Middle Eastern Patriarchy in Transition

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### Introduction

In *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (2000), twenty scholars coalesced around a definition of patriarchy as a “system of social relations privileging male seniors over juniors and women, both in the private and public spheres.”¹ The all-woman scholarly choir presented nuanced approaches towards describing, historicizing, and analysing the contained and mediated citizenship of youth and women in contemporary states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The editor, Suad Joseph, specified further that the privileging of male and elder rights is a constitutive characteristic of patriarchy in the region. She argued that the valorization of maleness and elders distinguishes theorization on patriarchy in a MENA context from notions of patriarchy as understood by Western feminist scholars, who “often disarticulate patriarchy and kinship.”² In short, MENA region scholars perceived and analysed patriarchy as a kinship-based power structure stratified along both gender and age lines.

Around a decade before that book was published, sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti pointed out in her seminal work “Bargaining with patriarchy” that patriarchy was “probably the most overused [concept], and, in some respects the most undertheorized.”³ There, she perceived the autonomy of women living in Muslim majority societies, under what she termed ‘classic patriarchy’, as more limited and contained when contrasted to women’s wider scope of action in male-dominated societies in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴

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² “Gendering Citizenship in the Middle East”, in *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, ed. Suad Joseph (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 16.
⁴ Ibid., 278-81.
Whereas the term ‘patriarchy’ may have been commonly applied during the heyday of the feminist movement in the 1980s, the use of the concept as a tool of analysis became gradually associated with the feminist ideological programme for women’s emancipation. The use of ‘patriarchy’ as an analytical concept dropped to the point of becoming the ‘p-word’. However, the restricted position of women and junior members of the household in societies and states that privilege male dominance has remained a topic of research, paving the way for a richer and more nuanced analysis of how patriarchy works, and the manner in which citizens and household members comply with, adapt to, resist, challenge, and rebel against patriarchal forms of authority and dominance.

New Directions in the Study of Patriarchy in the Middle East

Over the past two decades, the academic literature on patriarchy in the MENA region has focused on themes such as women’s rights and state power;\(^5\) gender (in-)equality and women’s position within Islamic jurisprudence;\(^6\) reform of family law;\(^7\) women’s agency and empowerment;\(^8\) globalization and its impact


