



## **The Arab Families Working Group Project: Beginnings**

*By Suad Joseph<sup>1</sup>*

### **An Arab Families Working Group Policy Brief**

Joseph, Suad . "The Arab Families Working Group Project: Beginnings." 327-345. *Framings: Rethinking Arab Family Projects*. The Arab Families Working Group. Web. 27 Jan. 2012.

<<http://www.arabfamilies.org/content/afwg-volumes>>.

### **About the AFWG**

The Arab Families Working Group (AFWG) is a collective of sixteen scholars from universities, NGOs, and research foundations whose work focuses on families and youth in Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine, and their Diasporas. Founded in 2001, AFWG is committed to advancing the state of empirical and theoretical knowledge on Arab families and youth and articulating research processes and outcomes with practitioners and policy makers. AFWG projects include comparative, transnational, interdisciplinary, and collaborative work on the three countries, and diasporic Arab families in the United States and Canada.

AFWG is co-hosted at The American University in Cairo (Egypt) and The University of California, Davis (USA). An institutional network has contributed to the work of AFWG, including the American University in Cairo (Social Research

---

<sup>1</sup> Suad Joseph is a Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Women and Gender Studies at the University of California, Davis

Center and Institute for Gender and Women's Studies); the Population Council, Cairo; the Lebanese American University, Beirut (Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World); Birzeit University, (Institute of Women's Studies); and the University of California, Davis (Anthropology, Middle East/South Asia Studies, and Women and Gender Studies).

### The Genealogy of AFWG

AFWG's "long" history began in 1975 when a small group of Middle East anthropologists and historians began meeting in New York City once or twice a year, for three years, to develop a collaborative project on new paradigms for studying Arab families. In 1977, a small group of faculty and graduate students began a study group on families based in Davis, California and the San Francisco Bay Area. This group focused on the comparative study of families. In each phase of this long genealogy, there were interested scholars but little sustainable momentum to create a collaborative project on Arab families. Several panels on Arab families were organized at the Middle East Studies Association meetings in the 1980s' and 1990's.

In 1999, AFWG founder and coordinator, Suad Joseph began her tenure as the Director of the University of California Education Abroad Program (UC EAP) at the American University in Cairo (AUC). In an effort to develop closer relations between the University of California and other regional universities, Dr. Joseph

proposed to the UC EAP Director (John Marcum) and the President of AUC (John Gerhart), the development of collaborative initiatives between UC and AUC with a focus on women, family and children. This collaboration contributed to the organization of a conference on Arab families in the Spring of 2000 at AUC (co-organized by Nicholas Hopkins, Suad Joseph, Hoda Rashad, and Barbara Ibrahim) which intersected with a conference on Arab families at the University of California, Berkeley (organized by Beshara Doumani). Through combined efforts, funds were raised for a number of scholars to participate in both conferences.

In the fall of 2000, Dr. Joseph approached Hoda Rashad (AUC, Social Research Center) with the idea of building from the 2000 conference to develop the Arab Families Working Group by organizing a workshop in 2001, in Cairo at AUC. The planning committee for the May 2001 workshop included Leila Bisharat (UNICEF, Cairo), Dina Craissati (International Development Research Center, Cairo), Barbara Ibrahim (Population Council), Suad Joseph (UC Davis and AUC), Hoda Rashad (AUC SRC), as well as Soraya Altorki (AUC), Samia Mehrez (AUC), Martina Rieker (AUC), and Maalak Zalou (UNICEF, Cairo). The planning committee agreed that the participants in the workshop (except those from UC) would have affiliations with regional institutions involved in research, policy or planning on Arab families in order to work locally on knowledge production by encouraging institutional commitments to research on Arab Families. The invitees

came from multiple disciplines to encourage interdisciplinarity. AFWG would focus on Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine as the Arab countries with the longest history of institutional development around women's studies and family studies. This three-country comparative research would aim to de-essentialize Arab families while assessing continuities in a contextualized manner. The invitees to the conference included graduate students to senior researchers, to support capacity building and the training of new scholars.

Over 40 scholars, planners and policy makers were invited to the first AFWG workshop in May of 2001, held at the Social Research Center of the American University in Cairo. Twenty Four scholars, planners and policy makers participated and came to constitute the AFWG Core Group in Phase I, which would eventually stabilize to 16 Core Group members several years later. At the initial Cairo conference a program of action was organized around three main empirical research projects: Arab Families and Public Discourse; Arab Families and Border Crossings; Arab Families and Well Being. AFWG Core Group members each joined one of the three projects.

#### AFWG Phase I & II: 2001-2005

Phase I & II of the AFWG project entailed the development of the theoretical framework for our research and the initial contours of the three research

project groups: Arab Families and Public Discourse; Arab Families and Border Crossings; Arab Families and Women, Work and Well Being. The newly formed AFWG Core Group met again in March 2002 in Cairo, where they clarified what collaboration meant in practice. AFWG was awarded its first major grant for empirical research from the Ford Foundation in Cairo in 2003. In 2004, the International Development Research Center (IDRC) also awarded AFWG a major research grant; both of these grants were renewed with equivalent or more funding through 2012.

In the Winter of 2003, AFWG began sharing its work with scholarly and activist communities (stakeholders) and launched its empirical work. AFWG committed to establishing the Arab Families Working Group edited book series. In February and June of 2003 the AFWG Core Group met to develop a framework for and write the first volume of the AFWG series. Phase I & II of the AFWG project are captured in Volume I of the AFWG series (<http://arabfamilies.org>) and in the development of the three Research Project Groups.

### Phase III: 2006-2011

As funding became available for empirical research at the end of Phase II, the Core group set out to identify and commit to specific projects. From the 15 Core Group members 13 research projects emerged, all individually based except

one collaborative project at Birzeit University. Clearly the recognition of the difficulty of conducting on the ground collaborative projects across three countries had set in. The projects taken up in Phase III were linked to the framework that had been developed and were grouped into the theoretical thematics. The more empirically grounded AFWG's research became, the more intersection emerged among the 13 projects. In the second year of Phase III (2007) AFWG had dissolved the separate Research Project Groups and regrouped as a whole. AFWG grouped the current research projects into two large thematics for purposes of publishing two special issues of journals: "War and Transnational Families" (published by the Journal of Middle East Women's Studies) and "Contesting Youth" (published as individual articles in different journals).

Towards the end of Phase II (February 2005) and continuing into Phase III AFWG launched a series of outreach activities: stakeholder workshops, media seminars, meetings with NGO's, conferences with international scholars, and research training workshops for a new generation of scholars. AFWG organized stakeholder workshops in conjunction with each Core Group meeting from 2005 to 2009 in Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine.

Phase III also focused on transforming AFWG's research into briefs for policy makers and NGO's and the general public, under a grant funded by IDRC. A communication specialist and graduate students worked with the Core Group to

rewrite the research in publically accessible language, translate some of the work into Arabic and produce them into brochures for dissemination. Much of this material is posted on the AFWG website: [www.arabfamilies.org](http://www.arabfamilies.org) .

In 2008 AFWG began a series of training workshops for graduate students, NGO activists, and young scholars in proposal writing for research funding and in methods of doing research. It carried out these workshops from 2008 to 2011.

#### Phase IV 2011-2013

In 2011, AFWG launched a two-year project, funded by the Ford Foundation, entitled “Training to Research”, dedicated to training and year-long mentoring of graduate students in proposal writing and research design. Focusing mainly on students from Egyptian national universities, while accommodating selected students from Lebanese and Palestinian national universities, the workshops are designed to train and mentor students in critical problem solving and evidence-based research. Key materials were prepared for the AFWG website and select documents were translated into Arabic for free public access at [www.arabfamilies.org](http://www.arabfamilies.org) .

#### Lessons and Assessments:

AFWG set out to develop a collaborative, interdisciplinary, comparative, transnational, inter-generational, long-term research project. The original vision

was to bring together scholars, policy makers and planners in a concerted effort to advance the state of empirical and theoretical knowledge on Arab Families. While AFWG has not achieved all aspects of its original vision, it has nevertheless made inroads into rethinking Arab families and youth through empirical and evidence-based research. After completing a decade of research work, AFWG is in Phase IV of its work: training a new generation of scholars; working on Volume II of the AFWG series; and engaging in conversations with stakeholders, NGO's, and policy makers. Over the next period AFWG plans to continue on a path towards research, training, and outreach on collaborative, interdisciplinary, comparative, transnational, inter-generational projects on Arab families and youth.