

Negotiated Masculinities

The Case of Iraqi Refugees in Jordan

Introduction

In this paper, I will be discussing the masculinities of Iraqi refugee men in Jordan following the so-called war of 'liberation'. I will be looking at how political, economic and social changes can influence practices of masculinities and femininities. This paper is based on interviews with Iraqi men and women refugees in Jordan between 2007 and 2008 during my work in a non-governmental organisation called CARE International. The theoretical framework of this paper utilises the work I had done for my PhD on patriarchy and the gender order in the Middle East generally and specifically in Jordan.

I will start the paper with exploring the structural order of the states in the Middle East, which has been referred to by Sharabi (1988) as 'neopatriarchy'. Moreover, I will address prevalent patriarchal gender structures on community and family levels. I argue that there is a 'natural' gender order, within which there are conventional practices of masculinity and femininity that can be multifaceted. I use the word natural in inverted commas to assert that gender roles are socially constructed and are not innate. In other words, gender roles are ascribed to both men and women, and are performances, which are flexible and changeable depending on the context.

However, those practices can be challenged by certain circumstances, which can lead to a negotiation with the overall structure of the gender order, which is in essence patriarchal. I will also demonstrate how the 'doing' of masculinities, within family level patriarchy, can be challenged and negotiated. However, neopatriarchy on state level reinforces those practices. In times of crisis the work of non-governmental organisations increases to help people who are in need especially women as they are considered a vulnerable group. Nevertheless, the paper will look at the limitations of projects implemented by NGOs to 'empower' women and alleviate their situation due to the lack of thorough understanding of social structures that gives power to men.

This paper will try to answer the question; to what extent do political, economic and social changes influence the practices of masculinities and femininities?

Neopatriarchy

It has been established by many scholars that Arab Middle Eastern countries operate as neopatriarchal states. As Sharabi (1988) puts it 'in the neopatriarchal state, unlike liberal or social democratic societies, religion is bound to power and state authority; moreover, the family, rather than the individual, constitutes the universal building block of the community.' In neo-patriarchal states, the head of the state- whether a president or a king- is considered to be the father of the nation. In other words, presidents and kings grant themselves the authority to handle state affairs politically, socially, and economically, by claiming that they are chaperones of the nation, and thus the most capable and entitled to undemocratically make decisions related to 'their' people. This creates a dichotomy of a ruler and a ruled, and an oppressed and an oppressor. However, one has to be careful not to state that this dichotomy is not fixed as neopatriarchal states go through many social, economic and political changes which influence the structure of neopatriarchy. For example, when states in the Middle East are forced to privatise state assets, the neopatriarchal state gradually loses its power over public resources, which become overtaken by private companies. Also, when people demonstrate and protest against governments and/or leaders this can lead to a disturbance in the overall structure. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this dichotomy, and instead it will focus on how the structure of neopatriarchy, which operates at the macro-state-level, allows the recreation and normalisation of such undemocratic patterns on community and family levels, or the micro-level. In other words, how neopatriarchy reinforces the operation of patriarchy on a community and a family level.

Community and Family Patriarchy

Patriarchy as a concept has been very difficult to define. It has been widely used to describe gender oppression. I use Deniz Kandiyoti's definition, as she explains patriarchy as the control of senior men over women and younger men, saying that this control 'is bound up in the incorporation and control of the family by the state' (Kandiyoti, 1988: 278). Deniz Kandiyoti has narrowed down her definition to focus mainly on the Middle East and North Africa and called it 'classical patriarchy', meaning a system of hierarchies, which enforces the superiority of men and seniors, including women, over women and junior men.

Based on my research, I believe that patriarchy is a system of male domination, and I suggest that it is legitimised through structures that hold symbolic meanings attached to genders. These symbolic meanings are socially constructed, and they are learnt and reproduced. The reproduction of symbolic meanings leads to the reproduction of patriarchal structures, which reinforce male domination over women and younger men. Patriarchal gender structure is based on the model that men are the breadwinners and the providers for the family and women are the carers.

Many scholars (Bhachu, 1988; Hartmann, 1981; Joeke, 1987; Vogler, 2005) explain that one of the ways through which women's emancipation can be achieved is by ensuring women's involvement in income generating economic activities. Those authors argue that through income generating activities women can gain independence. However, my research revealed that when women achieve economic independence, the independence remains very limited because structures of patriarchy persist in most cases, even if they operate differently. The materialist approach, which suggests that women's economic independence is very important for their liberation from male dominance, fails to explain the persistence of male domination and gender ideologies, even when women engage in income generating activities and earn money. Phizacklea (1988), for example, follows Hartmann and Cockburn's (1985) definition of patriarchy from a materialist perspective (Phizacklea, 1988). Cockburn uses Hartmann's definition of patriarchy as,

'A set of social relations which has a material base and in which there are hierarchal relations between men and solidarity among them, which enables them in turn to dominate women. The material base of patriarchy is men's control over women's labour power. That control is maintained by excluding women from access to necessary economically productive resources and by restricting women's sexuality' (Cockburn 1985) cited in Phizacklea (1988: 17-18).

This definition, in other words, fails to explain women's subordination, as evidenced in many studies. A study on women and agency in Gaza during the second intifada done by Aitemad Muhanna (2013) mentions poor and vulnerable women obtaining loans from micro-credit programmes to establish small businesses such as home

gardens, poultry farms or grocery shops. She stated that women were encouraged by their jobless husbands to apply for loans from either women's organisations and/or the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East). Those loans were supposed to help women improve their livelihood and to generate money by establishing a business. However, women under such circumstances do not have much of a choice, as poverty was on the rise in Gaza. Unfortunately the implementation of such programs only focus on one approach to improve women's livelihoods, which is providing them with economic means. However, I suggest that this approach does not answer the question of why male dominance is still prevalent despite the fact that women have access to economic resources.

Aitemad's research showed that there has been a division of labour based on gender as men controlled the money and the marketing, and women took care of the actual business. 'Many of the new business initiated by men and funded by loans received by women failed, and instead of generating income, generated serious debt' (Muhanna, 2013:103).

Therefore, many of the women's empowerment programmes, which focus on supporting women financially, fail in leaving a sustainable positive impact on women's lives because they do not take into account the socially constructed gender order, which produces gender hierarchy and produces divisions of labour. The gender order gives the power to men to be the managers of the businesses influences and thus would actually put women in more subordinate positions.

The Feminine-Masculine Binary

Patriarchal structures do not operate separately from the feminine-masculine binary. In other words, patriarchal gender structures produce roles for both men and women, which are masculine and feminine, and are ascribed to people based on the sex they are born into. 'Gender roles can be described as social norms, or rules and standards that dictate different interests, responsibilities, opportunities, limitations, and behaviours for men and women' (Johnson and Repta 2012: 23).

According to the patriarchal gender order, the male role is to be the provider and the breadwinner, whilst the woman is the carer of the household. This gender order does not only produce specific roles, but it also constructs specific practices, behaviours and characteristics to both genders to fulfil their roles. Those binaries are produced and reproduced based on the premise that men and women have specific ascribed gender roles which they should perform. Masculinity exists in light and in opposition to femininity and vice versa; therefore masculinities and femininities' existence is inseparable, as they are socially constructed in opposition to each other, as binaries.

Masculine Performances

Masculinity is a set of practices socially expected to be carried out by cisgender men, cisgender here is used to describe individuals, whose assigned sex at birth matches their gender identity. This does not mean that other groups, such as women, gender-queer people and trans-men, are not capable of performing them. The performance of masculinity is not unitary across classes, cultures and sexualities. It has multiple forms of performances, some of which can also have different levels of access to power. Connell (2006) identifies four kinds of masculinities; hegemonic, subordinated, marginalised and complicit. In this paper, I will only address hegemonic and marginalised masculinities, and will demonstrate how hegemonic practices of masculinities can become marginalised based on the change in the context for the Iraqi refugees in Jordan. I have chosen to discuss hegemonic and marginalised masculinities in this context because Iraqi men practised hegemonic masculinities before they resided in Jordan. However, socioeconomic and political circumstances have influenced men's masculinities to become marginalised, because they no longer can perform their 'natural' gender order and that is the breadwinner and the provider for the family.

Hegemonic masculinities represent the dominant kind and are usually characterised with strength, aggression, courage, independence, and virility. Marginalised masculinities, on the other hand, refer to masculinities practised in the periphery and the margins, such as the case of Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Here it refers specifically to the marginalisation of Iraqi men's masculinities by the state of Jordan, in other

words a marginalisation that is taking place between groups (Cheng, 1999). 'Factors of class, labour market relations, ethnicity and sexuality, as well as individual experience and relations with family and peers, are centrally implicated in the formation of men's identity, in patterns of association and in the categories men find themselves occupying and sometimes also consciously seek to occupy' (Ghoussoub & Sinclair-Webb 2000: Preface).

There have been a few studies (Peteet, 1994) on men's agency and the construction of masculinities in the West Bank. Peteet states that forms of masculinities like manhood, adulthood and honour are (re) constructed in a political context. For example, the systematic structural violence, by Israeli soldiers against Palestinians, creates an agency of resistance within male Palestinian youth, making the marginalised masculinities of Palestinian youth reflected by resistance. This example shows us how men's masculinities are flexible and in constant change depending on the time and space and the context they are in, as they can change from one masculine identity to another. The case of practices of femininity is different, because femininities cannot be hegemonic, as it will be explained in the next section.

Feminine Performances

Femininity in general has been given very little attention in literature (Budgeon, 2013) and similar to masculinity, femininity is also a social construct that is mainly expected to be performed by cisgender women, but does not mean that others such as some men and queergender people cannot perform it. In opposition to masculinity, femininity cannot be hegemonic. Connell (2006) suggests that the dominant form of femininity, termed, as 'emphasised femininity', is the one that is characterised by its subordination to masculinity, which is crucial to the domination of men in societies. In other words, all femininities are constructed as subordinate to masculinities (in particular hegemonic masculinity), and it is through this subordination that gender hegemony and patriarchal gender structures are created and maintained (Connell, 1987). In other words, masculinities and femininities can polarise each other. However, my research shows that masculine and feminine practices can be disturbed according to the context. Even though hegemonic masculinities are dominant and subordinate women, femininities can be disturbed. In other words, the performance of femininities can be challenged in a way, which takes a different form

from its conventional one (Muhanna, 2013). It is also important to note that the practices of femininities vary depending on class, race, sexuality, and age. In other words the performances of femininities take different forms and shapes because of different factors. For example, in the case of Iraqi women refugees, unlike their male partners whose masculinities have become marginalised in the context of Jordan, their femininities have changed, especially in the public sphere, due to the change in their gender role and by becoming the breadwinners of their households. This shift has been unfortunately limited to the public sphere, and did not change practices of hegemonic masculinities inside the household.

Real Disturbances

During my work at Care International, I interviewed many Iraqi refugee men and women to assess their cases and assist them with the provision of basic needs to help them cope with the living conditions in Jordan. These refugees fled Iraq after the war of 'Liberation' in 2003. Many left their lives, families and work to escape death, torture and other forms of violence and violations. Part of our job was to carry out home visits to save them the hassle of coming to the offices. The living conditions were extremely dire, and families used to live in one-bedroom flats, and in some cases we encountered more than one family living in the same small flat. Most refugees were living in the poor eastern parts of the city Amman, which are characterised by high levels of poverty, crime rates and bad infrastructure. Access to water and electricity was not continuous. Some of those families also came from privileged backgrounds in Iraq, and found that their situation had deteriorated after the war and after they fled Iraq.

During our home visits, we started noticing that men were not working, and the women were the ones engaged in income generating activities and who were the breadwinners in the household. This, in itself, constituted a disturbance in the 'natural' gender order. Prior to their flight, the men were the breadwinners and women were the household carers. However, with their move the order changed drastically because of the political and economic situation. Iraqi refugees were not allowed to work in Jordan, and those who were working took on illegal jobs. Women

were mainly the ones seeking work outside the household in Jordan and were, put in their words, 'much more adaptive and flexible' than their partners. However, the types of jobs accessible to women were unskilled such as cleaning houses and offices. In so many ways performances of masculinities and femininities have changed. This demonstrates how women's ascribed gender roles changed and consequently their feminine behaviour has been undermined by the political situation because they had to seek jobs outside of the household and also go to charities for money and resources. The experiences of men were different, as men had to stay at home because they could not seek jobs outside of the house, therefore their conventional gender role, which is the provider has been diminished because of the circumstances, and their hegemonic masculinities have become marginalised.

Marginalised Masculinities

Iraqis in Jordan, generally, faced racism. However, the extent of that was different between men and women, and the marginalisation of men had a different impact that marginalised their masculinities in the public sphere. Iraqi refugees were perceived by the Jordanians as ruining the economy of the country, taking advantage of resources and causing economic inflation in Jordan. Therefore, Iraqi men's masculinities became marginalised, as they were not allowed to work, often harassed by governmental agencies. Men also generally faced harassment on the streets, as they were perceived as a threat to Jordanian society. Many men refused to leave the house because they were scared of detention. Women, on the other hand, were not perceived as threatening as men; therefore, it was easier for them to be more mobile and faced much less harassment by government agencies. This confined men to the private sphere and pushed women into the public sphere for survival.

Iraqi families after their arrival in Jordan received assistance by international NGOs. For example they were provided with a monthly salary, food portions, medical assistance and also legal advice. It was apparent that women were the ones claiming those benefits, as men felt humiliated and insulted because they were not providing for their households, and became dependent on charity for survival. Men felt 'ashamed' because they were not able to perform their 'natural' role by being providers of their families. Women became much more responsible for keeping the

family together and to ensure the survival of the family. Women's roles seemed to become much more 'flexible' as they went out looking for different charitable organisations. This constituted a disturbance in the gender roles assigned to both men and women, and this case demonstrates that masculinities and femininities were influenced by the neopatriarchal Jordanian state.

Neopatriarchy and Iraqi Refugees

The situation of Iraqis in Jordan is extremely precarious as the neopatriarchal Kingdom of Jordan attitude towards Iraqi guests continues to be expressed exclusively in terms of concerns for scarce resources. Iraqi Refugees have also been perceived as a national security threat, due to fear of terrorism, crime and other threats that could spill over from Iraq. This has resulted in leaving the majority of the Iraqis without any legal standings and treating them as 'burden' on the economy. (Chatelard, 2008: para 8).

A study done by the Norwegian Research Institute FaFo in 2007 about the situation of Iraqi refugees in Jordan revealed that most Iraqis who resided in Jordan depended on their savings and transfers from Iraq. The same study also revealed that their situation is really difficult as they were not allowed to work due to the lack of work permits given to Iraqis. During my work at Care International it was evident that those people who had work permits, had acquired them before the war erupted as they were residents in Jordan.

The lack of work permits prevented Iraqi men from working hence hindering them from doing their 'natural' performance of masculinity. The Jordanian neo-patriarchal state influenced the gender order of the Iraqi refugees in Jordan on the family level, in addition to the political situation, which forced them to flee Iraq. The change in the gender order has resulted in domestic violence incidents. When I interviewed Iraqi women refugees they talked about men taking their anger out on their wives and children due to their frustration. Men felt that they were no longer performing their

role as breadwinners, financial providers, and also protectors of the family. This led men to feel that their masculine roles were being undermined and they felt 'weak,' not physically weak, but less of 'men'. One interviewee said,

'My husband became an anxious person after we came to Jordan. He started becoming violent. I know he has a good heart, and he is in distress and you know how difficult it is for men, when they feel they are not fulfilling their duties as husbands.'

Moreover, since women became the ones seeking work outside the house, and became the providers for the family, men started taking their anger out on their wives to enforce their masculinity. In most cases, women justified their husbands' behaviours for the mere fact that men were going through a hard time. When women talked about the domestic violence incidents, they did not mention them because they were complaining, rather they talked about how their men were going through hard times because of the situation, and how they felt extremely sorry for them. Despite the fact that there had been changes in the gender order, because of the reasons mentioned earlier, the structure of gender power persisted. Men exercised power over women despite their 'weak' position, and despite the fact that their masculinities became marginalised by the state.

It is also worth mentioning that patriarchal structures were reinforced by women's 'accommodation' to them because of their legal status in Jordan. Their legal status made them more vulnerable to such power and 'less' resistant to the abuse placed on them by their husbands. Women had no recourse to state support in Jordan, as their immigration status was very precarious. The neopatriarchal state, in this case, reinforced patriarchal gender structures and the masculine-feminine binaries on the family level, and undermined them on the state level. This allowed for the prevalence of the 'natural' gender order in the households and kept women in a subordinate position, with emphasised femininities in their homes.

The neopatriarchal state and the patriarchal family reflect and reinforce each other. They are interdependent variables that work together to shape practices of femininity and masculinity. In other words policies in the state of Jordan towards Iraqis have

put them in a very difficult position and have undermined their 'natural' gender order by not allowing men to work and earn money to provide for the family.

However, it has pushed women to seek illegal income generating activities and/or take charity from different international and local NGOs. It became clear through the interviews conducted that it was much more acceptable for women to go to charities than their husbands because of the stigma behind it for men to be asking for charity, and also it was safer for women to leave their houses as women are considered less 'harmful'. The change in the 'natural' gender order because of political and economic reasons reinforced hegemonic masculinities and emphasised femininities in the private sphere.

NGOs: Women's Empowerment Programmes

The majority of, if not most, projects that were concerned with women's issues and aimed to 'improve', 'develop' and 'change' women's social and economic situation within patriarchal structure have failed in my opinion on so many levels. Those projects overlook the masculine-feminine binary and the 'natural' gender order, and they also fail to change the social, political and economic structure within which women and men are both agents (Petesch, Smulovitz and Walton, 2005).

Kabeer (2001), for instance defines empowerment as 'the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in context where this ability was previously denied to them' (Cited in Malhotra and Schuler, 2005:73). She (2001) talks about two components to achieve empowerment. The first one is the process of change and the second is agency. The process of change to achieve gender equality and equity. The agency means taking into consideration women's voice and views and they should be active agents in the process of change. (Kabeer, 2001). In other words, financial support and financial independence are not enough to 'empower' women and improve their situation. Even if women have access to resources, it does not mean that they have control over them (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005).

Micro-credit programmes were implemented to create temporary and superficial changes in women's lives rather than concrete and sustainable ones. For example, some of these projects provided women with some money to come up with a

business idea, which is usually unsustainable petty trading. Women often used to ask their husbands for permission to get involved in such projects, emphasising their femininity and reinforcing the men's masculinity. So the power was still in the hands of the man, who could make the final decision on whether his wife, daughter or sister could join such projects or not. These projects claimed that they 'empower' women by making them 'independent'. Women's empowerment programmes, which are being implemented now, do not address women's statuses or empower them because first they operate under the larger gender power structure and that is patriarchy and secondly they do not focus on changing the symbolic meanings that ascribe roles to both genders and that is why there is still persistence of patriarchy.

Conclusion

This paper shows that there are prevalent gender structures in the Middle East that can be reinforced by state policies and structures known as neopatriarchy. Moreover, the masculine and feminine binary can take different forms as well and can be negotiated depending on certain political, social and economic circumstances, which can cause 'disturbance' in their practices. This paper showed that masculinities take different forms and can change from one form to another. It has been established that women's roles change because of socioeconomic and political reasons, and also they take on masculine roles to improve their situation and the situation of their families.

For example, there have been changes in femininities in the case of Iraqi women refugees. Their femininities were undermined in the public sphere, as they had to seek help and money to support their families; simultaneously men's masculinities have become marginalised. As for the private sphere, the gender order remained the same, and men practised their hegemonic masculinities and women practised their emphasised femininities. This demonstrates that the practices of masculinities and femininities are contextualised, and also reproduce gender inequality.

NGOs working in the field of women's empowerment do not unfortunately take these theories into consideration when implementing their projects. Instead, they operate within and in parallel with the overall 'natural' gender order, and for that reason they often fail to leave a sustainable social, political and economic impact. Firstly they do

not tackle the structure itself, which places men and women in different hierarchal power position, and secondly, they do not give women agency to voice their views regarding their needs. I would suggest that programs that are implemented by organisations should tackle gender specific issues. In other words, they should address and unpack gender as a concept to challenge the way people view the socially constructed roles of men and women. Moreover, programs that tackle the issue of gender inequality should include men and women in their design as the involvement of both genders is equally important to contest gender hierarchy in any society.

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