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## **Introduction: Women and Family life during the COVID 19 Crisis in the Middle East Countries: Challenges and Responses**

By Muhamad Olimat<sup>1</sup>, Osman Antwi-Boateng<sup>2</sup>, Narayanappa Janardhan<sup>3</sup>

The Greater Middle Eastern region is at the heart of global affairs and strategically positioned at the crossroads of world continents. Similar to other parts of the world, the region was taken by surprise by the breakout of the Coronavirus pandemic in early 2020. State and civil society institutions struggled to deal with the crisis. While some countries denied the presence of the virus even though it was spreading across the population, other countries stepped up to the challenge and began articulating a national strategy to combat the crisis and limit the damage. The state mobilized its apparatuses, resources, and personnel, simultaneously testing its preparedness systems and benefiting from the crisis in upgrading their response-capabilities. While the United Arab Emirates serves as an exemplary model in the region, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and Morocco are also bright examples. On the other side, some countries have clearly failed to tackle the challenge. These include Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia, among others in the region. These countries paid a heavy price in terms of human casualties and a near economic collapse as well. A third set of countries such as Jordan, Kuwait, Algeria, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Oman withstood the storm fairly well.

The objective of this special issue is to examine the response of the region to the pandemic and shed some light on the lessons learned in order to be better prepared for future crises. In this endeavor, Olimat's article provides a general survey of the response of the sub-regions of the Middle East to the crisis, the Levant, the Gulf, Central Asia and North Africa. Al-Serhan, Al-Fayez, and Shweihat examine the evident neglect by the Jordanian media of the role of women in managing and combating the crisis. Such marginalization of the role of women in the media coverage of the crisis is inconsistent with the gains that the women's movement has made and the substantial contributions of women to the state and society in Jordan over the past century.

Exploring the role of Emirati women during the Cov-19 pandemic, Al-Oraimi, Karabchuk and Shomotova and Musa and Mansoori posit a counter-narrative to the existing literature on Arab Muslim women as marginalized and invisible in the public sphere. Al-Oraimi demonstrates Emirati women's agency by establishing their invaluable contributions in the public sphere in their capacity as frontline workers. This agency is the result of years of governmental empowerment of Emirati women via the provision of educational opportunities that has resulted in the dominance of Emirati women in frontline occupations such as the health and educational sectors. Karabchuk and Shomotova explore how Emirati women are faring in higher education as Ph.D. students and mothers in the midst of the pandemic. The authors establish that the doctoral mother-students are meeting their educational and maternal obligations, while navigating the pandemic by "applying a multitasking regime" to their daily routines and comparing themselves metaphorically to the proverbial "octopus," trying to do multiple things simultaneously.

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In addition, Musa and Mansoori provide insight into the uptake of the Covid vaccine among Emirati women by interrogating the role of social media in shaping perceptions and attitude on the covid vaccine. They argue that in spite of the proliferation of unfounded anti-vaccination views on social media, Emirati women have exercised agency by overwhelmingly getting vaccinated. They attribute this to the high levels of digital literacy among Emirati women and their positive response to government policies. The Emirati women's cases provide lessons for policymakers and societies desirous of women's empowerment. At the macro level, Antwi-Boateng, conceptualizes UAE's Covid related philanthropy as "COVID diplomacy". He argues that countries such as the UAE, which have a pre-existing soft power strategy and soft power capabilities, are primed to be major players in COVID diplomacy. Ultimately such countries will be able to burnish their soft power credentials via international humanitarian assistance.

Under the banner of "Common but Differentiated Responsibilities" principle, Hamrouni and Alter explore how countries use health diplomacy to fulfil varied priorities and interests. They argue that the spirit of cooperation and justice were better addressed at the regional level than at the international level. Finally, Janardhan delves into the pandemic-induced disruptions in the rules of engagement between the governments in the Gulf region and the expatriate population, including women. He highlights how "semi-citizens", living in a state of "permanent impermanence", are being offered "conditional citizenship", thus promoting "Khaleeji (Gulf) capitalism" at one level but also creating new social contradictions that need to be tackled in a post-Covid world. Dr. Al-Gharaibeh's article examines the public health policy in the Covid-19 Era, and its impact on the institution of the family in the region. Finally, Dr. Olimat's article on the Geopolitics of North Africa examines the impact of the geopolitical factors of the region on state's response to the pandemic. The article found that, geopolitical constraints have limited the ability of the countries in North Africa to reponed to the Covid-19 Crisis.