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Families in development:
Assessing progress, challenges and emerging issues.
Focus on modalities for IYF+30 & parenting education

Parenting Styles and Programs:
What works for better Parenting in the MENA Region?

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Typologies of Parenting across the Globe

- Authoritarian: Strict parental authority, firm in control practices, focus on obedience, little communication and directive orders and punishments.

- Authoritative: Parents encourage children to be self-governing, give orders and leaves space for independence, encouraging autonomy and monitored progress.

- Permissive: Frequent expression of warmth, avoid confrontation, low enforcement of rules and high acceptance, almost no punishment.

- Rejecting-neglecting style: Parents neglect their children's needs, little communication and minimal interaction with children.

MENA Realities

- Despite the central importance of the family in the MENA region, public investment in family policies in general remains limited. A report by the World Bank presented that investing in early childhood in the MENA region is among the lowest in the world (World Bank, 2015).

- MENA milieu portrayed by contrasting settings, vary from high income GCC countries to LDCs and countries confronting humanitarian emergencies. Between prosperity and conflict zones, many countries in the Arab Mashreq, Maghreb and LDCs suffer from economic hardships and lack of appropriate policy responses.

- These contexts have implicit reflections on parenting practices and the whole childhood settings. For example, UNESCO reported that children's access to pre-primary education, measured in terms of gross enrolment, varies widely among Arab countries, from GER above 80% in countries like Kuwait, to under 5% in countries like Yemen, Mauritania, and Djibouti (UNESCO, 2010).

- Parenting practices in the MENA region cannot be understood without poverty, unemployment and lack of effective social protection policies in mind, as well as the impact of wars and conflicts, which forced millions to refuge and become internally displaced. Of the 60 million displaced people, both refugees and people displaced within their home countries worldwide, close to 40 percent originates from the MENA region (Yahia and Muasher, 2018).

Parenting Styles in the MENA Region

Authoritarian
- A strict adherence to the rules of adults exists, and disobedience is met with harsh punishment. This model is less intense in urban societies' contexts in comparison to rural contexts in the same country.

Authoritative
- The theory of social stratification illustrates class in MENA region and the lack of social mobility. Authoritative style is mainly found within middle class with high educational backgrounds.

Helicopter Parenting
- It is similar to the permissive style, with regards to giving close attention to the children needs. Monitoring child activities and supporting them closely, which affects their self-reliance feeling.

Neglecting-rejecting
- Some qualitative narratives reported neglecting-rejecting parenting style in high-income MENA countries. This style is also reported with contexts of children at risk.

Controlling
- Combination of authoritarian and authoritative styles, which is reported in tribal societies, particularly reported in Saudi Arabia and Gaza. This style is linked to adherence of patriarchal values.

Flexible
- Combination of authoritative and permissive styles, which is reported in middle-income countries in Mashreq and Maghreb, such as Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria, with more liberal values and modernity contexts.

Ambivalent/ Inconsistent
- Inconsistent mix of authoritarian and permissive styles. Evidence reported this parenting style is due to modernization and exposure to the western culture.

Gaps on Parenting Education Programs in the MENA Region

- DIFI conducted a study on "Parenting Programs in the Arab Region", which mapped the parenting education programs across the Arab countries.

- The study reported 108 programs distributed across the region (38 programs in the Arab Mashreq, 32 programs in the Gulf, 26 programs in the Arab Maghreb, and 12 programs in LDCs).

- However, these programs are not specifically parenting education programs, as some of them are meant for awareness raising, or capacity building of service providers. The total number of parenting education programs found is 34 programs across the region. The following gaps are highlighted in the study of mapped programs (DIFI, 2019):

    - Lack of program evaluation and scientific impact assessment.
    - Lack of set criteria governing programs and poor documentation
    - Most documented information comes from programs in high-income settings.
    - Inadequate use of the internet, media, and written bulletins in the programs.
    - Poor coordination among service providers, resulting in duplication of programs.
    - Incoherence of the theoretical grounding of programs.
    - Challenge of promoting positive parenting practices in vulnerable contexts.
    - Disengagement and lack of parents' retention in the programs and long-term funding.
    - Lack of parental programs for families living with disabilities.
    - Scarcity of parenting programs for imprisoned persons.

Qualitative (FGDs) Findings on Parenting Education Programs in the MENA Region

○ DIFI study conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) to evaluate different parenting programs in Jordan, Oman and Morocco. Below is a critical reading to the commonalities of FGDs' outcomes:

  ○ Majority of participants were females. This outcome is consistent with the stereotype of gender roles in the MENA region, perceiving fathers as breadwinners and mothers as care-givers.
  ○ Enrolment of parents, mostly mothers, in the parenting education programs is driven by the needs to know parenting techniques, especially mothers of children with behavioral issues.
  ○ Some other driving forces behind parents' enrolment in the programs are; protection from technology risks, early childhood needs, and resolving family conflicts.
  ○ Common positive outcomes of parenting programs include, developing children personalities, eliminating negative behaviors, managing time and communicating with children, learning self-control and learning to identify abilities and talents.
  ○ Common negative outcomes are related to absence of adolescence and youth aspects in the programs. Instead, a focus is given to childhood exclusively.
  ○ Raising awareness in various topics at the same program, without enhancing in-depth knowledge and skills in a particular matter/skill.
  ○ Excessive length of sessions and lack of participatory approach and time for discussion

Conclusion

○ The investment case for parenting is a call that needs to be addressed. It begins with why positive parenting matters and what the programs could do to fulfill the ultimate goal beyond child wellbeing, which empowers the future generations.

○ While parenting in some MENA contexts is characterized by authoritarian styles due to the tribal values, yet, permissive/helicopter and neglecting styles are also reported in high-income countries in the MENA region. Parenting in the region faces exacerbated challenges when it comes to national settings of poverty, unemployment, conflicts and displacement.

○ Evidence from impact assessment studies proved that authoritative parenting style is the most constructive practice with associated positive impact on child wellbeing. How to reach this model in the MENA region, remains a question. Parenting programs should help in building parents' capacities to parent. However, mapping the parenting programs in the region shows that they are fragmented, lack evidence-based approach, and do not respond to the parents' needs. The evaluation of these programs is very limited in the region due to the lack of impact assessment studies. In addition, the programs do not cover the most vulnerable.

Recommendations

- Calling national machineries and NGOs to invest in introducing and developing parenting education programs.

- Design evidence-based parenting education programs, beginning with mapping of parenting styles and assessing parental needs.

- Children-at-risk not to be left behind. Specific parenting programs should be tailored for parents/caregivers of children-at-risk.

- Adolescence and youth milestones not to be dismissed from programs' conceptualizations and coverages.

- Research agenda in the region to be enriched by program evaluation and impact assessment studies.

Thank you