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Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Women and Misyar Marriage: Evolution and Progress in the Arabian Gulf

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Abstract

Women's status continues to undergo rapid evolution in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). The modernization policies sweeping the energy-rich region has resulted in unintended social and gender imbalances. Partly due to the wealth distribution policies and the vast influx of foreign labor into the GCC, the region's indigenous people are facing several challenges as they adapt to their surrounding environment. Improvements to women's education have resulted in an imbalance of highly educated women relative to their male counterparts in the region, tipping the scales of gender roles. While both men and women accept predominantly paternal values, the strides in women's status may be contradictory to traditions, customs, and expectations. As a result, high divorce rates plague GCC citizens, while misyar marriage reemerges as a temporary antidote.

Keywords: Women, Islam, Muslim Women, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Arabian Gulf, Misyar, Marriage, Legitimacy, Education, Progress, Women's Issues.

Introduction

This paper will analyze the evolution of progress of women's status in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), the forces driving the evolution, and its effects. The Gulf Co-Operation Council (GCC) is a union of six countries: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, and Bahrain. These countries are neighboring Arab countries along the Persian Gulf (referred to as the "Arabian Gulf" within these countries). Due to their similarities, they share a common language (Arabic), culture, religion (Islam), Islamic civilization, and a recent history of British colonization**.**

Another similarity amongst GCC countries is that they are predominantly rich in fossil fuels. Four of them are Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) members with the exception of Bahrain and Oman. The GCC OPEC members possess over 60% of the world's proven energy reserves, thereby depending on energy revenues for 50% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Ahmed 2010). Thus, urbanization within these traditionally nomadic societies is fuelled by energy wealth (Moss, Watson, & Zinyowera 1998, p. 246).

The manner in which modernization policies have affected the role of women will be analyzed in this paper as it poses intriguing possibilities. High divorce rates in the

region will be rationalized through advances in women's education and status in the GCC. Further, the manner that GCC society absorbs the changing tides of women's status will be analyzed as well. In particular, this paper will examine the re-emergence of a temporary marriage contract, "misyar", otherwise defined as "ambulant marriage" (Arabi 2001, p. 147), within this context.

Evolution, Progress, and Development

The status of women in the GCC is changing as swiftly as quicksand due to modernization propelled by oil revenues. As a whole, (OPEC and non-OPEC members) the GCC contains about 45% and 20% of the world's oil and gas reserves respectively (Hartley 2009). Consequently, GCC governments have undertaken wide scale, strategic, top-down reform in efforts to transport citizens through the rapid modernization of their national economies. Nationalistic labor policies embodied in Saudization in Saudi Arabia, Qatarization in Qatar, Emiratization in the UAE, and their equivalents in other GCC states serve the purpose of educating, training, and building national citizens' capacities to replace the high-level jobs of foreigners in each respective country. Considering that almost 50% of the region's population is estimated to be expatriate (Kawach 2010), with foreigners dominating over 70% of Qatar's (PPC 2009) and neighboring UAE's populations, nationalistic labor policies are pertinent in order to address the GCC's overwhelming population imbalance.

However, the trickle-down effect of such inorganic policies is tipping the scales of socio-economic balances. Particularly, women's status in the GCC is drastically transformed, to the extent that societal norms regarding the role of women are severely altered. Such generational gaps can be illustrated when comparing the roles of women within the same family. While GCC women in the Silent Generation (born in the mid - 1920s to mid-40s) were widely illiterate and accustomed to subordinate family status, their daughters born in the GCC-Baby generation (mid-late 40s to mid-60s) were on the receiving end of major civil and personal rights. Qatar can serve as a case study for GCC women's increasing civil rights, as the country's new Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar in 2004 (Article 35) equated women's rights with men.

It is worthwhile to note that while women's constitutional rights are equal to men in Qatar, Kuwait (Kuwait Constitution Article 29), UAE (UAE Constitution Article 25), Bahrain (Bahraini Constitution Article 4), Oman (Oman Basic Law Article 17), the Saudi Arabian Constitution guarantees "human rights in accordance with Shari'ah[2]" (Article 26). Even so, in practice, women in the other GCC countries are still routinely denied equal rights to men. For instance, in order for Qatari women to obtain drivers' licenses or travel abroad on their own, they must present the Ministry of Interior with a male guardian's written permission, which must be annually renewed (as a maximum duration of time). As for driving licenses, in addition to male guardianship, Qatari women must establish that their living situation requires them to drive due to school, work, and/or lack of resources to hire male chauffeurs. Women in Saudi Arabia do not have access to those liberties with or without male permission, as the country's application of Shari'ah law prohibits women from driving, travelling, marrying, or working without male guardianship.

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[2] Shari'ah refers to Islamic jurisprudence.

However, progress is evident and hopeful in Qatar and neighbouring Kuwait. In Qatar, women were granted to right to run in and vote for municipal elections in 1999. Although none of the women won that year, in April 2003, one woman won the election and signals a sign of change in the country (Bahry & Marr 2005). In Kuwait, women gained their rights to political participation including voting and running for parliament in 2005. Four women won parliamentary seats in 2009, thereby representing 8% of Kuwait's National Parliament (UNDP 2010, p. 13).

Having established that women's rights have yet to be brought into complete equality with men in the GCC, it is important to recognize that progressive steps toward liberalization are being made in the region. Critics of GCC policies' toward achieving equality for women fail to realize that swift progress has been made in good faith. Although limits exist, they are largely due to social incapacities to absorb such vast changes so quickly. The unintended socio-economic imbalances posed by top-down reform regarding the status of women are resulting in jolting phenomena that must be addressed not only be policymakers but by the people themselves. These social trends will be addressed in the following sections.

Divorce Rates

Divorce rates in the GCC and Arab world as a whole are alarmingly high and reportedly on the rise (Permanent Population Committee (PPC) 2009). According to Qatar Statistics Authority (QSA 2009), over 80 divorces amongst Qatari citizens took place on a monthly basis in 2009. As a result, Qatar's divorce rate leapt from around 4% in 1989 to over 30% by 2009. According to the latest statistics available from all countries, Qatar's divorce rate is ranked the highest in the Arab and GCC regions with the exception of Kuwait (PPC 2009). The fact that such a small country with a population of around 1.6 million people (QSA 2011) is experiencing such a steep divorce rate is a source of much trepidation. Most worrisome is that 67% of the divorces in Qatar are of citizens, which is a figure up to 17 times higher than the divorce rate amongst foreigners in Qatar.

Qatar's General Secretariat for Development Planning (GSDP) attributes this stark phenomenon to the advances made in women's civil liberties, educational capacities, and financial capabilities. What should be added to that list are social norms surrounding marriage and courtship, including engagement practices and social expectations of married life.

Social Norms of Courtship and Marriage

In order to understand the reasons behind these startling social statistics, the concept of "marriage" in a GCC sense must be culturally defined, upon which the label of "divorce" would apply differently. In terms of legitimacy, the majority of Muslim scholars agree that marriage is the key to stability, chastity, and long-term bliss. Moreover, marriage is seen as a lifelong commitment. That perception of marriage is evident in its contractual definitions across Arab-Muslim countries.

In his book, *The Status of Women Under Islamic Law and Modern Islamic Legislation*, Jamal J. Nasir (2009, pp. 32-33) investigates definitions of marriage

governed by Shariah law in the following countries, and these are his findings. Marriage is:

- Kuwait: "a contract between a man and a woman who can lawfully be wed to him to the end of tranquility, chastity, and the strength of the nation."
- Algeria: for "the formation of a family based on love, compassion, co-operation, chastity of the two spouses, and the preservation of legitimate lineage."
- Yemen: "an association…[with] the objective… to build a family based on good companionship."
- Oman: "a lawful contract between a man and a woman, the objective thereof being chastity, and the creation of a stable family, under the guardianship of the husband, on bases to guarantee for them the discharge of the burdens thereof with affection and compassion."

Typically, the modern-day Qatari couple undergoes an arranged marriage under which the groom's female relatives select a potential bride from a similar social standing. Upon her and her family's consent, and even before the bride and groom glimpse each other (sometimes not even by photograph), marriage papers are drawn (El-Islam 1974, p. 47). Legally, the couple is now married, even before ever setting eyes on each other, let alone holding a wedding reception. It is only then that the families feel comfortable enough in the eyes of society to introduce the now, legally married, couple, and let them share a few moments - under the oversight of family members. A lucky few will share supervised telephone conversations, and the more liberal of them will go on dinner excursions without guardians present. This process continues as the bride and groom live separately until the date of the wedding, which is usually 8-10 months later depending on the availability of highly demanded wedding halls (*The Peninsula* 2007).
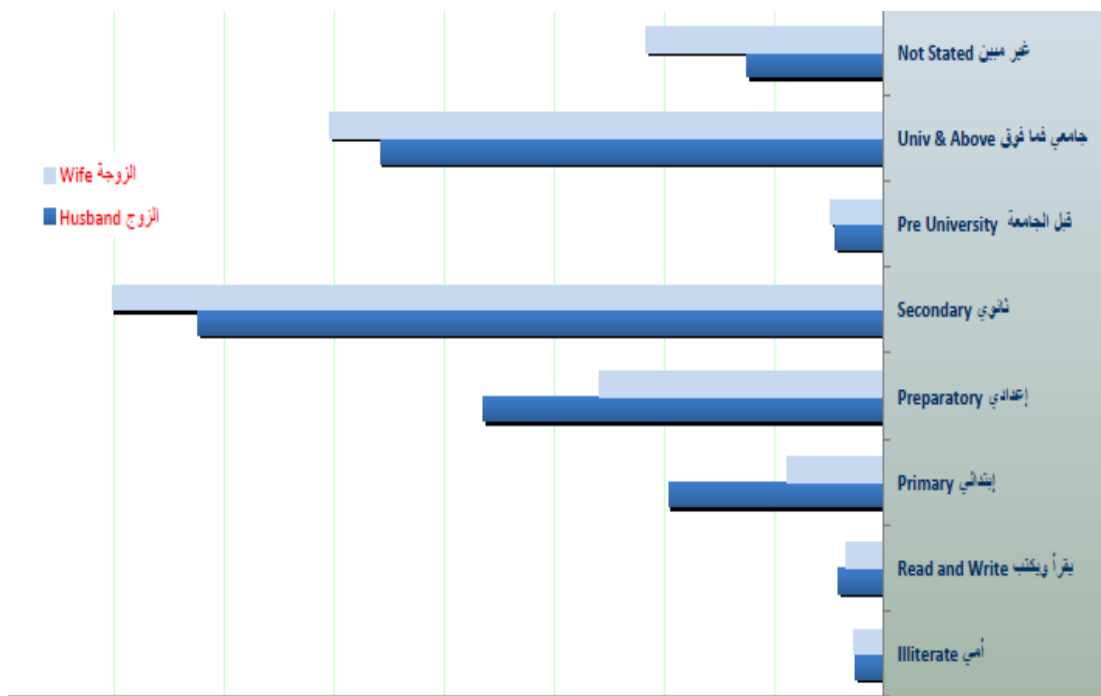
It should come as no surprise, then, after the wedding, newlyweds catch one another by surprise. Suddenly, marriages are broken apart even before they begin. While they are labelled as "divorce" in a technical sense, in most other countries they would fulfil the criteria of annulment since many of the marriages may have been merely documented on paper but not consummated, they can be likened to docile versions of other societies' courting rituals. There are several reasons that may be behind this incompatibility, and will be reviewed within the subsections below.

The foremost reason for young couple's incompatibility is educational disparity. One of the most striking misconceptions about Arab women is that they are less educated than men. This is certainly not the case, especially not in Qatar where Qatari female graduates from Qatar University actually outnumber their male counterparts (Government of Qatar Planning Council 2007). This may be due to the fact that Qatari men are provided with the social capacity to study abroad, therefore earning their degrees from foreign institutions rather than Qatar University. According to the General Secretariat for Development Planning (GSDP 2009, p. 8), about 550 Qataris are pursuing higher education outside of Qatar, and 60% of them are men. Qatari women, on the other hand, traditionally have very limited socially acceptable prospects for their futures that are exclusive of marriage. Within recent years, education has become the leading one of them.

To illustrate, according to the General Secretariat for Development Planning (PPC 2009), the majority of married Qatari women and men in 1986 were high school graduates (32.5% and 27.2% respectively). Meanwhile, in the same year, 21.1% of married Qatari men were university graduates compared to less than 9% of women. By 2004, about 44% of married Qatari women obtained university level education, contrasted to only 33% of men in the same year (2009, p. 18).

Since public education is gender-segregated, young women are encouraged to devote time for education and succeed academically. Qatar University, in this case, is perceived as a safe haven for single women to spend their time, as well as for married women whose husbands forbid them from work. Although there are six American universities with campuses in Qatar's Education City (Texas A&M, Georgetown School of Foreign Service, Carnegie Mellon, Cornell Weill Medical School, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Northwestern University), the coeducational system of those universities is slowly gaining traction as an academic avenue for Qatari women. Currently, female university students at Education City are almost three times higher than men (GSDP 2009, p. 8). As illustrated in the graph below, Qatar Statistics Authority (QSA 2008) figures suggest that the majority of divorced women in Qatar obtained higher levels of education than the men divorced in the same year.

Divorces by Educational Level of Men and Women in Qatar (QSA 2008)

The result is intellectual incompatibility between Qatari women and men. According to the Qatar Statistics Authority in 2008, the educational status of the majority of married Qatari men was at secondary school level, while the educational status of the

majority of the women that they married was at university level or above (QSA 2008). Considering that arranged marriages form the majority of unions, these differences between the educational levels of men and women are only discovered after the event. Emirati women (from the UAE) experience a similar educational imbalance as "the high proportion of Emirati women who are college-educated [are] less inclined to marry young Emirati men schooled in relatively patriarchal conceptualizations of family and marriage" (Hasso 2009, p.9).

Financially, women are traditionally dependent upon men as the main breadwinners, however, despite that their educational status is often below that of women's. Such is evidenced by the majority of Qatari men's occupations in 2008 (almost 90%) were clerks while about 86% of women were unemployed (QSA 2008, p. 103). This illustrates that the financial burden of marriage life is mostly on the Qatari men's shoulders. Social norms, again, are the likely culprit for this trend. While Qatari men are expected to provide for their families, dual-income households are more practical for facing rising living costs. World Bank figures indicate that living costs spiked in Qatar during 2008 as the economy's inflation rate stood at 15% (International Monetary Fund as cited in World Bank 2008). However, the majority of Qatari women were unemployed during that year, indicated either that they do not want to work due to social expectations of male support or that their husbands do not allow them to work.

Dependence on Social Welfare

The most overlooked factor, however, is that the all-encompassing social benefits extended to citizens by their governments may have stifled the ambitions of male citizens. GCC countries' welfare policies provide abundant resources to citizens, leaving very little to the imagination. From subsidized food and gas, to free electricity, water, healthcare, and education (Brown 2007), to nationalistic labor policies (Qatarization 2010), business ownership laws favoring local citizens, and citizens' sole rights to publicly traded stocks (U.S. Dept. of State 2010).

A contemporary illustration of citizens' dependence upon the state is embodied within the Saudi Arabian government's announcement of plan to write-off Saudi citizen's public and private debt (Ferris-Lay 2010). Consumer debt write-offs are not new to the GCC region. In 2007, the Kuwaiti government initiated a "debt forgiveness scheme" for its citizens, writing off their debt, which exceeded $1 billion (U.S. Dept. of State 2010). Consequently, the dependency relationship between Kuwaiti citizens and their government was also prevalent in January 2010 when Kuwait's National Assembly voted in favour of the government writing off 6.7 billion dinars ($23 billion) of consumer debt (Saeid 2009). Kuwait's Parliament, however, rejected the bailout, stating that it would destabilize national banks and open exposure to legal violations (Trade Arabia 2010). The debt write-off debate was ignited in Qatar, next door neighbour to Saudi Arabia, where an online survey indicates that almost 75% of the respondents were, not surprisingly, in favor of debt write-offs in Qatar (Kippreport 2010).

While female citizens enjoy those public goods they are faced with social expectations to adhere to a paternalistic society. Also, some of the government's, such as Oman, Qatar, and the UAE have instated policies geared toward empowering women. While women still have the same social benefits as their male counterparts, they are encouraged to become more active social players. There is also something to be said for

the notion of overcoming obstacles. For women, driving, working, or even attending co-gender universities domestically or abroad presents an obstacle to be overcome. For men, however, the challenge does not exist since those opportunities are already available to them.

Rising Costs of Weddings

Inflation in the GCC has been blamed as the main culprit for rising wedding and marriage costs amongst the region's citizens, although social expectations of elaborate wedding parties shoulder a heavy portion of those costs. In 2005, inflation was above 26% and almost 20% in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E. respectively, and although it fell over the next four years, inflation stood at 9%, 18%, and 20% in those countries by 2009 (World Bank 2009).

There is a lack of scholarly data regarding the costs of marriages and wedding in the GCC, however, a report on marriages in the UAE estimates the cost of an Emirati wedding at about 300,000 Arab Emirates Dirhams (AED) or about $82,000 USD (Khaleejtimes 2006). A study on neighbouring Egypt lends an indication on how the wedding costs are broken down. According to Diane Singerman (2007), the cost of dowry, jewellery, and the wedding party combined represents 20% of marriage costs, which are the second highest components of marriage costs after housing, which stands at 32% (p.15). The report notes that about 70% of marriage costs are borne by the groom (p. 13).

News articles in Qatar and Saudi Arabia verify that rising expenses related to wedding celebrations lend to discouraging citizens from marriage. In Qatar, hikes in wedding halls combined with increased housing costs have been blamed for discouraging youth from proceeding with marriage (*The Peninsula* 2007). Given the economic, educational, social, and financial pressure on men and women in the GCC, an alternative marriage contract has surfaced as a temporary solution to the pandemonium, *misyar marriage*, which will be discussed within the next section.

Misyar Marriage: a Conceptualization

The combination of the previously mentioned factors – education, high divorce rates, social expectations of marriage, rising wedding costs, and disparity between men and women – may have lent to the reemergence of an early-Islamic marriage contract; misyar marriage. First, misyar must be defined. Misyar marriage is oftentimes considered a derivative of mut'a marriage, the former defined as a "travelling marriage" and the latter a "temporary marriage" (Nasir 2009). In both instances, the marriage is instituted for the mere purpose of physical pleasure, neglecting the other elements of an Islamic marriage contract which were outlined earlier in this paper, most significantly cohabitation of husband and wife, long-term commitment, and the intention of procreating. The difference between the two types of marriages lies in the time constraint placed on the union. While in misyar marriage the time limit is implied though not stated in the marriage contract, mut'a, on the other hand, is a marriage clearly defining the duration of the relationship within the contract (Nasir 2009). As such, Shi'ites deem mut'a marriage religiously permissible but Sunnis take the opposite view mainly due to the time limit placed on the arrangement (Nasir 2009).

"Misyar" is a loaded term, carrying several different meanings depending on the narrator's frame of reference. The term's literal translation into English from Arabic is, "travelling marriage". According to Oussama Arabi, the Shariah (legal Islamic) definition of misyar is "ambulant marriage" (2001, p. 147). Arabi describes misyar as a "strikingly novel configuration, where human sexuality, economic status, and polygamous culture come together to forge new legal knowledge" (p. 148).

Misyar marriage, in its legal definition, falls short of the traditional obligations of Islamic marriage, including co-habitation of husband and wife, and welfare provisions from husband to wife (Arabi 2001, p. 148). To simplify the term, misyar is a short-term marriage made both religiously and legally permissible in Islamic countries.

As a practice, misyar has been embraced by some and rejected by others, notably women's rights activists. Its definitions on the street range from discreet, tongue-in-cheek, to unguardedly disdainful. Such variations in definitions are observable in the following explanations of misyar: "easy and temporary marriage" (Ibahrine 2008), a "no-strings marriage of convenience" (Ahmad 2009), "legal prostitution" (Jabarti 2005), and "sex tourism" (el-Gawhary 1995). Disparities in the conceptualization of misyar marriage depend on the perceived morality of the arrangement. While some argue for its religious legitimacy as an institution of marriage, others (such as GCC feminist groups) judge the arrangement according to the intentions of those consenting to the union.

With misyar, Islamic society may be far happier with consensual sexual relations as long as those actions are legitimized by marriage. Therefore, misyar may be seen as providing a utilitarian approach to satiating the sexual desires of Muslim men and women. This utilitarian perception of misyar marriage is supported by Syed Ahmad (2009) who affirms that misyar marriage is "popular... in a society where extramarital [or] premarital sex is a cardinal sin [because] it legitimizes sexual relations outside the framework of conventional marriage".

Social Function of Misyar Marriage

Misyar marriage cannot be discussed without mention of the Egyptian Islamic scholar molding the moral framework of Qatar, Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, a leading authority, one of the few remaining figures of Islamic scholarship, who states that misyar marriage is religiously legitimate. He adds that "there is no doubt that such marriage may be somehow socially unacceptable, but there is a big difference between what is Islamically valid and what is socially acceptable," indicating that as long as both parties accept the terms of the marriage contract then they are legally married in the eyes of Allah (Al-Qaradawi 2006).

The utilitarian aspects of misyar marriage are also highlighted by Sheikh Dr. Ahmed Al-Kubaisi, an Islamic scholar based in the United Arab Emirates who broadcasts his Friday sermons from Dubai to an audience of about 20 million people (McFarlane 2007). An Iraqi senior cleric, Al-Kubaisi's background was multi-religious in a Sunni-Shi'i context. He states that legalizing misyar is a policy that is likely to alleviate society of the ills of spinsterhood, and prevent widows from sinfully fulfilling their sexual desires (Al-Kubaisi as cited in Fakih 2006). In this case, Al-Kubaisi considers singlehood as a breeding ground for moral corruption, which threatens the sanctity of Islamic society. From his perspective as an Islamic cleric, misyar legitimizes acts that would have otherwise been not only unlawful but sinful.

Self-constraint, Al-Kubaisi assumes, will lose the war against physical desire and temptation. Misyar, according to this principle, performs the function of legitimizing people's pursuit of physical pleasure. At the same time, it provides an avenue for achieving sexual satisfaction without disturbing social norms.

Both potential bride and groom may be interested in fulfilling the desires of their "sovereign masters", pleasure and pain (Bentham 1780). While physical pleasure is the most notable one, there are also other desires that may be at play. In many reported cases, women generally enter into the agreement for financial purposes (Ahmad 2009). They enter into misyar under an agreement that some monetary compensation will be made. Other times, compensation is in an intangible form. Women are able to escape the burdens of spinsterhood, widowhood, or divorced life (Zakaria 2009). Therefore, to those women, misyar marriage is a socially acceptable option to enjoy enhanced social status, and defend alternative lifestyles. For men, misyar marriage is a means to fulfill their sexual needs without obligations to their wives (Karam 2006).

Proponents of misyar may look to its utilitarian aspects for support. Perhaps those who dub misyar as a "temporary marriage" or "no-strings marriage of convenience" are utilitarian thinkers at heart. They perceive the marriage from a perspective of adherence to social norms, and operating within the confines of tradition. From that perspective, misyar is an ethically authentic approach to preventing "moral disruption and social disintegration resulting from unbridled sexual drives" (Arabi 2001, p. 150).

Morality of Misyar Marriage

Al-Qaradawi, while defending misyar marriage, asserts that "what matters most in contracts are motives and meaning, not the wording or structure" (2006). Opponents of misyar marriage would agree with Al-Qaradawi on that statement, however, based on motives (or "*niyyah*") of entering misyar marriage alone, Islamic principles would reject the legitimacy of misyar marriage. According to the Islamic philosopher, jurist, and scholar, el-Ghazali, in the second section of *The Foundations of the Articles of Faith,* states that "a thing…may be pronounced unlawful from its very nature," explaining that, "its very nature is that the cause of its being pronounced unlawful is a quality inherent in it" (c. 1094, p.25). While misyar certainly conforms to the moral law of containing sexual relations within the union of marriage, however, it fails to be undertaken for the sake of the moral law. If misyar were for the sake of the moral law, then women and men entering into the arrangement would commit to all of the other obligations of an Islamic marriage.

Legal obligations of a traditional Islamic marriage (other than misyar) include financial welfare ("nafaqah"), housing, and children's custody (Zakaria 2009). In case of misyar, the intentions of those entering into the marriage arrangement have been established as sex, money (el-Gawhary 1995), and/or social status (Zakaria 2009).

Since misyar artfully evades those obligations, the marriage arrangement "may be pronounced unlawful from its very nature" (el-Ghazali c. 1094, p. 25). It is an effective means for people in the GCC to adapt to the modernization taking place in the region and reach particular ends – sex, finance, and/or social status – using each other as instruments. When the misyar marriage is over, there are no obligations to be made by either husband or wife involved in the arrangement. As a result, several similar marriages are entered upon the premise that no children will be born (Bajubair 2010).

Interestingly, one of the main supporters of misyar marriage, the Islamic scholar Al-Kubaisi, recognizes that the arrangement is a means to an end. In his opinion, the marriage is not an option for a "respectful" woman because "despite being [acceptable] according to Islamic Shariah [law], [misyar] compromises a number of values. If a king came asking for my daughter's hand [for misyar marriage], I would spit in his face" (Al-Kubaisi as cited in Fakih 2006). Based on that statement, Al-Kubaisi reinforces the elements of misyar that el-Ghazali would likely judge as morally disgraceful from their "very nature". Therefore, under el-Ghazali's philosophy of *niyyah* (intentions), misyar marriage would be aligned with the term, "legal prostitution" (Jabarti 2005), and an immoral arrangement regardless of its legality.

The rational for Misyar may be that Muslims are trying to reconcile Islam with modern sexuality. While Muslims are as susceptible to overt sexuality in the media, workplace, and everyday life, they are trying to abide by the tenets of Islam as much as possible while attaining sexual satisfaction. The openness provided by globalization and technology closes the distance between men and women who no longer solely meet under family arrangements but also at their own initiatives, thereby opening previously closed doors to sexual promiscuity that contradicts traditions.

Therefore, misyar is also a chosen option by women who are dissatisfied with the expectations, conditions, and standards for traditional marriages. Educated, working women may desire to sate their physical desires and gain a closer intimacy with men within a religiously (morally) acceptable context without giving up their independence. Therefore, they agree to provide their own homes and live separate from their husbands in misyar marriages, perhaps with no intial interest in bearing children. Alternatively, less educated women with lower incomes (from countries such as Egypt), welcome misyar marriage as an opportunity to gain a financial boost for themselves and their rural families in a morally legitimated process at the hands of wealthy GCC men (such as Saudis). Meanwhile, religious scholars and clerics are quick to legitimate misyar marriage as an arrangement, overlooking the intentions behind the act, in order to maintain their relevance amongst constituents rather than losing them to worldly desires.

Consequences of Misyar Marriage

Wives taken as misyar wives and children born from misyar marriages suffer the most drastic consequences of the arrangement. While women are paid a dowry that they agree to upon entering the marriage, they lose financial support and, possibly most significantly, on social recognition as wives. The "strategic secrecy" of the contract protects men involved in the marriage, who may marry up to four women (as is the case in traditional Muslim marriages) in the same manner without any responsibility toward them aside from dowry (Welchman 2010, p. 7). Women involved in the contract, on the other hand, provide their own accommodation, receive no financial support, and are not allowed to bear children as the marriage is only temporary and unknown to the rest of the community.

Due to the secret nature of misyar marriage, there are not any published figures regarding the number of such marriages that have taken place in the region. However, an article published in October 2010 reports that 900 children were abandoned in Egypt by Saudi fathers as a result of this form of marriage (Sidiya 2010). The report adds that almost 50 abandoned children are registered in the Saudi Embassy in Manila, born to

Filipino mothers and Saudi fathers through misyar. Hasso (2009) confirms that a significant number of misyar marriages occur between wealthy Emirati men and low-income Egyptian young women (p. 19), and journalist Ethar El-Katatney verifies that the highest number of visitors to "misyar matchmaking" website Misyaronline.com are from Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Conclusion

Women's status continues to undergo rapid evolution in the GCC. The modernization policies sweeping the energy-rich region has resulted in unintended social and gender imbalances. Partly due to the wealth distribution policies and the vast influx of foreign labor into the GCC, the region's indigenous people are facing several challenges as they adapt to their surrounding environment. Improvements to women's education have resulted in an imbalance of highly educated women relative to their male counterparts in the region, tipping the scales of gender roles. While both men and women accept predominantly paternal values, the strides in women's status may be contradictory to traditions, customs, and expectations. As a result, high divorce rates plague GCC citizens, while misyar marriage reemerges as a temporary antidote.

Legalizing and legitimizing misyar is a utilitarian public policy as it aims to protect the sanctity of Islamic society by legitimizing extramarital and premarital sex – otherwise strictly punishable criminal acts (Zakaria 2009). Regardless of whether one is in favor of legitimizing misyar marriage or not, there are several social problems introduced by the marriage. First, women's dignity is violated as they are expected to voluntarily surrender their rights to financial support and public recognition of their husbands. Second, and possibly most tragic and socially damaging, children born unintentionally in misyar marriage are victimized as their legitimacy and access to financial support from their fathers is drastically hindered (Bajubair 2010).

Since Islamic clerics have proceeded with legitimizing this marriage, it is their social duty to provide remedies for these problems. If remedies are unachievable, then perhaps misyar marriages defeat the purpose of protecting society from far-reaching ill effects. From a utilitarian approach, the negative impacts of misyar marriages may even outweigh the benefits. Using that rationale, supporters of Bentham and Kant may reach an agreement that misyar marriage is morally unjustifiable.

The first step to remedying this social phenomenon is to measure it. Considering the secrecy of the agreement, it is difficult to quantify, however, surveys may resolve that challenge. The numbers of children born out of such marriages must also be registered and published. Only then will the relationship between misyar marriage and social inequity be tested. GCC governments are encouraged not to shy away from depicting the harsh realities of these forms of contracts.

Slowly, this trend may be resolved as traditions catch up with the region's swift modernization. In the meantime, less binding courtship practices must be developed, which allow for testing the waters before diving into marriage. Even before that, perhaps most fundamentally, education, intellectual growth, and scholarly achievement must be prized amongst men as much as they are with women in the region. Once a higher value is granted to educational qualifications, financial success will take a backseat. This is a notion that will challenge modern materialistic values and replace them with cultural and educational roots.

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