

# Discoursal representation of masculine parenting in Arabic and English websites

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the differences and similarities between Arabic and English parents' role in Arabic and English parenting website texts and the linguistic exponents used to address parents and signal their roles, and to find out the socio-cultural ideologies that have given rise to variations in gender roles. To this end, a corpus of 40 articles targeting gender-neutral titles and father related ones were selected equally from English and Arabic websites. Drawing on Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Sunderland's (2000, 2006) framework of analysis, the data were analysed and contrasted. The English texts reflected the prevalence of 'shared parenting' discourse, whereas the Arabic ones revealed a 'very traditional parenthood' discourse. These differences can be attributed to variation in the socio-cultural practices dominant in Arab and Western societies. Such findings will hopefully provide some useful insights for family life educators and parents who resort to such websites.

**Keywords:** parenting discourse, gender roles, Arabic and English websites

## 1. Introduction

Parenthood research has become of interest to professionals (e.g., midwives, doctors, and psychologists) to assess fathers and mothers, especially those married couples expecting a baby, or having a new baby. Thus, we analyze website texts as a source of parenting information addressed to heterosexual parents. Such texts would be a fruitful source on addressing and representing gender's different roles, relations, and practices. As a general note, this article will not explore parenthood texts targeting gay parents or the single mother or single father.

Rashley (2005) claims that parenting education on the internet is not only giving information about childcare but also conveying gendered expectations about parents' roles. In the past, Arab new parents tended to seek childcare information from elder people, relatives, and friends. As the result of massive cultural

and technological change, a lot of young parents have been separated from their extended and immediate families and started to lose familial support. Consequently, young parents have depended on different sources of parental and family life education such as websites, given that these sources are based on experts' opinions and medical professionals. New parents can seek different kinds of information from medical information, child-rearing, breastfeeding, and family life education (FLE). According to The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), FLE has the function of "equipping and empowering family members to develop knowledge and skills that enhance well-being and strengthen interpersonal relationships through an educational, preventive, and strengths-based approach".

Parental roles and how they are constructed in different cultures are not static but dynamic interactional processes. They are constantly constructed and reshaped according to the historical and cultural context (Brandth and Kvande 1998). Traditional parents' roles in the past decades were almost constant, where the mother is the main caregiver for the baby and the father is the financial supporter of the family. The discourse of motherhood describes mothers as 'selfless' and 'sacrificial', focusing exclusively on their children's care rather than on their desires and needs because children require intensive and constant attention (Warner 2005). This tendency also applies to employed mothers who are reported by an Australian study (Craig 2006) to continue their attentive role to children by reducing their personal care time, in contrast to fathers, who devote less time even though when they are fully responsible for childcare (Silver 2000). Fathers also tend to spend time with their children for enjoyment, whereas the mother is more attentive and responsive to the children's needs during the time of enjoyment spent with them (Such 2006). According to Shaw (2008), motherhood is mainly attached to intensive mothering where the mother is responsible for the child's physical needs and concerned with his/her emotional and psychological needs as well as the other household work, whereas the father's role is limited to bringing income and being the head of the family.

In the Arab world, the sense of equality for both genders, though it has not been achieved, encourages women to study and have a career, whereas the men are not encouraged to have some house holding and childcare responsibilities (Abu-Baker 2005). The masculine values, according to Abu-Baker (2005), are still conservative in Arab society, as women who demand gender equality are perceived as home racers. Instead, they should maintain the image of the good mother who is selfless and whose life is devoted to her family.

However, the growing literature indicates a changing nature of fatherhood in Western society; fathers have become more involved in childcare and in their children's lives because of a change in ideologies. Recently the number of fathers

who want to be more involved in the day-to-day care of children is increasing (Dienhart 1998; Gatrell 2006). This new attitude has amended the idea of the 'one-parent' participation in the development of the infant (Bentenuto and Venuti 2019; Brandth and Kvande 1998). Fathers have become directly involved, spending much more time with their children, and increased their co-parenting (Bentenuto and Venuti 2019).

The different parents' roles and practices and how they are constructed and reshaped by socio-cultural ideologies in different cultures are the foci of this piece of research. It purports to investigate the differences and similarities between Arabic and English parents' role in Arabic and English parenting website texts and the linguistic exponents used to address parents and signal their roles, and to find out the socio-cultural ideologies that have given rise to variations in gender roles.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Starting from the evidence that fathers have become or can be more involved in parenting and childcare as the result of a change of ideology, recent studies have highlighted the importance of fathers' role not only in taking part in childcare but also in supporting mothers, providing a "reduction of distress and increasing their mental health and general well-being" (Bentenuto and Venuti 2019, 2). Given the universality of childcare (Sunderland 2000), parentcraft texts have been thought of as a reflection of the construction of a range of parents' responsibilities and a representation of motherhood and fatherhood's specific social practices. Despite the universality of parenthood, parents' responsibilities vary cross-culturally in terms of parents' roles and their responsibilities to parentcraft. In light of this, the present study drew on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework to figure out how parenting roles and identities have been constructed through parenting discourse. In what follows, we shed light on the studies that have utilized a CDA framework to illustrate how parenting discourse portrays parental roles and identities (e.g., Lazar 2000; Sunderland 2000, 2006).

Drawing on Van Leeuwen's (1996) theoretical framework, Sunderland (2000) explored how fatherhood and gendered identities are constructed in a collection of parentcraft texts. She identified a 'part-time father/mother as the main parent' as a single complementary dominant discourse, being two sides of the same coin, running in parallel. Within this overarching discourse, she identified three fatherhood sub-discourses: 'father as a baby entertainer', 'father as a line manager', and 'father as mother's bumbling assistant'. Lexico-grammatical exponents, like 'play' and 'fun' represent 'father as a baby entertainer'. The 'bumbling assistant' discourse is recognized by the imperative verb 'remember' to remind the father of

what to do. Likewise, 'father as line manager' discourse is realized by verbs like 'ensure', 'stop', 'limit', etc. positioning the father as the patriarchal head of the family; this discourse is sometimes accompanied by a similar parallel discourse called 'mother as manager of the father's role'.

In a further study of the representation of parenthood in written media magazines, Sunderland (2006) drew on CDA to find out to what extent the linguistic features of these magazines addressing father and/or mother represent or exclude either of them in parenting, and what kind(s) of parenting they promote (e.g., shared parenting, and/or 'hands-on' fatherhood). A variety of linguistic representations of fathers and gendered discourses were detected, such as material and mental processes and their related social actors signalled by pronouns and lexical items. However, some social actors were found to be excluded by being suppressed or backgrounded. The results of her study showed that fathers are neither directly addressed nor stereotypically represented. More importantly, Sunderland found that neither shared parenting nor fathers have been fully addressed in the articles analysed. Likewise, Cameron (2013) showed that the greater number of American parenting websites address mothers, whereas the father's role in parenting is almost absent. The author also noted that some articles suggest that mothers teach fathers how to express their feelings to their children. Such a finding agrees with Sunderland's 'mother as manager of the father's role'.

Drawing on CDA, Lazar (2000) identified two kinds of discourse reflecting gender relations in a national campaign in Singapore: egalitarian, and conservative gender relations. According to these discourses, each parent was represented in two different ways. In the egalitarian discourse, motherhood has dual participation in public and private spheres, having a successful career and being a good mother at the same time. That is, parenthood is presented as symmetrical between mothers and fathers, and men are seen in the domestic sphere as cooperative and sensitive emotional fathers when playing with their children. In contrast, the conservative discourse revealed gender asymmetry in the representation of the parents' divergent roles and identities inside the house and in public and private spheres. Men are represented as the centre of the family, bringing income, being executor actors, whereas mothers are portrayed as the main caregiver, 'drying children after bathing', 'cooking for the family' and 'taking care of the kids' safety'. Such findings indicate that a mother's career and her family are two conflictual things that subvert the findings of egalitarian discourse and agree with Sunderland's (2000) 'part-time father/mother as the main parent' discourse.

Since the present study aims to investigate the representation of parents as social participants and their parenthood practices as social actions, it drew on Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework. Van Leeuwen's notion of process and social participants is borrowed from Halliday's (1994) experiential meta-function of lan-

guage which is realized by the material, mental, verbal, and relational processes and the participants related to each process. His framework is also an extension of CDA for analysing social actors and social actions. CDA is used to reveal stated and hidden values, beliefs and perspectives that are not always stated explicitly in the text (Paltridge 2006). Such a framework enables the researchers to figure out how gendered identities are being constructed through parenting discourses. Van Leeuwen (2008) examines the allocation of participants' roles in terms of 'agent' and 'patient' and in what social context they are represented. He bases his analysis on the assumption that meanings are related to culture more than to language as the latter only realizes the processes and the participants' roles. Moreover, we found that it is necessary to use Sunderland's (2000, 2006) studies, which follow Van Leeuwen's model of analysis, as she examined the linguistic exponents in parenting texts realizing parents' different roles. Accordingly, Sunderland identified parental social actors' roles like 'part-time father/mother as the main parent' as a main dominant discourse and other three parallel sub-discourses: 'father as a baby entertainer', 'father as a line manager' and 'father as mother's bumbling assistant'.

### 3. Method and procedure of data analysis

To meet the purposes of the study, the data analysis was based on family life education articles selected from two Arabic and English parenting websites. The texts selected were limited to those representing the father and gender-neutral parenthood for the mere reason that the mother's role is too obvious in the texts addressing her. A group of 40 articles were selected, 20 articles from the Arabic parenting advice website *ʕa:ʕilati*: "My Family", and 20 from the English 'Baby Centre' website. These two websites are considered the highest visited by internet users. The former has 5,777,170 followers, whereas the latter has 2,633,031 followers. These two provide similar family life contents including free advice for parents. The Arabic website is active in the UAE and Lebanon; it is divided into sections according to topics: infants, parentcraft, pregnancy and health advice; each section includes a wide range of topics. BabyCenter (babycenter.com) is an American website owned by Everyday Health Group and Everyday Health Media LLC in San Francisco, CA, USA. It is known as the 'world's number one digital parenting resource', available in nine different languages. The website is divided into sections, including articles on childcare, parenthood and other topics.

Regarding the procedure of data analysis, we utilised CDA, as it reveals inequality, power domination and hidden underlying ideologies (van Dijk 2003). We have drawn on Van Leeuwen's (2008) analytical tools that work best for

analysing the participants' gender roles and practices. We analysed each individual text by identifying its genre and focus. Taking the clause as the basic unit of analysis, we analysed each clause to isolate the different types of processes and the social participants related to each process in order to identify the role of each parent in parenthood and to figure out the active and passive participants and their power relations in the social interaction. We identified the different types of address terms used to refer to each participant, and the processes related to their social roles and actions. We isolated the various parenting discourses that surfaced in the Arabic and English texts to compare them and find out the ideologies promoted in these texts.

## 4. Data analysis

### 4.1 Representing social actors and social actions in the English texts

This subsection presents the frequency of occurrence of the different social participants, 'father' and 'mother' or both, and the processes representing parenthood. The social participants are involved in social interactions, realized by the material, mental and verbal processes.

#### 4.1.1 Social actors in the English texts

Table 1 exhibits two types of address terms: lexical items and pronouns; they can be categorized into terms related to the mother, others that relate to the father, and some that are gender-neutral addressing both parents.

**Table 1.** Frequency of English address terms

Address terms	Mother		Father		Gender-neutral		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
lexical terms	14	1%	84	7%	74	6%	172	14%
Pronouns	58	5%	269	22%	729	59%	1056	86%
<b>Total</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>803</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>1228</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1 demonstrates that the gender-neutral address terms addressing both parents in the English texts constitute 65%, in contrast to 29% and 6% addressing fathers and mothers, respectively. 'Father' as a social actor is represented with 7% by lexical items like *father*, *dad*, *daddy* and *husband*, while the lexical items *mother*, *mom* and *mommy* stand for 'mother'. Gender-neutral terms are realized by lexical items like 'parent(s)'. The pronouns utilized make up 86% of the total of English

address terms. The gender-neutral pronouns constitute 59% of the total pronouns, whereas the frequencies of pronouns addressing fathers and mothers are 22% and 5%, respectively.

The following instances exemplify the lexical items used to represent the social participants:

- (1) “Many *parents* don’t have a choice; they need to work outside to support their families.”
- (2) “Most *fathers* take vacation time or sick days when their children are born.”
- (3) “Breastfeeding continues the exclusive relationship the *mother* and infant experienced during pregnancy.”

The following examples represent the pronouns used as social participants in the English data.

- (4) “When the baby is finished nursing so *you* can be the one to rock her back to sleep.”
- (5) “But *you* don’t have to back off just because *she’s* taken care of the baby’s food.”

To illustrate, the gender-neutral pronoun ‘you’ in Example (4) addresses no specific gender; this makes ‘mother and father’ equally addressed in this social practice in contrast to ‘baby’ as a goal, which behaves as a passive participant in this process. On the other hand, ‘mother’ in the second clause of Example (5) is represented as a social actor by the feminine singular pronoun ‘she’, who participates in the material process, ‘take care’, whereas ‘father’ as a social actor is referred to by the second person pronoun, ‘you’, in the first clause of the same sentence.

The text analysis revealed that ‘father’ has been represented as an active participant, having different roles. He takes parental leave to help his wife as in Example (2) and a caregiver, having the function of the actor of ‘to rock the baby back to sleep’ as is shown in 4. On the other hand, the mother is given the role of breastfeeding as in Example (3). Her role in this situation is dominant as she is the direct and active addressee due to her physical nature. Concerning the gender-neutral lexical items and pronouns related to them, mothers and fathers have equal roles, as the genderless lexical item ‘parent’ is used to address both in the context of working outside the house, as shown in Example (1).

#### 4.1.2 *Social actions in the English texts*

We found the following types of social processes: material, mental and verbal. As shown in Table 2, the frequency of English processes related to gender-neutral

participants is the highest (68%) in comparison to those related to fathers (24%) and mothers (8%).

**Table 2.** Frequency of English processes

Processes	Mother		Father		Gender-neutral		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Material	25	5%	80	16%	233	45%	338	66%
Mental	15	3%	29	6%	75	15%	119	23%
Verbal	1	0%	12	2%	42	8%	55	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>350</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>512</b>	<b>100%</b>

The material processes are those of doing and happening; they include action verbs such as ‘give’, ‘work’ and ‘play’. Table 2 illustrates that the material processes that relate to gender-neutral participants make up 45%, whereas the father’s material processes make up 16% and the mother is represented in 5% of the material processes. The following exemplify the material processes:

- (6) “Some parents are fortunate to be able to **choose** whether they **stay** at home with the kids or **to work** outside the home.”
- (7) “California was the first state to offer paid family leave laws. (If you **work** in that state you may be able to take up to six weeks at partial pay **to care** for your new baby).”
- (8) “Dads have a really important role **to play** in breastfeeding. Here are a few ways you can **help**; **take on** your partner’s chores and **help out** whenever you can. When she is breastfeeding **bring** her a pillow or a glass of water or offer **to burp** your baby when he’s done eating.”
- (9) “On nights when you don’t have **to work** the next day, have your partner wake you up when the baby is finished nursing so you can be the one **to rock** her back to sleep. Or **take turns** getting up for feedings.”

As shown in Table 2, the dominant discourse is that of ‘shared parenting’ which is exemplified in 6, ‘stay at home with the kids’, or ‘work outside house’, both of which reflect equal parenting opportunities. The processes related to fathers constitute 24%, most of which (16%) are material verbs like ‘help out’, ‘bring’, ‘burp’, ‘rock’ and ‘take on’ as in Examples (8) and (9). The actor of these processes is the father, whereas the goal is either the mother, who is not directly mentioned but referred to by the process of breastfeeding, or the baby, who is referred to in the context of processes like ‘burp’ or ‘rock’.



Mental processes, on the other hand, are reactions rather than actions; they carry with them “the emotions and attitudes that belong to these actions” (Van Leeuwen 2008, 56). These verbs have two participants, sener and phenomenon. The following examples demonstrate this social process.

- (10) “**Remember** to ask for leave and getting approval early in the pregnancy.”
- (11) “This is true of a lot of dads I know. They **enjoy** the time spent playing with their children in the moment, while mom sits worrying in the background.”
- (12) “My wife really **appreciates** everything I do for them.”

As it is shown in Table 2, mental verbs have the percentage of 23% of the total processes, 15% of which relates to gender-neutral participants, whereas 6% and 3% are associated with fathers and mothers, respectively. In Example (10), the sener of the gender-neutral mental process, ‘remember’, is the implicit second person generic pronoun ‘you’, which refers to both parents. The mental verb ‘enjoy’ in Example (11) has two participants: ‘dads’ as a ‘sener’ and ‘their children’, the phenomenon. Instance 12 exemplifies the mother’s mental reaction, ‘appreciate’, to the phenomenon ‘everything the father does for the children’.

Processes related to verbal interactions constitute 11%, most of which (8%) are gender-neutral processes addressing both parents equally, as exemplified in the following:

- (13) “When your pre-schooler’s time out is over, **talk** about actions that put him there in the first place.”
- (14) “Nearly two-thirds of dads **say** they’re more involved in the physical aspects of caring for their children – changing diapers, making meals, giving baths – than their dads were.”

The data analysis revealed that the frequency of English gender-neutral shared parenting processes is the highest (68%) in comparison to the processes assigned to fathers and mothers individually (24% and 8%, respectively). This indicates that the discourse of shared parenting is actively drawn on in the English parenting texts. The English genderless lexical item ‘parent(s)’ is used in the context of working outside the house as shown in Example (6). This indicates that ‘mother’ and ‘father’ in the English texts have equal opportunities to work outside the house and support their families or to ‘stay at home with the kids’. What further supports the dominance of ‘shared parenting’ is the high frequency of material processes (45%) related to childcare such as ‘raise’, ‘nurture’, ‘feed’, ‘care’ and ‘take turns’; housework (e.g., ‘clean up’, ‘work’, ‘prepare’ and ‘cook’); or others associated with parental leave (e.g., ‘stay with the kids to take care of’ and ‘work outside house’, as in Examples (6) and (7)). Paternity leave discourse gives rise to the

appearances of two other types of discourses: ‘the involved father’ and ‘mother working outside the house.’ The idea of the former is inspired by the discourse of ‘the modern father’ (Stoppard 2007) who is encouraged to be a competent full-time parent following the mother’s steps. The English texts encourage fathers to be involved in childcare actions like ‘changing diapers,’ ‘making meals’ and ‘giving baths’ since the ‘mother who works outside the house’ is compensated by the ‘involved father’ discourse that presents fathers as doers of mother’s actions, as in Example (14). Mothers, on the other hand, are represented as doing untraditional tasks, which were restricted to fathers such as working for money and having a career, as shown in Examples (1), (6) and (9). Such a tendency is in contrast with the traditional division of labour which presents the father as the financial supporter in contrast to “the naturalness of the practices associated with the ‘Mother as main parent’” (Sunderland 2006, 524).

Our analysis has shown that ‘father’ has been represented not only as a financial supporter but also as an agent having another minor role in the context of the mother’s breastfeeding. His role is signalled by interactive processes like ‘help out,’ ‘care,’ ‘burp’ and ‘rock,’ as shown in Examples (8) and (9). However, this partial role is sometimes refined by the ‘mother as the manager of the father’s actions’ as exemplified in (9), where the mother is responsible for the father’s actions related to the baby. Though this father’s role is partial, the mother ‘appreciates’ what the father does (see Example (12)); such appreciation indicates that the father seeks evaluation of his partial role. In a text entitled ‘Dads Today,’ the author stated the top three things to be done by dads, one of which is cleaning the home (mopping, sweeping, tidying up). These things present fathers as doing the work of mothers and give them a degree of competency in contrast to Sunderland’s incompetent parent discourse, ‘father as a bumbling assistant’.

## 4.2 Representation of social actors and social actions in the Arabic texts

This subsection presents the frequency of occurrence of the different social participants in the Arabic texts, and the different types of social processes the participants are involved in.

### 4.2.1 *Social actors in the Arabic texts*

Table 3 shows that 44% of the address terms in the Arabic texts relates to ‘mother,’ while 30% addresses ‘father’ and 26% represents gender-neutral terms addressing both parents.

The lexical items addressing fathers are realized by *ʔab* ‘father’ or its plural *ʔa:baa:ʔ* ‘fathers,’ whereas gender-neutrality is expressed by lexical items like *ʔahl*

**Table 3.** Frequency of Arabic address terms

Address terms	Mother		Father		Gender-neutral		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Lexical items	31	4%	103	14%	63	8%	197	26%
Pronouns	292	40%	121	16%	137	18%	550	74%
<b>Total</b>	<b>323</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>747</b>	<b>100%</b>

and *wa:lidayin* ‘parents’, and those related to mothers are signalled by *ʔum* ‘mother’ or its plural *ʔumaha:t* ‘mothers’, as exemplified in (15) and (16).

- (15) *yalfab-u al-ʔabu dawran ʔasa:siyyan fi: taʔli:m-i ʔaʔfa:li-hi il-ʔinʔiba:ʔ-i wa-lʔistiqla:liyyah*  
 ‘The father plays an **important** role in teaching his children discipline and independence.’
- (16) *tasarufat-u al-ʔahli ʔama:m-a l-ʔaʔfa:l-i tuʔbaʔu ʔaya:ta-hum.*  
 ‘**Parents**’ behaviour in front of their children affects their lives.’

As can be seen in the examples above, *al-ʔab* ‘the father’ and the gender-neutral participant *al-ʔahl* ‘parents’ are the social actors in Examples (15) and (16), respectively, whereas *ʔaʔfa:li-h* ‘his children’ and *al-ʔaʔfa:l* ‘the children’ are the goals, respectively, in the same examples.

Arabic pronouns, on the other hand, constitute 74% of the address terms used. The following examples illustrate pronouns as social participants in Arabic:

- (17) *man qa:la ʔanna al-ʔaba la: yumkinu-hu ʔan yahtamma bihim wa- yam-naʔahum ʔana:na-hu wa- yuxaʔiʔa waqtan liyalʔaba maʔahum.*  
 ‘Who said that the father can’t **take care** of **them**, **give** them attention and assign some of his time **to play** with them?’
- (18) *Salim-a: ʔifla-kuma: aʔ-ʔalata wa-ku:n-a: al-qudwata al-ʔa:liʔata lah-u fayara:-kuma: tuʔaliyy-a:n-i wa tumazidd-a:n-i l-xa:liq*  
 ‘Teach **your** child how to pray, be a good model to him so he sees **you** pray and praise the Creator.’

The father as a social actor is referred to in Example (17) by the third person singular masculine attached pronoun, *-hu* ‘he’, whereas the third person plural pronoun *hum* referring to children is the goal. In Example (18), the gender-neutral second person dual pronoun *-a:* represents both parents.

#### 4.2.2 Representing social action in the Arabic texts

Table 4 displays the frequency of processes that were used in the Arabic texts. The processes related to ‘mother’ constitute 47%; those related to the father are 28%, and the gender-neutral processes comprise 25%.

**Table 4.** Frequency of Arabic processes

Processes	Mother		Father		Gender-neutral		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Material	109	36%	69	23%	53	17%	231	76%
Mental	27	9%	12	4%	12	4%	51	17%
Verbal	7	2%	4	1%	9	3%	20	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>302</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 4 indicates that the processes related to ‘mother’ are the most frequent, constituting 47%. The following exemplify the material processes:

- (19) *al-ʔumu tahtamu biʔiʔsa:m-i ʔifli-ha as-ʔayi:r... , tasharu ʕalyiyhi il-lya:li:*  
‘The mother **takes care of feeding** her baby..., and **stays up** the nights for him.’
- (20) *ʔalmustaḥsan ʔan tahtami:na da:iman bidirasat-i ʔiflik-i.*  
‘You would better always **take care of teaching** your child.’
- (21) *mina al-muhimi ʔan tusa:ʕid-i: ʕari:kak-i ʕala: ɗabʔi ʔaʕ ʕa:bih-i: fi il-marati il-muqbilah.*  
‘You must **help** your partner to control his nerves the next time.’
- (22) *ʔamma al-ʔabu fayaliban ma: yufaɗilu ʔawla:dihi yaʕtari: lahum ma: yuri:du:n, yadʕamuhum fi il-ʕamal-i wa yufaʕiʕuhum ʕala at-taḥali: biʔiqah.*  
‘When it comes to the father, he often prefers children, he **buys** them what they want, **encourages** and **supports** them to work and have confidence.’
- (23) *yaka:du yanḥaʕiru dawru al-ʔabi fi: daʕfi il-fawa:ti:r-i wa- taʕmi:ni il-madxu:li il-ma:diy*  
‘The father’s role can be restricted to **paying bills** and **providing income** for the family.’
- (24) *yaqu:mu- zawʕuk-i bi-ʔxɗi il-ʔaʕfa:li fi: nuzhah.*  
‘Your husband **takes** the children on a picnic.’

The material process exemplified in (19)–(21) reflect the different roles assigned to ‘mother’ in the Arabic texts. They include childcare realized by *tahtam* ‘takes care’, *Iʕsa:m* ‘feed’, *tusa:ʕidi*: ‘help’, *tashar* ‘stay up’, and husband care signalled by

'help your partner to control his nerves.' This is in addition to her responsibility about housework (e.g., cook, clean up, tidy, prepare). On the other hand, the processes related to fathers as social participants constitute 28%, most of which (23%) are material verbs like *yafṭari*: 'buy', *yadṣam* 'support' and *yufaṣṣiḥ* 'encourage' as in Example (22); *daḥṣi il-fawa:ti:r* 'pay the bills', *taḥmi:ni il-madxu:l* 'provide income' as in 23; and *ḥaxḏa* 'takes' as in (24). Some of these verbs are interactive like 'play with children.' Gender-neutral participants make 17% of the total material processes. As shown in Example (18), verbs like *tuṣaliy-a:n* 'pray' and *ṣalim-a:* 'teach' are used to express this social shared parenting process.

Mental processes, on the other hand, constitute 17%; those related to 'mother' are 9%, whereas father and gender-neutral participants' processes constitute 8%, divided equally. The following are examples of this:

- (25) *ḥar-razulu l-mutafahim-u huwa alaḏ: yuqadiru zawzata-hu: wa yatafahamu zuru:fahaa*  
 'The man who **understands** well is the one who **appreciates** his wife, and **understands** her conditions.'
- (26) *likuli wa:lidayni namaṭun xa:ṣun yattabiṣ-a:ni-hi fi: tarbiyati ḥaḥfa:li-hima: wa yuḥmin- a:ni bi-faṣṣaliyyati-hi*  
 'Parents follow special methods to raise their children and they **believe** in their efficiency.'

Examples (25)–(26) illustrate gender-neutral mental processes like *yuḥmin-a:ni* 'believe', *yatafaham* 'understand' and *yuqadir* 'appreciate' related to fathers.

Regarding the verbal processes, they are infrequently used (7%). Gender-neutral participants are represented in 3% and the mother in 2%, whereas the father has 1%. The following are some examples.

- (27) *taḥdaḏ-a: maṣa ḥaḥfa:li-kuma ṣani illahi wa al-di:ni wa ḥubi il-ḥaxar.*  
 'Talk to your children about God, religion, and loving others.'
- (28) *yumkinu lil-ḥabi ḥan yuxbira ḥibnata-hu qabla ḥan tanama qiṣatan*  
 'The father can **tell** his daughter a story before she goes to bed.'

Example (27) presents gender-neutral processes like *taḥdaḏ-a:* 'talk'; the sayers are parents who are referred to by the dual gender-neutral pronoun *-a:*, whereas the receiver of the process is *ḥaḥfa:li-kuma:* 'your children'.

Even though none of the titles of the Arabic texts selected has any reference to mothers as social participants in childcare, the results of Arabic text analysis show a high discrepancy in frequency between the social processes representing mothers' actions (47%) and fathers' practices (28%), whereas the genderless participants' processes constitute 25%. Such discrepancies in frequencies of the social

practices reveal how motherhood and fatherhood are constructed differently in the Arabic texts.

The high frequency of processes related to ‘mother’ indicates that she is the most active social participant, who frequently has the agent’s role in parenting practice. It also indicates that she has been taken as a standard reference not only for childcare, but also for husband care and family care. She is also addressed as the manager of household affairs to the extent that she is primarily identified as ‘housewife’. Further, mother is presented as the primary caregiver who is expected to feed the baby and stay up the nights with him. These multiple social roles are expressed by linguistic signals like ‘care’ in contexts like ‘Takes care of feeding’ and ‘stays up the nights for him’ (Example (19)), and with regard to take care of her child’s teaching as in Example (20), “You better always take care of teaching your child”. In other words, the cornerstone of parenthood in the Arabic texts is the mother, who can be considered as ‘other-centeredness’.

A further role given to the mother is to please her husband and reduce his stress. Pleasure can be elicited by taking care of cooking as a good way to win her husband’s affections, following the Arabic saying, “The quickest way to a husband’s heart is through his stomach”, as indicated in one of the articles that advises mothers to please their husbands by “preparing his favourite dish as a surprise”. Likewise, she is also directed to alleviate her husband’s stress by prompts like “You must help your partner to control his nerves the next time” (see Example (21)). Such roles assigned to ‘mother’ give rise to a new type of discourse; that is the mother as ‘the manager of the father’s mood’. This stands in contrast with what is normally expected of the father who is supposed to support his wife by reducing her distress and increasing her mental health and general well-being (Bentenuto and Venuti 2019). Playing multiple roles, including childcare, feeding, staying up the night for the children and managing the father’s mood and family give rise to a new discourse that can be called ‘mother as the manager of family life’, through which the mother helps and guides everyone in the home.

Regarding fathers’ roles, being a good father is almost associated with generating income. The father is the one who is supposed to pay for all the family necessities such as paying bills, providing family income, and buying children and the mother what they want (see Examples (22) and (23)). Thus, fathers find their identity in activities away from home and in ‘material security’ for the family but not in child care giving practices.

The Arabic dataset revealed that the fatherhood discourse running through the Arabic texts is less than the ‘part-time father’ parenting discourse discussed in Sunderland (2000). Asking questions like “Who said that the father can’t **take care** of **them**, or **give** them attention...?” (Example (17)) presupposes that fatherhood and childcare are incompatibly matched. That is, such a question can only

be asked based on the presupposition that it is problematic for fathers to take care of children. However, there are marginal roles assigned to fathers realized by the verb ‘help’. Such roles surfaced on the margins of childcare “...dealing with children’s problems”. Thus, it is apparent that the father’s involvement in childcare is covertly minimal.

Furthermore, the Arabic texts demonstrated that fathers could provide care in two ways, one of which is entertaining children outside home. This is signalled by material and transactive verbs like ‘play’ and ‘takes the children on a picnic’ (Example (24)) together with transactive verbal processes such as ‘telling bedtime stories’ in Example (28). In contrast, mothers have no energy left to do such a work because of the tedious childcare and housework they are engaged in. Fathers can also provide care by supporting and encouraging their children and teaching them independence, discipline and confidence (see Examples (15) and (22)). This in turn agrees with Brandth and Knvade’s (1998) view that masculinity is associated with independence, as mothers tend to be too close to their children and worry much about them; this, in turn, could “affect the child’s ability to be independent” (303).

It was also found that shared parenting in the Arabic texts constituted 26%. It is signalled by lexical exponents like *al-ʔahl* ‘the parents’ and *wa:lidajin* ‘parents’, and pronouns relating to them. At first sight, the neutering in the use of such terms suggests symmetrical mutual sharing of social roles. However, considering our analysis, the apparent de-gendering continues to gloss over unequal sharing of roles as much as before, with the exception of intermittently mutual tasks that are irrelevant to childcare (e.g., “to talk to their children about ethics, religious issues, Allah and love for all”). They are admonished to teach them prayers and urged to play the role of a good model to be followed by their children, as it is explicitly stated in Example (18). What seems bizarre is that sometimes the apparent sharedness evinced in addressing both genders in the gender-neutral texts, immediately shifts to directly address mothers only, suppressing the father’s role in all situations as exemplified in the following instance:

- (29) *zami:suna: naʔlamu ʔanna aʔifla yuħa:wilu: taqli:da taʔarrufa:ti il-ʔahli ka:fatan. li ða:lika ʕalayki ʔann tantabihi: ʔila: taʕaʕi:ki maʕa zawʕuki*  
 ‘We all know that a child tries to imitate all his parents’ actions and behaviour,  
 so you have to be careful about the way you deal with your husband.’

In this example, the author starts addressing parents using the gender-neutral participant, parents. The anonymous reader expects that it is an invitation to view parenthood as being shared. However, the author immediately shifted to address mothers only, suppressing the father’s role. Such a radical suppression presumably suggests that the authors of these articles presuppose that the only possible reader

for these texts is the mother given that motherhood is a default job in the Arab world.

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of the two sets of data revealed two opposing types of discourse operating in the domain of parenthood, each of which regulated gender relations differently. The former was a parenting discourse encouraging gender equity, evident in the English texts; it almost presents gender equality not only in parenthood but also in other aspects of life within the private and public spheres. The Arabic texts, on the other hand, reflected a conservative discourse, which specified the traditional roles and responsibilities to be fulfilled by each gender. The latter portrays men as money providers who have career commitments outside the house but do nothing for the essentials of childcare as such a role is restricted to mothers in the home front.

It can be argued that these parenting discourses are mainly influenced by the socio-cultural and ideological aspects of each society. The English texts promote a kind of egalitarian parenting discourse that is concerned with gender parity in public and private spheres. This shared parenting type is evident in 68% of these texts and further emphasized by the gender-neutral terms representing mother and father symmetrically and equally, encouraging a non-traditional division of labour. Disrupting traditional gender stereotypes, mothers in the English texts have a strong presence in the workplace, which has been traditionally reserved for men, and men, on the other hand, are seen in private spheres, doing household tasks and children rearing, which have been traditionally reserved for women. Marsiglio (1995) and Deinhart (1998) point out that marriage and divorce, patterns of employment and work hours have given rise to a change of parenting responsibilities. Authors of the English texts try to respond to such a change by assigning additional roles for the father in order for him to be more involved in parenting and encouraging him to take paternity leaves to look after the new child if his/her mother has a career outside home.

Although most of the English texts encourage a symmetrical relationship between both parents and advocate a fair division of paid labour, such views do not represent all English societies and cultures' perspectives. For example, one of the texts analysed encourages mothers to stay at home if the family does not need the mother's salary:

- (30) "Families that didn't need the mother's salary might benefit from the mom being at home for the first year."



Such a statement invites both parents to look at parental roles as being compatible rather than equally divided between them. Likewise, there are other western conservative movements that have a similar discourse that opposes the one advocated in the English texts. For example, Spiteri and Fitzgerald (2016) point out that parents in Amish society in the United States have distinct traditional responsibilities and roles in the family. The man is considered the head of the family and the main breadwinner. Amish mothers, in contrast, have different roles to fulfil as well. They are the household managers, responsible for raising the children and cooking their food.

Unlike the English texts analysed, the Arabic ones present a different picture of mothers and fathers' roles. They portray women in the domain of household, childcare, and husband-concern spheres. A woman's success as a mother is measured in relation to how much she sacrifices or her self-effacement for the sake of family members' pleasure. The father, on the other hand, is portrayed in a very traditional image, which has nothing to do with the essentials of childcare; his role is limited to generating income and entertaining children. This, in turn, agrees with Such (2006), who points out that the man's role is represented in spending time and having fun with his family, whereas the mother's part is to spend her time with them to respond to their needs. The Arabic texts also demonstrate that the father does not have a role to play after the birth of a new infant. What supports this finding is the absence of linguistic signals that relate to 'paternity leave' and to 'the mother who works outside the house' in Arabic discourse in contrast to the English texts, which promote seeing mothers in paid labour force contexts. In short, the Arabic texts encourage the idea of the intensive mother, who is stereotyped as the selfless parent who makes sacrifices for the life aspects of the child, on the one hand, and as a default carer for the family and household labour, on the other. The Arabic texts also stereotype fathers as significantly not involved in childcare and household domestic affairs, but only in responsibilities outside the home.

Such a prevalent traditional discourse of parenting overwhelmed by gender stereotypical roles assigned to mothers and fathers in the Arabic texts can be attributed to the social construction of the Arab family and socio-cultural and religious traditions since culture has a major role in structuring parenting practices and can transmit guidelines about parenting (Dwairy and Sakleh 2006). The Arab family, in general, is characterized by being collective and paternalistic, whereby preference is given to males (Abu-Baker 2005; Al-Ali 2006; Joseph 2000), whereas women in religious traditions are regarded as subservient to men (Mahmood 2012). Consequently, man is mostly presented in the Arabic text as the head of the family who is accorded a primary status in the struggle outside the house domains to safeguard his family and secure its living, whereas he plays a marginal role with

respect to childcare. In contrast, the wife does almost everything related to this role herself. The optimal mother, according to Arab traditions, is characterised by closed involvement, willingness and devotion to make sacrifices for childcare and her husband's comfort. At the same time, she should suppress her pain and problems caused by her husband following the Arabic folk saying, "women's mouths are for eating but not for talking", as her success is measured by her ability to cope with these problems. She is also encouraged to endear herself to her husband and be obedient to him.

However, this does not mean that the traditional conservative discourse is the absolute homogeneous ideology dominant in Arab culture, or that the egalitarian discourse is the only ideology prevalent among Western culture, but there are other competing discourses in each individual culture. Unlike the traditional discourse advocated in the Arabic texts, some Arab scholars (e.g., Abu-Baker 2005; Al-Kaa'ki 2000; Mahmood 2012) have opposing views and promote gender equality in most aspects of life within the private and public spheres and consider women as victims of socio-cultural traditions. For example, Al-Kaa'ki (2000) blames Arab women who tend to identify with the traditional norms even though they are sometimes the victims of some of these norms. Abu-Baker (2005) questions Arab inconsistent calls for equality between men and women indicating that although there have been calls for equality in the Arab world after Arab women were given the opportunity to pursue higher education and work to serve their family, there have been no parallel calls for men, neither for sharing in the responsibility for raising children nor for changing their values in the division of labour. She criticised Arab sociocultural traditions that warn women not to emphasize their professional and financial achievements for fear of threatening their husbands' face and controlling them. Likewise, some Muslim scholars like Al-Ghazali (2005) oppose those who think that women's job is to cook, respond to the husband's lust and fatten the children. Ibn Al-Qayyim (2007) also stated that it is not compulsory for the wife to do the housework, but if she does such an act, it is rather an act of noble manners.

Regarding the role of religious traditions, we need to call upon the pre-Islamic historical context to explain some ideologies since "all social practices are tied to specific historical contexts and are the means by which existing social relations are reproduced or contested" (Janks 1997, 329). Before the coming of Islam, Arab males used to oppress women and despise femininity; women were not allowed to work outside and move in public alone due to the false conception that anything related to the woman is *'awrah* 'bare and exposed'. This attitude has its roots in the prominent worry among Arabs that if a woman is not supervised and is working independently of the males, she is open to an approach by other men (Al-Ali 2006). Unfortunately, some of these practices and conceptions continued after

Islam to the extent that some Arabs have come to regard them as native to Islamic traditions although they bear no relation to Islam because they are incompatible with the Quranic and Prophetic teachings, which advocate that what forms family life is mutual respect and understanding and urge men to be kind to their wives in many verses, like “Consort with them in kindness” (The Holy Qur’an, iv: verse 19). Likewise, the Prophetic sayings have laid down sound standards to judge a man (e.g., “Best amongst you is he who is good to his wife”). Moreover, Islam has given women the right to work outside in institutional services like nursing, female education, medical treatment, etc.

Some other Arab scholars think that Islam itself has accorded woman a secondary status and has not given her equal rights in comparison to men. For example, Asad (2003) and Mahmood (2012) argue that Islamic religious traditions have given authority to men over women, constrained people’s freedom and accorded a secondary status to women. Asad (2003) thinks that religious beliefs are founded on constraints; this, in turn, has posed danger to the freedom of oneself and others. Mahmood (2012) thinks that Muslim family law is unfair to women in matters like divorce and child custody and considers woman as subservient to man. She assumes that if these laws were secularized, they would yield greater gender equality. However, there is another opposing view among other Arab and Muslim intellectuals (e.g., Qutub 2006) who maintain that Islam endorses the equity of rights between men and women and treats the two sexes as equal component parts of humanity who are entitled to equal rights although it differentiates between them regarding their distinct functions in life, such as woman’s specialized functions of conceiving and nurturing. This conception of equal rights does not mean similar rights. Rather, there is a kind of labour division and equity in roles and obligations between men and women toward family and society in Islam which eventually ends up with equal rights.

## 6. Conclusion

As stated earlier, the aim of this study was to investigate the representation of fatherhood in Arabic and English articles devoted to parental childcare. The analysis has identified two major opposing types of discourse, the egalitarian and traditional discourses, and a minor intermediate part-time one, each of which represents the contribution of fathers and mothers in the domain of parenthood but regulates gender practices differently. The first presents the mother and father equally in almost all aspects of family life except the function of breastfeeding where the mother is privileged. The traditional parenthood discourse amounts to a kind of patriarchal division of labour placing the father in only one position

which is that of the family supporter, while the mother is responsible for the house holding and childcare. The minor discourse represents the father with some partial roles to play such as 'father as the baby entertainer'. However, the father's role in the Arabic texts is not that significant to the extent that it falls short of achieving Sunderland's (2000) 'the part-time father/mother as the main parent' discourse. In contrast, the writers of the English texts promote an almost equal shared parenting discourse that has been extended beyond Sunderland's father discourses' boundaries promoted two decades ago.

These parenting practices are constructed unequally according to different cultural settings (Messner 1993; Segal 1990) as the roles given to either parent are influenced by the ideology of that culture (Short 2005). The English articles promote a parenting discourse encouraging gender equity, whereas the Arabic texts have reflected a conservative discourse overwhelmed by gender stereotypical roles that can be attributed to the social construction of Arab families and their socio-cultural affiliations. According to Sunderland (2006) and Althusser (1984), socio-cultural ideologies have given rise to the 'naturalness' or 'obviousness' of the parental practices and roles associated with each gender in various cultures. However, these conclusions about socio-cultural parent practices can be valid for the websites analysed but cannot be generalized for the entire Arab or English culture. That is because there is no absolute homogeneous ideological discourse dominant in each culture, but there are competing discourses running in each individual culture.

Based on the data analysed, it is recommended that the authors of the Arabic texts produce a more balanced discourse by avoiding gender stereotypes and inequalities so that more individuals can be reached and benefit from parenting websites. The results of this study can benefit family life educators and childrearing professionals in providing content that concerns both parents. Furthermore, parents who seek childcare information should read the content of these websites critically in order to be aware of the gender roles provided in parenting education texts (Cameron 2013), to identify inequalities and to be liberated from gender oppressive information (Brookfield 2005).

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