Masculinity in crisis
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In the heady days of 2011, Tahrir Square was a showcase for the best and the worst of Egyptian manhood. I saw protesters fighting and falling for the dreams of ‘freedom’, ‘justice’ and ‘dignity’ writ large in the graffiti that wallpapered their downtown battlefield.

I also watched men in black, with shiny visors and sturdy shields, strike back for the father of the nation and his authoritarian regime. When I was stumbling through the tear gas, it was a young man who showed me how to soak my scarf in Coca-Cola and wrap it around to protect my face.

On another occasion, I saw men ripping the clothes off a young woman they had cornered by a railing while, on the other side, a second group of men were beating them off, covering her up and trying to lift her to safety.

Cleopatra wasn’t the only Egyptian of infinite variety. It should come as no surprise that men in Egypt, and the wider Arab region, are as diverse as men anywhere in the world. But that is not the impression held by many outside the Middle East.

Events of recent years – be it the spate of sexual assaults in cities across Europe on New Year’s Eve 2015, or terrorist attacks in capitals around the world – have cemented the image of Arab men in many quarters as sexed-up, homicidal/suicidal predators.

This is because gender in the Arab region has distinctly female features: most policies, programmes and research studies focus on women and girls. And rightly so, since they are on the receiving end of a range of laws and customs aimed at keeping them in check. But there will be no transformation without information: until we understand how men feel about the shifting roles and rights of women, and why, it will be hard to help them change their attitudes or their actions.

Over the past two years, my colleagues and I at Promundo, an international NGO that specializes in promoting gender equality among men and boys, have worked with local research partners and UNWomen to gain insight into the lives of men in the Middle East and North Africa.

In our International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES MENA), we interviewed nearly 10,000 men and women aged 18-59 in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and the Palestinian territories. The results both confirm, and confound, conventional notions of gender relations in Arab societies.

It is clear that men in these countries are under enormous pressure. More than 90 per cent say they are fearful for their own safety, and they express anxiety for their family’s present state and future...
prospects. This is not just the Syrian refugees in Lebanon we interviewed, or the Palestinian men living in the shadow of occupation we talked to, but ordinary men in Egypt and Morocco as well.

Much of their disquiet comes from economics. These men (and women) defined manhood, above all, as the ability to provide for their families; but times are tough and aside from the double-digit unemployment rates that face younger men, even those with jobs are having a hard time making ends meet. About half of the men in Egypt and Palestine, for example, said they were frequently stressed or depressed, or sometimes felt ashamed to face their families because of a lack of work. More than 60 per cent of men across the board worried about not being able to meet their family’s daily needs.

This connection between manhood and money-making has been seen in IMAGES studies around the world. And in the Arab region, as elsewhere, it has profound implications for men’s wellbeing.

In Egypt, for example, men described how they rely on painkillers just to get through a day’s hard grind; Syrian refugees talked about how emasculated they felt by the fact that their wives and daughters were the ones bringing home the money – be it from small jobs or humanitarian handouts – thereby upending the order of domestic life they knew back home.

As one Moroccan man in the study put it: ‘It’s a burden; you are expected to work, to marry, to secure a stable income. It’s very heavy for him – men too are victims of this masculinity and this patriarchal mindset.’

This economic imperative shapes men’s views of women’s place in the world. While 60 per cent or more of the men surveyed considered it just as much of a priority to educate girls as boys, more than half in most countries thought that it was more important for a woman to marry than to have a career, and up to 98 per cent agreed that, when jobs are scarce, men should have access to work before women.

It is not just men who cling to these patriarchal notions either; although more than 70 per cent of women insisted on their right to work, a majority in most countries agreed with their male counterparts about the importance of marriage for women, and the priority of work for men.

Such ideas translate into practice: across the Arab region, only about 25 per cent of women on average are in the formal workforce – one of the lowest rates of female labour force participation in the world. Women are increasingly educated, but that is not translating into formal employment – thereby pumping up the pressure on both sexes.

On a number of issues, particularly those related to their own sexuality, women held as conservative or even more conservative views than their male peers. In the case of domestic abuse, for instance, up to 70 per cent of female respondents believed that women should tolerate violence to keep the family together.

This is not some abstract opinion. Up to 40 per cent of women in the survey reported having been physically abused by their husbands at some point in their marriage, some of the highest levels ever seen in IMAGES studies, and rates of emotional abuse were even higher.

Outside the home and on the street, about 60 percent of women in Egypt and Morocco reported having experienced sexual harassment in public spaces, mainly ogling and catcalling, though a significant proportion had suffered close encounters of a more menacing kind.

While #MeToo has gained ground in the Arab region as in the West, #MenToo is just as relevant. Male participants in the survey were also on the receiving end of violence, particularly in childhood, with more than a third beaten as boys at home and up to 80 per cent thrashed by teachers at school.

And then there were the sizeable minorities who found themselves in street fights or were victims of state-sponsored violence. Such experiences have profound consequences: men who were beaten at home, for example, or saw their mothers victims of the same, were more likely to go on to use violence against their own wives or to sexually harass women in public.

Across the four countries, participants talked about a ‘crisis’ of masculinity, but it is really more of a crossroads, with men and women caught between a past that no longer fits their present, and an uncertain future.

This is particularly true for young men, whose attitudes towards women’s roles and rights were, in most cases, either no different or more conservative than those of their elders, while young women were more progressive than their mothers and grandmothers.

This finding is a departure from IMAGES results in many other parts of the world and has wide-sweeping implications for relations between the sexes, in the boardroom as well as the bedroom, in the decades to come.

Amid such sombre findings the survey also offers glimmers of hope. Men across the four countries are clearly invested in fatherhood – a majority saw no shame in looking after the children and two thirds or more said they attended antenatal visits with their wives.

While most men in the study were missing in action when it came to the bathing and changing their children, more than three-fifths enjoyed playing with their sons and daughters and more than 80 per cent in some countries were in favour of paid paternity leave.

As with violence, history makes a difference: the minority of men surveyed who actually do the dishes, or change children’s nappies or believe in equal rights for women are, more often than not, the sons of fathers who themselves pulled their weight in the kitchen or shared decisions equally with their wives, or whose mothers were themselves more educated. It is this minority that is the key to change, but bringing such ideas and practices from the margins into the mainstream is the slow, hard work of legal reform, government policy-making and civil society action – the stuff of sexual evolution, not revolution.

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For more on the state of men in the Arab region, visit www.imagesmena.org

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