



The Arab Families Working Group

Displaced Arab Families: coping and changes in post-war Beirut

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Abstract

This research project aims to explore families' coping and adaptation mechanisms to social problems and the shifts in dynamics and boundaries of family under the conditions of internal migration and displacement. It also looks at the change in family structures and dynamics and its effect, along with gendered division of labour, on children's health outcomes. The participants in the study included mothers and daughters from an Eastern suburb of Beirut, Nabaa, and a southern suburb of Beirut, Raml, who my research assistant and I interviewed. We used in-depth interviews and observations over a year to collect our data. We accessed the participants by through contacts of those already interviewed. We held a total of 25 interviews, conducted in colloquial Arabic, with mothers and 18 with their daughters.

We found that the families who originally were war displaced experienced multiple moves within the urban suburbs in search of cheaper rent. They coped with their difficult financial problems through borrowing money from relatives or moving children to less expensive schools or utilizing services offered by local governmental and non- governmental agencies.

The pressures of multiple moves confounded by dire familial conditions have contributed to the changing roles within these families. Decision-makers in the household are those who are generators of income. Mothers are taking the lead role in managing the household, generating income and posing restrictions on girls' mobility. New roles similar to those of the mother are delegated to the girls at home.

When their mothers work, older daughters carry the extra responsibility of looking after their younger siblings and helping with the household chores in addition to doing their own studies. Many carry this burden at an early age and it increases as they grow older with their mothers having to work outside the home to contribute to the family income. This has adverse effects on the psychological state of the daughters and their relationships with their parents.

The women resort to substance abuse, such as smoking and taking sedatives to cope with the demands of life. Other less harmful strategies include: sleeping, crying and ignoring their problems. The girls cope by writing diaries, sleeping, crying, shouting and talking to friends, keeping things to themselves, drawing or not talking to anyone.