabit—from different ages, educational and class backgrounds, social locations, and national and diasporic settings—this special issue shows why Arab men’s life concerns and struggles to fulfill their various roles involve complex negotiations of gender—negotiations that both underpin and undermine taken-for-granted assumptions about the omnipresence of Arab patriarchy.

When Arab men are viewed *as men* in detailed ethnographic accounts, their lives are revealed to be much more interesting, complex, diverse, and often completely different from prevailing stereotypes. As shown in this issue, Arab men’s

articulations of masculinity in practice reveal their everyday efforts to be “good men,” and “good at being men,” while, at the same time, responding to the new forms of physical and economic precarity that has shaped—and continues to scar—the Arab region as a whole. Given this particular historical moment, when Arab men’s masculine trajectories are increasingly uncertain but also when dangerous stereotypes of Muslim and Arab men freely circulate round the globe, we have a special scholarly responsibility to engage with these dominant discourses and to deconstruct them. In our view, such humanizing accounts of Arab men’s lives—of the kind featured in this special issue—seem critical, particularly in these politically dangerous times in the Arab world and beyond.

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ORCID iD

Marcia C. Inhorn  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7456-7120>

Konstantina Isidoros  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7791-9611>

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Author Biographies

Marcia C. Inhorn is the William K. Lanman, Jr. Professor of Anthropology and International Affairs in the Department of Anthropology and The Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University. A specialist on Middle Eastern gender, religion, and health, she has conducted research in Egypt, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and Arab America over the past thirty years. She is the author of six books, including *The New Arab Man: Emergent Masculinities, Technologies, and Islam in the Middle East* (Princeton University Press, 2012), and her most recent work, *America's Arab Refugees: Vulnerability and Health on the Margins* (Stanford University Press, 2018). She is the founding editor of the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (JMEWS) and coeditor of the Berghahn Book series on "Fertility, Reproduction, and Sexuality."

Konstantina Isidoros is a lecturer of anthropology for Human Sciences, Research Associate of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology and International Gender Studies Centre and a research fellow of Fertility and Reproduction Studies Group at the University of Oxford. She is a sociocultural anthropologist and conducts research across the Sahara Desert, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania. Her first ethnographic monograph, *Nomads and Nation-Building in the Western Sahara: Gender, Politics and the Sahrawi* (forthcoming, May 2018), and she is engaged in two new anthropological studies on North African men and masculinity.