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Children Upbringing in MENA Region Subconsciously Fuels Patriarchy

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Submitted to

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I. Overview

An interesting fact about our life as human beings is that we all start and finish it in the same way. While it can be argued that not all humans are born equal, some are richer, some are taller, etc., one thing for sure is that death makes all people equal. However, if all people die equally, why does birth set differences between them? What kind of differences are automatically born with babies? Even though life would be “la vie en rose” if all people were the same since day one in their lives, it is not achievable, and it is the reason social and political hierarchies and fights have long been around. For instance, a baby born in the United States of America directly receives the prestigious American citizenship, and is spared from years of suffering in terms of travelling, education, job applications, etc. Furthermore, a girl born in the seventeenth century was likely to face infanticide seconds after arrival into the world. Many more examples can be given that dictate the automatic privileges received after birth or even while being in the womb such as aristocratic family name, wealth, sex, health, etc. Nevertheless, one of the most important factors that segregates newborns into different lives is the community they arrive at, and the parents they did not choose who will ultimately have full control of their lives for many years to come.

Numerous living organisms produce newborns that are self-sufficient at an extremely young age. These include but are not limited to insects, precocial birds like ducks and chickens, snakes, sharks, and even mammals like guinea pigs. However, it is a well-known fact that human babies are born helpless and require the continuous care of their parents. This allows newborns to become under the complete control of their parents for a long time, and more importantly, moldable into whatever their parents want them to be. All the actions done, and words said by the parents and their direct community, can readily be absorbed and imitated by the children. Therefore, parents’ behavior, which reflect their ideologies and beliefs, become one of the greatest and most attention-worthy reasons for different upbringing of children and the outcomes they later present in their community.

Looking from a broader perspective, talking about community is important because it allows to understand problems that affect many people. A community is made up of people that many times share a certain geographical area and have a sense of unity in norms, customs, identities, religion, etc. Nevertheless, living in a community does not always mean direct inheritance of all its principles and actions, which can in turn result in oppression against people

who do not correspond to what is expected of them. Such oppressive systems are best exemplified by patriarchal systems that legitimize exclusion of gender non-conforming people, migrants, and poor people through policies, organizations, institutions, and social practices. Patriarchy produces and gives power to all forms of violence; it is a deeply rooted system that has a strong set of structures through which it subtly reproduces itself (Gender Equality and Anti-discrimination against Women – List of Issues n.d.). Particularly, looking at the Middle East and North Africa, it is where patriarchy was first developed between 3100 BCE and 600 BCE (Women in the Middle East North African region pushing back against patriarchy – Arab Barometer n.d.). As such, patriarchy is still widespread in MENA region and is represented in political regimes, economic statuses, educational programs, multimedia, work in the public and private spheres, all of which affect households and the growing environment of the children.

In this paper, the forceful actions of parents driven by patriarchal violence during their children's upbringing will not be discussed, but rather, the light will be shed on the daily events that take place in children's life in MENA region that are the result of their parent's subconscious and implicit support of patriarchy. Therefore, let me put forth the following scenario, a young girl wakes up to the smell of her *mother's* delicious cake, calls her quietly, as so not to waken up her father, and asks her to make sure her *full name* is written on her *Arabic* school project before leaving to her *single-sex school*. When she returns home, she finds a *family gathering* is taking place to celebrate the birth of her younger brother, and later watch together their favorite *TV series*.

II. Personal Status Laws

In an attempt to dissect this scenario, personal status law in MENA region, particularly Lebanon, will be discussed first. Children grow up learning to write their father's name and father's family name following their first name, which if the child is the eldest male offspring, is usually after his grandfather's name from his father side. Also, if the parents did not share the same nationality, most likely the child's citizenship will follow that of his father's, with citizenship laws prohibiting women from passing their nationality to their husbands or children in Lebanon. Furthermore, Lebanese women have no option but to change their record number from their father's to their husband's when they want to get married, which is also the case in all MENA region countries. There is no law that allows women to have their own record number, which emphasizes the patriarchal idea of women being property and having to belong to men. This form

of dismissal that women face extends and climaxes in cases of divorce, children's custody problems, and inheritance. The discriminatory impact that such personal status laws have on women have led activists to advocate for civil personal status law. In lights of such biased laws, CEDAW has also called on Lebanon to urgently adopt a unified personal status code (Human Rights Watch Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on Lebanon 2020). Although some people might argue that children carrying their father's family name is a way of bonding and trusting in parents' marriage, I strongly believe that having both your mother's and father's family name would break patriarchal barriers, give more gratitude and sense of presence for the mother, and thus, implicitly prepare children to be less sexist.

III. Educational Systems

Secondly, educational systems largely contribute to children upbringing and can silently implement patriarchal norms. It starts off with having to enroll in single-sex schools because mixing with the other gender is viewed as forbidden for religious and behavioral reasons. In many Arab countries such as Bahrain, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, and Jordan the majority of schools are single-sex schools with Arabic being the first language. Pointing out the importance of language, it too can subtly implement prejudices about gender as research revealed that Arabic language has the highest content of gender sexism among other international languages (Muassomah, Fitriani, and Yurisa 2020). A significant example is the absence of the female version of the words "delegate" and "judge"; both of which represent places where decisions are made. Moreover, some studies show that in gender-segregated schools, girls outperform boys when compared to mixed classrooms (An exception to the gender gap in education n.d.). However, other studies show evidence that single-sex education is more likely to make children sexist, by increasing gender stereotyping and legitimizing institutional sexism (Do single-sex schools make kids sexist? n.d.). Despite arguments of single-sex schools performing better since boys' and girls' brains are different, educated women participating in labor force in MENA region is still very low and I strongly believe that children learning in co-educational schools can better learn how to accept the opposite sex, treat them equally, and combat gender stereotypes both domestically and in workplaces.

IV. Social Settings

Thirdly, many patriarchal incidents take place while in social settings that go unnoticed but yet get observed and saved in children's subconscious. Whenever an Arab family is expecting visitors, the wife is found to be extremely busy preparing food, drinks, and anything it takes to ensure good hospitality. While being very hospitable is not a problem, the work that is done to achieve it is basically taken on by women. This is directly linked to the patriarchal view of women as the "natural carers" who have the necessary skills to feed the family, raise the children, and clean the house; a gender role that has long been imposed on women (Feminist Perspectives on Care Work in the MENA Region - Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation 2020). Next, the conversations that take place when visitors arrive, especially if they are direct relatives, deliver tons of sexist phrases in front of eager-to-learn kids. Various unintentional and traditional phrases include: "you are a woman worth hundreds of men" whenever family wants to cheer their female members and "may we congratulate you with a groom (i.e., a boy)" whenever people know of a pregnancy or delivery incident in the family. In my opinion, the social settings in MENA region are constructed on unintentionally sexist conversations and demonstrate the uttermost outcomes of patriarchy that become idolized by children, and hence, reproduction of patriarchal violence is fostered.

V. Multimedia

Lastly, the patriarchal effects of multimedia children are exposed to, cannot be dismissed. Almost all Arabic TV series picture women being the care workers in the household, the inferior employee in the workplace, and the weakest and most sensitive part of the family's honor. I recall scenes from Syrian series where a woman was killed by her little brother because she was raped, or a woman undergoing a hymenoplasty in hopes of ever being accepted for marriage. Children watching such series can directly understand, and more dangerously, accept the inequalities that our society embraces and proudly translates into family shows. Besides, certain product advertisements like cleaning detergents or cooking items are only targeted towards women. They are simply addressed to women and use solely female version of words; further highlighting the idea that women belong in the kitchen. An inspiring success story that stems from fighting such advertisements is when the 11-year-old Meghan Markle wrote a letter to soap manufacturer Procter & Gamble, civil rights lawyer, news anchor, and Hillary Clinton complaining about a sexist P&G

soap advertisement, which was later changed to address “people” rather than just “women” (11-year-old Meghan Markle wrote a letter to change a sexist advert. The company listened | indy100 | indy100 n.d.). This incident proves that children can subconsciously learn sexism, choose to fight it, and be heard as young activists.

VI. Conclusion

All in all, there are countless proofs of children being subjected to patriarchy from a very young age and being affected by it for their entire lives. In a 2017 study (Paynter 2017), children were asked whether they agreed with several sexist statements like “boys are smarter than girls”, and the results were that majority of boys believed they are, and more shockingly, more than a quarter of the girls agreed too. Childhood is just such an incredibly substantial stage in humans life that parental actions stemming from patriarchal views can result in unintentional reproduction of the system. It is then quite imperative to look closely at the parents actions and offerings that leave children prone to a daily dose of subconscious patriarchy. For instance, a 2018 study (Connley 2018) found that a woman’s salary and participation in the workplace is severely shaped by the sexism she encountered during childhood. Hence, the upbringing of children by unvigilant parents can expose their kids to patriarchal violence and allow the non-stop suffer of its outcomes.

Although all these acts are influenced and strengthened by several laws or regulations put by patriarchal systems, we must understand that ‘we’ as citizens and individuals, are the ones who make up these systems and give them the power to rule. Hence, it is crucial to focus on limiting sexist and violent acts that fuel patriarchy at an individual level, especially around children since they do impact them greatly.

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