

Family Guidance as a mechanism of reforming in the United Arab Emirates experience

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Abstract:

This study aims to highlight the approach of the United Arab Emirates in formulating wise solutions to familial disputes and conflicts, with the goal of achieving the highest possible level of family reconciliation. This stems from a firm belief that the loss of family cohesion inevitably leads to a severe breakdown in social relationships, which in turn results in the collapse of society at all levels. This is due to the fact that the individual is fundamentally the primary capital in any social or civilizational structure. To address this issue, the structure of this research paper is divided into two sections: the first focuses on the measures taken by UAE governmental institutions in the field of family counseling as a mechanism for reform, while the second addresses the measures adopted by civil institutions.

Keywords: Family counseling, reconciliation, family disputes, measures, Arab experience.

Introduction:

The family is the cornerstone upon which the structure of society is built. It is the foundation of its progress and prosperity. The more cohesive and healthier the family is, the stronger the fabric of society becomes, the firmer its pillars, the more mature its ideas, and the better preserved its religion and identity. This also leads to societal stability, a better quality of life, and a sense of

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security. This is the result of a series of integrated and mutually influential interactions between the health and cohesion of the family on one hand, and the health of the family and society on the other.

However, the family may be shaken by conflicts and crises that disturb its emotional core, threaten or destroy its stability, sow resentment within hearts, and create alienation among its members. This weakens its bonds, scatters its thoughts, and marks a critical turning point in its path—disrupting its functions and distancing it from its mission and reason for existence. This is especially true in today’s world, which is witnessing a wave of malicious globalization aimed at uprooting constants and values, distorting beliefs, stripping away cultural references, and erasing identity—posing a serious threat to the future of the Arab family. Arab societies have recorded alarming rates of divorce and domestic violence, with numbers rising significantly each year. This is despite the fact that most family disputes leading to separation stem from issues that could be resolved without resorting to courtrooms—spaces that, once entered, make it difficult to reunite the family again. These alarming indicators have compelled many countries to urgently seek solutions to rebalance family dynamics, address the disruptions affecting them, and steer families toward psychological and behavioral stability.

This has been pursued by enacting measures and policies at both governmental and civil levels aimed at raising family awareness, alongside the need to focus on all personal status laws and legislation. It also involves learning from the best practices in the field of family reform, guidance, and counseling—especially within the Arab world—where family education has now become a vital social necessity, particularly in light of the significant rise in divorce rates in Arab countries, (Khalifa, 2019) which have ranged between 40% and 42% (Ahmad & Walaa Abdel Fattah, 2/4/2022, p. 748). In some of these countries, one of the most prominent examples of a nation that has paid great attention to family counseling and activating its role is the United Arab Emirates. The country aims to empower families to perform their functions effectively in light of various and rapid changes, which in turn positively impacts the quality of human resources. This also ensures the enhancement of social, psychological, economic, and health-related functions, thereby facilitating the achievement of the desired sustainable development and securing its stability.

This raises the question: What are the measures and procedures adopted by the United Arab Emirates in the field of family counseling as a mechanism for reform?

1. Measures taken by government institutions in the United Arab Emirates in the field of family counseling as a mechanism for reform

The United Arab Emirates is considered one of the leading countries in establishing both official and non-official institutions specialized in family counseling. Below are the most prominent governmental institutions involved:

1.1 Measures taken by the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, and the Marriage Fund Foundation in the field of family counseling as a mechanism for reform

First: Measures taken by the Ministry of Social Affairs: The Ministry has implemented a series of activities and initiatives, all aimed at supporting family stability and strengthening cohesion among all family members (Albrithen A, 2023, pp. 230-243), Among the most notable of these initiatives are the launch of electronic family counseling services, in addition to telephone counseling services, (Mustafa, p. 58) and the launch of the “My Family, My Nation” initiative. One of the key projects adopted by the Ministry is:

- The Family Counseling Offices Project: The Ministry exercises close supervision over these offices (Al-Mahrazi).
- The Smart Family Happiness Advisor Project: This project is one of the most prominent initiatives of the second edition of the 10X Initiative, implemented jointly by the Community Development Authority and Dubai Courts in collaboration with relevant government entities. The project introduces a new model for utilizing artificial intelligence technologies to meet family needs by providing family counseling services at all times. These services are delivered with high efficiency, based on accumulated expertise, advanced scientific frameworks, and complete confidentiality (Authority, 18-4-2019). The project aims to provide a round-the-clock family advisor for all family members, offering them social counseling services, suitable plans for social training and rehabilitation, and regular follow-up on their cases to ensure their stability and provide the necessary support when needed (News, 2019).

Second: Measures taken by the Ministry of Interior: The Ministry of Interior gives special attention to the family by establishing Social Support Centers in 2005 as a modern initiative within the Abu Dhabi Police. The aim was to support police stations in the city, help resolve conflicts and cases that do not require legal intervention, raise public awareness, and participate in conferences by offering workshops and lectures to enhance legal and social awareness. The centers include various departments: a department for family disputes and domestic violence, a department for children and youth, a department for school-related problems, a department for crime victims, and a department for community affairs. All of these departments operate within three main axes: the first is dealing with minor cases; the second focuses on providing psychological and social support to victims, especially women and children; and the third concerns crime prevention by raising community awareness. Family disputes are among the most common cases received by the center. The center is also tasked with other responsibilities, including overseeing child custody visits, enforcing court rulings related to marital and personal status matters, executing special rulings, caring for released juvenile offenders through psychological and social follow-up programs,

and providing support to drug addicts and their families in coordination with the relevant authorities.(Khalifa, 2019)

Third: Measures taken by the Marriage Fund: The Marriage Fund is tasked with counseling and guidance to support the family and build society through conscious and continuous plans and operations, in addition to training. The Marriage Fund gives special importance to those preparing for marriage and newlyweds by organizing awareness campaigns and striving to rationalize marriage expenses. It relies on the following:

- Preparation Program: A series of training courses for individuals preparing for marriage who benefit from the Fund's grant. The program is based on the principle of building a stable and cohesive Emirati family.
- Youth Advisory Council: This aims to conduct regular dialogues with young people, enabling the Fund to understand their issues, aspirations, and vision. These insights are integrated into the Fund's policies, work plans, marketing and media campaigns, as well as its awareness workshops and lectures, ensuring that these programs respond to their trends and ideas.

This project is the first of its kind in the UAE, and it aims to contribute to the development of leadership skills among young people, particularly in the areas of family management and guidance, which enhances family stability. It also provides a model for social work based on social participation in shaping and developing the programs and activities offered by various state agencies. Additionally, it benefits from the Advisory Council to serve the Fund's purposes, particularly in conducting research, collecting data, organizing mass weddings, and inviting young people to participate in the lectures and workshops regularly organized by the Fund.(Khalifa, 2019)

1-2 Measures taken by the Ministry of Justice, the Judicial Institute in Dubai, and the Community Development Authority in the field of family counseling as a mechanism for reform

First: Measures taken by the Ministry of Justice : A family guidance department was established under the Department of Justice in the UAE in 1998 with the goal of reuniting families and resolving family disputes amicably. (*Family Guidance in the UAE*, 8-12-2023)This was done through the following procedures:

- The Ministry of Justice issued Ministerial Decision No. 1 of 2011, which included 32 articles regarding the family guidance regulations. It also established a department in the Sharia courts of the country, consisting of one or more committees for family reform and guidance concerning issues related to the family that fall under the Personal Status Law. The main role of

the mediator is to manage constructive negotiations to help the parties communicate positively, discuss the details of the dispute, and understand it impartially and objectively. The aim is to help the parties choose the solutions and options that suit them, with awareness and maturity. Additionally, it is the mediator's responsibility to identify obstacles and barriers that hinder fruitful communication, using effective techniques such as active listening, body language, reframing, summarizing the idea, and ensuring the dignity of all parties to create an atmosphere of comfort, mutual respect, and sufficient trust.(Khaled, p. 152)

The law requires the establishment of one or more family guidance committees in the Personal Status Court, as determined by the head of the court. Each committee is supervised by judges and is responsible for considering personal status disputes, excluding urgent temporary cases.(Abdulrahman, 4-4-2023) The committee is also tasked with providing opinions and advice regarding the status of the parties involved in personal status cases or specific cases upon the request of the competent court handling the case. This decision will contribute to spreading and solidifying the role of family reform and guidance, studying the issues and phenomena faced by families, developing appropriate solutions, raising awareness about the culture of resolving family disputes amicably, and cooperating and coordinating with both official and non-official institutions in the community regarding family matters. This will enhance the principle of effective partnership between institutions with shared goals.(Al-Mahrazi)

- Family Arbitration Initiative: Family guidance and reform offices are considered an alternative mechanism to traditional litigation. The United Arab Emirates requires parties to resort to family reform offices and present their disputes to these offices before approaching the competent court. (Al-Harbi, p. 25)According to Article (16) of the explanatory memorandum of Federal Law No. (28), divorce proceedings in the Personal Status Court should not be heard unless they have been referred to the family guidance committee.(Abdulrahman, 4-4-2023)

Family guidance committees can begin their work only with the personal presence of the client or through communication technology ("remote communication"). The primary task of the arbitrator is to remove discord between the spouses and seek reconciliation if possible. The meeting with both parties takes place at a location they specify. Arbitration proceedings begin with a court order issued by the judge, and the Personal Status Department announces the appointment of the arbitrator. The announcement includes the phone numbers of the plaintiff and defendant, the name of the other arbitrator, and their contact number. The arbitrators then contact both parties by phone to set a meeting date, review the case, and hear statements during multiple sessions with the spouses or anyone else influencing the progress of the reconciliation.If reconciliation is achieved between the spouses, it must be documented in the court record, and both parties sign it. It is then approved by the competent judge. The memorandum also mentions that the reconciliation

agreement has the force of an executive order and cannot be challenged in any way unless it violates the law.

If reconciliation is not possible between the parties, the committee issues an electronic or paper certificate to that effect. Additionally, the committee specifies the requests that were previously discussed. Finally, if no dispute arises within two months from the date of registration, the committee archives the case.(Al-Mahrazi)

The Family Guidance Department of the Judicial Department in Abu Dhabi offers its services to everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs.(Program, p. 5)

Family guidance in the UAE is considered part of public order; it is one of the reasons for the invalidity of a judicial ruling if it is found that the case was not presented to the family guidance office.(Yahya, p. 22)

- Family Program for Divorce Requests: This is a system adopted by the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department in 2020, making it the first of its kind in the Gulf Cooperation Council region. The program includes workshops enriched with multimedia, featuring presentations, sharing personal experiences, and working papers on self-reflection. It offers opportunities for participation in group discussions through interactive exercises. It is worth noting that some studies have shown several benefits of this program for families and society, including reducing the likelihood of future legal disputes between the parties.(Program, p. 7)

Second: Measures taken by the Judicial Institute in Dubai: The Dubai Judicial Institute has qualified family arbitrators with expertise in Sharia and law through the "Family Arbitrators Qualification Diploma" program, the first of its kind in the country. This program is carried out in cooperation with the Dubai Women's Renaissance Association and is taught by a select group of judges, trainers, and experts who have previously practiced arbitration according to the Quranic methodology and the traditions and customs of the Emirati society.(Khalifa, 2019)

The experience of the Dubai Courts is distinguished as the first department to implement its family guidance and reform initiative. It stands out from other similar experiences due to its comprehensiveness and innovative elements, as it focuses on highlighting the new positive role of the court as a social clinic and an awareness-raising institution, in addition to being a judicial entity.

This unique experience in the country is characterized by several innovative elements that helped enrich family members by reducing the need for litigation, saving time and effort by creating agreements that are immediately enforceable. Additionally, it facilitates direct communication with the disputing parties without the mediation of their legal representatives, ensuring quick resolution between them. The program aims to resolve marital disputes both before and after divorce and is open to all nationalities and groups residing in the emirate, offering continuous follow-up and guidance to the involved parties.

The family guidance program at the Dubai Courts resolves family disputes between children, parents, and extended family members, not limited to marital conflicts. It also extends to supporting newly married couples by preparing them for family compatibility through a specialized training program and promoting family culture. This initiative has ultimately led to a decrease in the divorce rate among newly married couples from 16% to 6%.

The family guidance and reform program relies on an integrated electronic system linked with other departments in the Dubai Courts, from the initial registration and information entry to generating statistics, correspondence, and reports. Additionally, there is a webpage containing weekly social articles, and participation in several Arabic and international websites offering family counseling.

It has been implemented with a high degree of professionalism and excellence, which has allowed it to lead regionally and globally. It is considered a model and a comprehensive reference in its field, with 12 Arab and foreign judicial institutions benefiting from this experience. This success is attributed to the use of the latest psychological and therapeutic methods in reform sessions, such as neuro-linguistic programming. and suggestion therapy. Since its establishment, the family guidance and reform program at the Dubai Courts has achieved multiple results, including a 23% decrease in the number of personal status cases.(Al-Mahrazi)

One of the most important results achieved was a 33% decrease in divorce cases, making the Emirate of Dubai the lowest in the country and the Arab world in divorce rates compared to marriage. Additionally, it contributed to providing flexible and distinguished services to clients by offering various methods for reform sessions, such as phone calls, internet, fax, and visiting case locations when needed. The department also contributed to reducing the number of cases and divorce rates by eliminating the need for eight job positions, including judges, clerks, registrars, and secretaries, saving the equivalent of 2.1 million dirhams annually in salaries and allowances. Furthermore, it encouraged some commercial institutions to sponsor its programs and social events.

The family guidance and reform program also contributed to creating positive competition with the Human Rights Care Department at Dubai Police in the field of family reform. This was achieved by providing social guides in police stations for reconciliation between disputing parties and preparing training programs for those responsible for the reform process.(Al-Mahrazi)

Third: Measures taken by the Community Development Authority: The Community Development Authority in Dubai works in collaboration with various entities to provide its programs and services, set policies, regulations, and standards for social service providers, aiming to raise the standards of services in Dubai and activate the role of Emiratis in society. The vision of the Youth and Community Development Authority is to provide a leading social sector that drives and develops sustainable development in the UAE. Its mission is to invest resources and energies

optimally to build effective partnerships with the non-profit private sector to develop a distinguished social sector that aligns with the ambitions of the Dubai government. It also aims to make the community happy, strengthen national identity, and provide empowerment and community participation opportunities for citizens.

All of the Authority's services and programs are focused on improving the lives of individuals and communities, strengthening family bonds, and providing social care for families, children, and youth. (*Community Development Authority in Dubai*, 9-12-2023)

Wafaq Project: A national official project under the Community Development Authority in Dubai, offering marriage facilitation services exclusively for Emirati citizens, aimed at helping adjust the demographic structure due to the rising rate of marriages to foreigners, and preserving national identity. The service is free of charge at all stages, from registration to the final stage of reconciliation. (Al-Mahrazi)

1-3 Measures taken by the Supreme Council for Family Affairs and the Family Development Foundation in the field of family counseling as a mechanism for reform

First: Measures taken by the Supreme Council for Family Affairs: It works to enhance family welfare in the Emirate of Sharjah by contributing to empowering family members to achieve their stability, security, and effectiveness within the community. Its goal is to activate the role of the family in society, enabling it to perform its functional roles according to contemporary developments, while adhering to Islamic values and culture. (Page)

Second: Measures taken by the Family Development Foundation: It is an independent, non-profit government organization that specifically focuses on instilling religious values and nurturing authentic Arab traditions to ensure the continuity of the family and the cohesion of society. The Foundation works on supporting women and enhancing their status to enable them to actively contribute to economic and social development. It adopts innovative methods to implement policies aimed at caring for, developing, and empowering women and children in alignment with the state's social policy. It also develops strategies and plans, and executes specialized programs related to the family. (*Family Development Foundation*)

2. Measures Taken by Civil Institutions in the United Arab Emirates in the Field of Family Counseling as a Mechanism for Reform

2-1 Measures taken by the General Women's Union: Among its initiatives

- **Vision Office Initiative:** The objectives of this initiative are summarized in the office's pathways, which include developing family dialogue skills, fostering positive communication with the child's guardians, facilitating the implementation of court decisions regarding visitation and the

transfer of the child to and from a safe family environment, and preparing a comprehensive strategy aimed at creating plans, programs, and mechanisms. This includes conducting exploratory and analytical studies to understand the reality of these children, their psychological and health needs, and everything that ensures their family stability and care within the family.

- **Hotline Service:** (In cooperation with the Fatwa Department of the Judicial Department) The hotline service began operating in 2008 as part of the implementation and achievement of the Vision Office's objectives. (Al-Mahrazi)

- **Email Service:** Through the electronic connection of the Vision Office website with the Fatwa Department of the Judicial Department, which in turn responds to inquiries from callers via email.

- **Wathiq and Wafa Project:** The program consists of two parts: the first is raising awareness and educating divorced individuals about the negative effects of divorce and its impact on children. The second is the preparatory program for a successful marital life.

- **"Know Your Rights" Encyclopedia:** In cooperation with the Fatwa Department (Judicial Department), it is distributed free of charge.

2-2 Measures taken by women's associations in the country, family counseling centers, and independent counselors:

- **Measures taken by women's associations in the country:** These associations, spread across all emirates of the country, provide family counseling and guidance services. Their goal is to raise awareness about the importance of family counseling and guidance by helping individuals perform their social roles, as well as offering counseling, treatment, and intervention in family crises, whether on an individual or family level.

- **Family counseling centers:** These are independent social-oriented centers specifically established to address family issues and provide the necessary guidance and solutions.

- **Independent counselors:** These are individuals who have been well-trained to possess family counseling skills. They do not work under an official umbrella of the state, but instead, they work voluntarily and can be contacted for their opinions.

In conclusion, the family counseling experience in the United Arab Emirates represents one of the effective mechanisms in developing societal culture and stabilizing marital relationships in light of the current and future challenges facing families. (Government).

Conclusion

The experience of the United Arab Emirates in the field of family counseling is a pioneering one, demonstrating that adopting family counseling as a mechanism for family reform is one of the most important strategic goals in achieving family stability, which in turn is closely linked to achieving social stability and sustainable development. The results achieved in this field, which are

highly satisfactory, show the country's serious efforts in spreading the culture of reform, a practice that is both a legal and ethical virtue with positive impacts on all levels—individual, collective, personal, and national. It strengthens family cohesion by addressing the causes of conflict and dispute.

From this, it can be said that family counseling is a complement to the judiciary and a branch of swift justice, as well as a resource for sustainable development. This outstanding experience should serve as an inspiration for other countries to follow its path and benefit from its results in guiding families towards safety and stability, and communities towards progress and prosperity.

Given the limited practical studies addressing the role of family guidance and counseling offices and the effectiveness of their performance in Algeria, a set of recommendations has been proposed to develop this vital sector. These include: benefiting from the experiences of leading countries both Arab and Western, considering the family as the nucleus of society and the foundation of human investment; establishing graduate programs and specialized research centers in family counseling; creating training and development plans for specialists within recognized academic institutions; enhancing the exchange of expertise and scientific studies both within the country and internationally using digital means; expanding family counseling offices across the country and not limiting them to courts; establishing clear strategies and standards for practicing the profession, enacting legislation to regulate it; establishing counseling offices in every family court with branches outside of them, comprising specialists in Sharia, law, social work, and psychology, with mandatory recourse to them; granting reconciliation minutes the status of enforceable judgments; establishing a government agency responsible for family centers and integrating family counseling into national family policies; and finally, creating an association for practitioners to monitor societal and professional transformations.

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