



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief builds on a larger father involvement study that encompasses 10 countries in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region to identify some of the key challenges of father involvement in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Using mixed methods with a modified Fatherhood Scale survey and life history interviews, the study found notable differences in father involvement in education across geographic, gender, and generational factors. Overall, fathers in GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) tend to be perceived as more encouraging of their children's education, especially for their daughters, but are less engaged in the types of quality involvement that are key to educational achievement. Based on the findings of this study, this policy brief highlights some of the key challenges of GCC fathers' involvement. We conclude by offering recommendations to create and support an education environment in the GCC that values quality father involvement.

## Father Involvement and Education in the GCC

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### Introduction

Fathers play an important role in the development and education of their children. However, fathers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) face several barriers to involvement in their children's education, including strong gender roles that emphasize the mother as largely responsible for children's education and the father as responsible for material and financial provision (Ridge et al., 2018). As a result, fathers in the GCC struggle to engage in the types of involvement that research finds to positively impact educational outcomes.

This policy brief highlights some of the findings of a regional fatherhood study conducted by Ridge and Jeon (2020). The study surveyed 1,684 individuals and interviewed 55 participants from the MENA region using a retrospective mixed methods approach to explore how adults perceived their father (Ridge & Jeon, 2020). Ridge and Jeon (2020) found that father involvement differs across geographic, gender, and generational factors. They also found that GCC fathers need to be supported to become more involved in relationships with their sons, and especially when they are of an older generation and/or are less educated (Ridge & Jeon, 2020). Based on the findings of the larger study, this policy brief specifically examines some of the key challenges to GCC father involvement in their children's education. We conclude by offering policy recommendations to address these challenges and foster quality father involvement, which will support children's educational outcomes.

### Background

While much research has examined the impact of parental involvement on educational outcomes with a significant emphasis on mothers, father involvement has been studied much less. Father involvement is an important factor in children's development in education and social and emotional wellbeing. Research shows that father involvement is associated with improved academic achievement, social skills, self-esteem, behavioral improvement, and higher standardized test scores.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bing, 1963; Gadsen & Ray, 2003; Goldstein, 1982; Kevorkian, 2010; Lam et al., 2012; McBride et al., 2005; Michiels et al., 2010; Nord, 1998; Nord & West, 2001; Radin, 1982

Children of involved fathers also tend to enjoy school more and have fewer behavioral issues, making them less likely to fail a grade or face suspension or expulsion (Flouri et al., 2002; Nord, 1998).

Father involvement consists of many types of involvement, both positive and negative, and the impact of father involvement is dependent on the kinds of involvement fathers engage in. Existing studies define father involvement to include categories, such as educational involvement, affection, material provision, and moral training, and negative factors such as psychological control (Dick, 2014; Ridge & Jeon, 2020). These types of involvement impact educational outcomes such as literacy, academic achievement, and standardized test scores.<sup>2</sup> As a result, research shows that the mere presence of a father is not an adequate predictor of success, as it can lead to fathers who are "technically present but functionally absent" (LaRossa, 1988, 454). Instead, other types of father involvement, such as reading to their children and engaging in meaningful conversations around social and political issues, as well as the quality of that engagement, are key to ensuring that fathers positively shape educational outcomes (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012). Additionally, a father's engagement in his children's lives impacts how those children become involved in their future children's education, impacting the next generation of fathers and mothers.<sup>3</sup>

Looking specifically at the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, father involvement has its own unique challenges and opportunities. Research on father involvement and education in the MENA region is even more scarce, which may be partially due to perceived gender roles in which the father is perceived primarily as the family's material provider and the mother is responsible for both children's upbringing and education (Ridge et al., 2018). This gendered approach to educational involvement is further compounded by the tendency for schools to be gender segregated, often excluding a father or mother from their opposite-gender children's education and anecdotally leaving some children effectively without involvement from either parent (Ridge & Jeon, 2020). In addition to gendered aspects of involvement, perceptions about the value and impact of education is a major factor in parental involvement. When parents believe education will lead to better employment opportunities, they are more likely to encourage their children's academic excellence and higher education attainment (Wiseman et al., 2009). However, high parental expectations are not necessarily translated to higher academic outcomes. Wiseman and Zhao (2020) found that parents in the Middle East have high expectations for their children's education, but their

actual achievement reflected in PISA scores and higher education enrollment is significantly lower than these expectations.

In focusing on fathers and the impact of their involvement on education, we do not intend to minimize the importance of mothers. Rather, we recognize a valuable opportunity to explore the patterns, challenges, and opportunities for father involvement in light of regional and generational shifts in social norms and gender roles, which shape the differing parenting that fathers and mothers offer. Focusing on fathers underscores changing definitions of what it means to be a good father, as well as the significant role men can have within the family in collaboration with the established role of mothers<sup>4</sup> and school institutions.<sup>5</sup> However, one hindrance to research on parental involvement in the MENA region is that few studies differentiate between the impact of fathers and mothers on their children's education. Those that do tend to be qualitative by design and focus on a single country, limiting what can be said about larger trends in father involvement at a regional level (Al-Jazzaf, 2012; Aram 2010).

Having surveyed existing literature on father involvement with a particular interest in research in the Middle East, we will next summarize the design and findings of our father involvement study conducted with participants from the MENA region. We then use these findings to identify key challenges that arise from this study and offer recommendations for policy makers, educators, and other stakeholders in the GCC.

## The Study

To investigate trends in father involvement in children's education, this study used mixed methods, surveying approximately 1680 individuals from 10 MENA countries, five of which are in the GCC (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) and collecting 55 life histories from 7 of the total 10 countries. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling with demographic variation in age, gender, nationality, religion, marital status, and father presence during childhood.

The study, conducted in English and Arabic, used a retrospective approach to examine the nature and perception of father involvement and its impact on educational trajectories and the individual experiences of late-teen to adult participants in the Middle East, using a modified 41-item Fatherhood Scale based on Dick's (2014) study, targeting 5 types of father involvement. The types of father involvement are nurturing and affection, good provider role, educational involvement, psychological

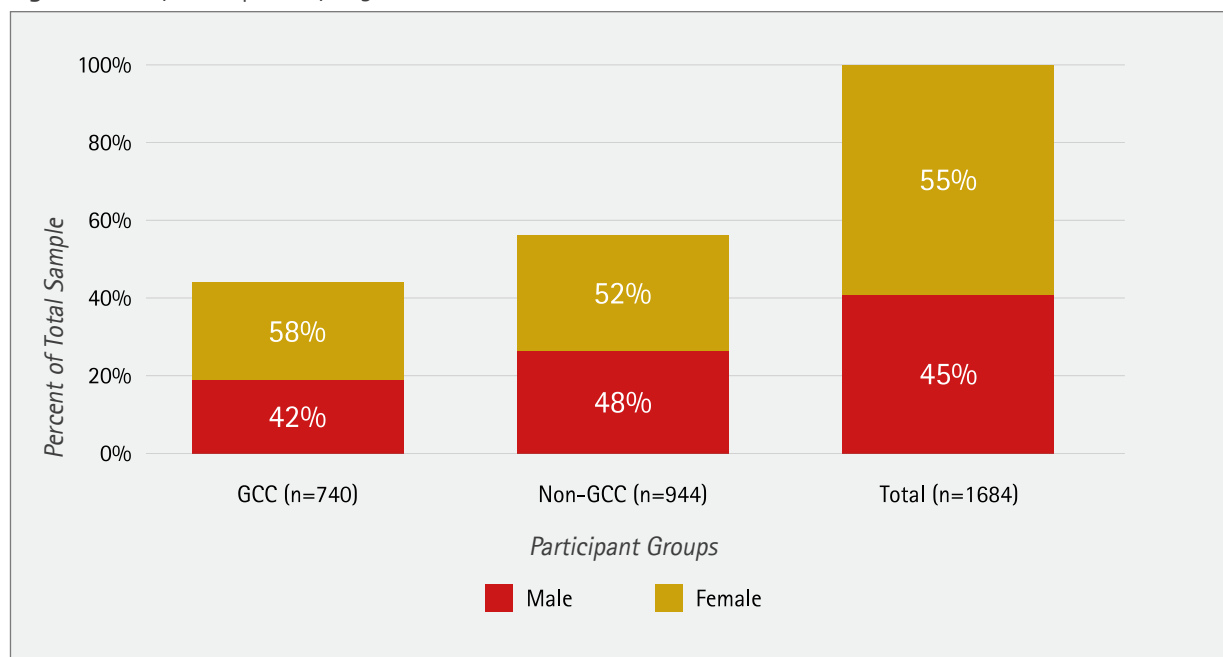
<sup>2</sup> Abadzi, 2017; Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; OECD, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Gettler et al., 2019; Jessee & Adamsons, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Aitken, 2009; Cabrera et al., 2000; Dick, 2014; Jordan, 2019; Lamb, 2000

<sup>5</sup> Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Bergnehr, 2015; Jones, 2019

**Figure 1: Study Participants by Region and Gender**



control, and moral father role.<sup>6</sup> The qualitative results of our study were analyzed using deductive coding around three primary themes for the life history interviews. Descriptive statistics, Analysis of Variances (ANOVAs), and regression analysis with interaction terms were used to analyze the quantitative data from the survey.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. One limitation of this study is that our findings are correlations and not causal relationships. Also, certain aspects of father involvement, such as intellectual involvement, may not be captured by the subscales used (Ridge & Jeon, 2020). A third significant limitation is that the sample of participants is not representative of a balanced range of age, socio-economic status (SES), and types of school they attended, which may result in disproportionate representation of certain experiences. Future research can build on this study by examining other components of father involvement and their interactions with other factors that affect educational outcomes.

## Key Challenges

Based on our findings in the fatherhood study, we have identified 5 key challenges of father involvement in education in the GCC.

### 1. Few GCC fathers engage in the types and quality of involvement associated with high educational attainment.

There is a need for more GCC fathers to engage in quality involvement. Overall, we found that *children whose fathers are encouraging and highly educated have high educational attainment themselves*. Within this pattern,

### Box 1: Key Challenges of Father Involvement in Education

1. Few GCC fathers engage in the types and quality of involvement associated with high educational attainment.
2. GCC fathers are less encouraging towards their sons than their daughters, reinforcing the reverse gender gap in education.
3. The lower educational attainment of older generations is a barrier to father involvement.
4. Limited connections between schools and fathers are a barrier to meaningful involvement.
5. A lack of research limits what is known about father involvement in children's education in the GCC region.

father encouragement is the largest factor impacting educational attainment in terms of magnitude of the relationship ( $r=0.361$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The impact of father encouragement and involvement in children's education is qualified by the positive or negative psychological impact a father has. More psychologically controlling fathers are associated with lower self-esteem, whereas nurturing fathers are related to higher self-esteem (Dingus & Eckert, forthcoming). Within our study, higher levels of psychological control are associated with lower educational attainment, which points to the importance of quality relationships and the involvement of fathers with their children.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the Fatherhood Study, see Dingus & Eckert (forthcoming); Ridge & Jeon (2020); Ridge et al. (2017); Ridge et al. (2018)

Looking at a regional level, cultural norms and legal standards in the MENA region frame father involvement primarily in terms of their role as good material providers. Fathers in the Middle East are expected to provide for their families' material needs, working to supply financial resources, houses, clothing, food, toys, etc. (Ridge et al., 2018). Non-GCC participants in the study who perceived their fathers as fulfilling this expectation are likely to have higher educational attainment. However, this pattern does not hold in the GCC, as there is no statistically significant association between perceiving a father as a good provider and high educational outcomes for GCC participants. In fact, geographic differences indicate that GCC fathers are more likely to be perceived as encouraging of academic performance and higher education. However, *overall, GCC fathers are perceived as less involved in their children's education than non-GCC fathers.*

This may be related to the types and quality of educational involvement GCC fathers engage in. For example, GCC fathers are more strongly perceived in subscales related to logistics, such as dropping their children off and picking them up from school, and less involved than non-GCC fathers in day-to-day details, such as homework or school activities, such as school visits, parent-teacher meetings, and reading. In our sample, only 29% of GCC fathers attended school activities regularly compared with 41% of other Arab fathers and 55% of Western fathers.<sup>7</sup> While 86% of participants from the GCC reported their fathers as at least sometimes being a good provider and 88% reported their father as encouraging them to do well in their studies, only 29% reported that their fathers regularly helped with homework and 25% reported their father read to them often or always (Figure 2).

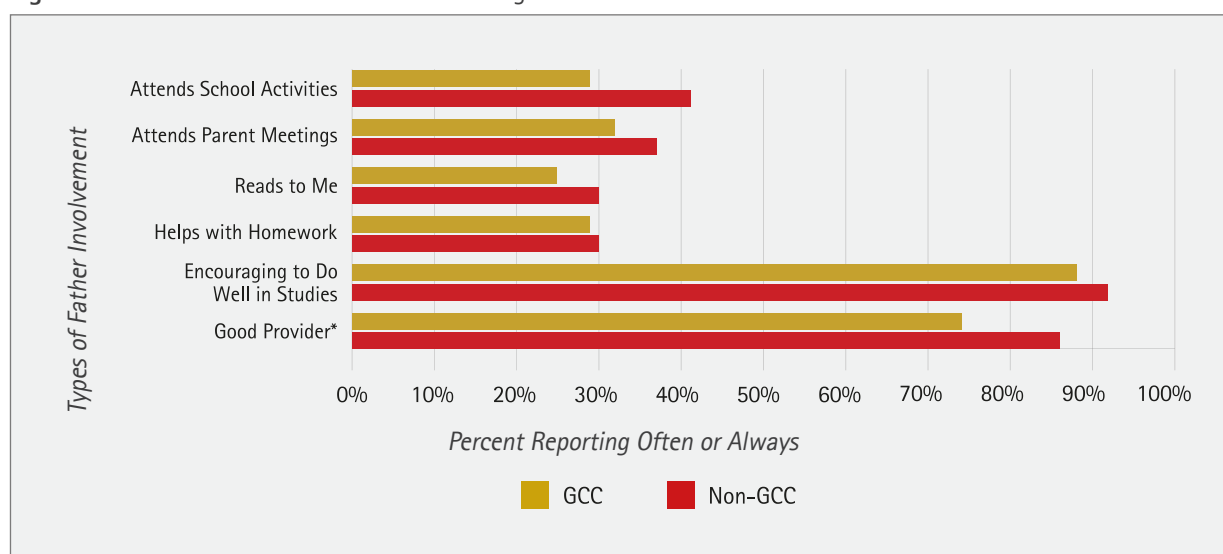
This distinction in the types of involvement by GCC and non-GCC fathers is further captured in the interviews. For example, non-GCC participants tend to describe their father's involvement in their education as helping in their math and science homework, while GCC participants make no mention of homework help and instead frame their fathers' involvement as "following up" on their education or facilitating their transportation.

“He would wake up early in the morning and wear a military uniform and take me and my brothers to school. At the end of the day, he would come back to take us home.”

(Afra, Bahrain)

These logistical types of involvement are important, but they are not associated with higher educational attainment. Types of involvement that enrich learning, such as reading together or discussing social and political issues, are shown to have greater impact on educational outcomes, including literacy, standardized test scores, and pursuit of higher education.<sup>8</sup> Together, these patterns suggest that, although GCC fathers are perceived as providing for their children's material needs, their involvement in their children's education should be expanded beyond logistical and material terms to other types of quality engagement to positively impact educational outcomes.

Figure 2: Father Involvement Across the MENA Region



\* Good Provider is an aggregate of several survey questions. The other items are individual questions.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the survey sample described, individuals from Europe and North America were also surveyed for comparison.

<sup>8</sup> Borgonovi Et Montt, 2012; Hampen-Thompson et al., 2013, 246; Ho, 2010; OECD, 2012

## Box 2. Father Involvement in Student Literacy and Reading Fluency

Students' ability and ease of reading are important skills for educational attainment that father involvement can positively impact. In MENA countries, the language of instruction in public schools is predominantly Arabic. Research has identified a number of challenges related to Arabic fluency, which include the visual complexity of the Arabic script, diglossia, differences in colloquial and formal Arabic language systems, as well as limitations and inefficiencies in instructional methods (Abadzi, 2017; Eckert et al., 2020). Literacy and reading fluency are prerequisites to advanced classroom learning, as well as standardized testing, and limited or inadequate reading fluency directly impacts educational outcomes. For example, PISA scores in 2018 in the UAE show a significant difference between Arabic- and English-speaking students' scores in Math, Reading, and Science, with English-speaking students scoring as much as 85 points on average higher than their Arabic-speaking peers (Buckner, 2020). This is reflective of a larger trend of students in Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern countries, including in the GCC, which are struggling to improve in international standardized assessments that measure reading fluency, and consistently perform below the global average in international standardized assessments (Eckert et al., 2020; OECD 2009; RTI International, 2014).

Fathers can directly influence their children's reading fluency by reading to them regularly. Studies indicate that early parental engagement with young primary school students is strongly related to lasting higher reading performance in secondary school (Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Hewison, 1988). Reading to primary age children and talking with adolescents about political and social issues have a meaningful impact on students' learning (OECD, 2012). Students whose parents read to them in early primary years performed higher at age 15 on PISA reading assessments than their peers by as much as one year above, even controlling for SES (OECD, 2012). By reading to their children, fathers can engage their children in reading practice, which speeds up cognitive processing, and improves reading performance (Abadzi, 2017). Interventions in Arabic language learning, including the Iqra program, can offer fathers a framework for Arabic reading involvement.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. GCC fathers are less encouraging towards their sons than their daughters, reinforcing the reverse gender gap in education.

Examining gender differences, *women are more likely than men to perceive their fathers as encouraging academic achievement*, measured by good performance in school and the pursuit of higher education. Also, GCC sons are more likely to perceive their fathers as psychologically controlling, which is significantly related to low self-esteem (Figure 3). In our sample, 80% of male participants in the GCC reported that their fathers were at least sometimes psychologically controlling.

The closer relationship between fathers and daughters than fathers and sons, and the relational component of educational involvement are common themes reiterated by participants in interviews. However, overall, fathers are perceived as less involved in education compared to other factors of father involvement by both daughters and sons in the sample.

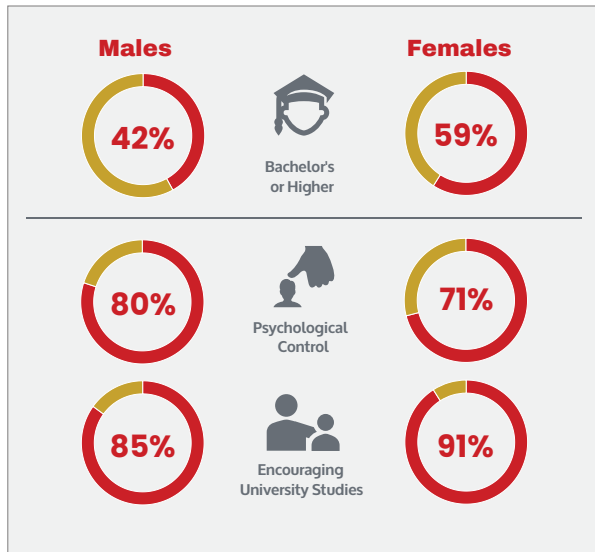
“He loved the daughters more than the boys. He used to distinguish the daughters because it was very hard for him to educate the boys.”

(Amal, Bahrain)

The trend of fathers being less involved in their sons' education than their daughters' reinforces the reverse gender gap in education, which describes the pattern of female students in the GCC outperforming male students in educational outcomes including educational attainment and standardized test scores (Ridge, 2014). In our study, *GCC female participants consistently outperform male participants* in attaining higher educational outcomes and pursuing higher education. The relationship of gender and education is statically significant for GCC participants,

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the importance of Arabic reading fluency as well as an analysis of the Iqra program for early grade literacy intervention, see Abadzi's (2017) and Eckert et al. (2020).

**Figure 3: Participants' Educational Attainment & Their Fathers' Involvement in the GCC by Gender**



but nonsignificant for non-GCC participants. This study supports the larger trend of women in the GCC being encouraged to pursue education, as fathers are perceived as more encouraging by daughters than sons. The relationship between fathers and sons must similarly be fostered to address the reverse gender gap in education.

With more women joining the workforce and pursuing higher education, the disruption of changing gender roles can leave some students without sufficient parental support (Hendy, 2016). As the perception of fathers as material providers persists, fathers in families with working mothers need to adapt to avoid the pitfalls of functionally absent fathers. A study conducted by the World Bank

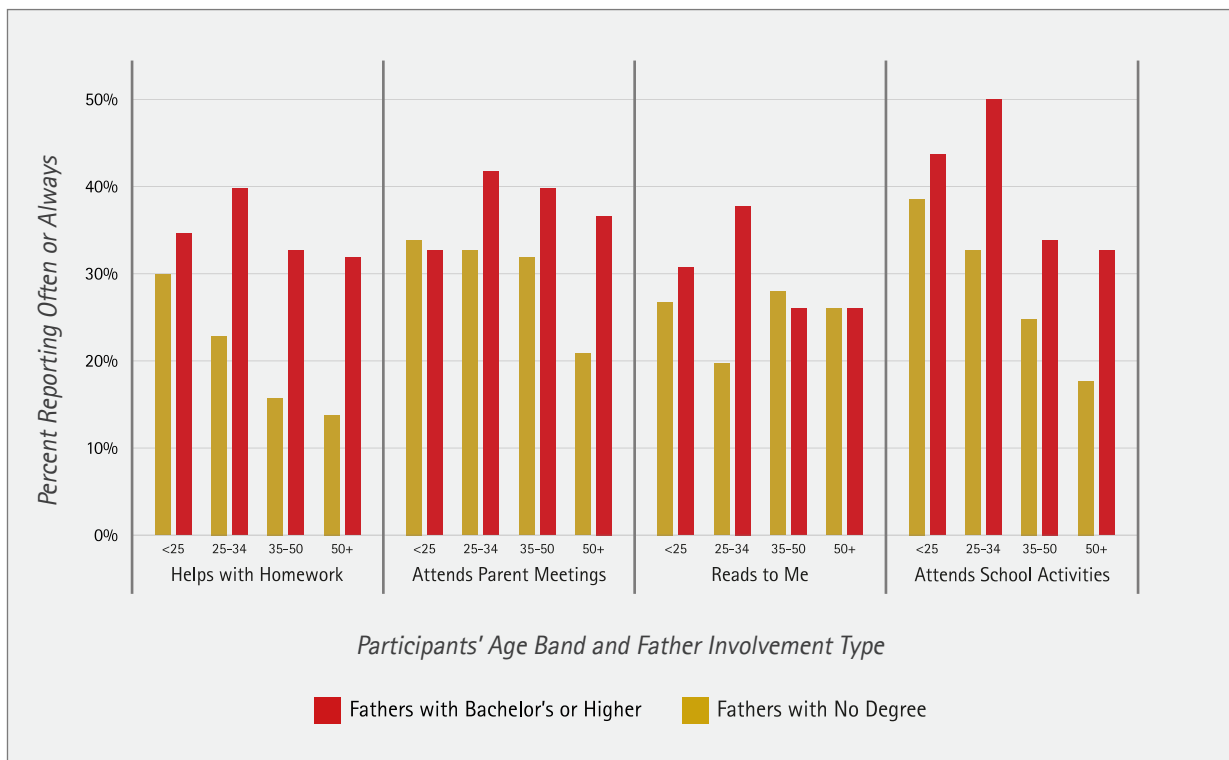
across 53 countries indicates that more women join the workforce in countries with mandated paternity leave policy, which allow fathers to spend more time with their children and take on more responsibilities for their care (Amin et al., 2016). Workplaces have the important opportunity to encourage and support employees to be involved fathers.

### 3. The lower educational attainment of older generations is a barrier to father involvement.

Our analysis shows a number of generational distinctions, including that *older fathers tend to have lower levels of education and are perceived as less involved* in their children's education. To examine generational differences in father involvement and education, our study delineates 4 age bands based on the ages of participants (<25, 25-34, 35-50, 50+). While, overall, participants have higher educational attainment than their fathers, fathers of older participants have lower educational attainment. Participants over 50 years old report, on average, that their father's highest educational attainment is secondary school compared to participants in the youngest age band (<25) whose fathers attained, on average, a bachelor's degree. While students' higher educational attainment is related to fathers' educational attainment, our findings show that *older participants have higher educational attainment*, in part because younger participants have not completed their education.

Notably, *fathers of younger participants are perceived as more encouraging of academic success and more involved than fathers of older participants*, with the types

**Figure 4: Father Involvement by Participant's Age and Father's Education**



of involvement including helping with homework and participating in school activities. In our sample, 30% of the youngest participants (<25) with fathers without a degree, reported that their fathers had helped with their homework compared with 14% of the oldest participants (50+) (Figure 4). This trend continues across these 4 types of father engagement, with the exception of reading. On the other hand, participants with fathers who have a bachelor's degree or higher did not report as strong of a difference between the oldest and youngest age bands across all 4 types of father involvement, suggesting that a father's education level is more strongly associated with meaningful father involvement than generational differences (Figure 4).

Qualitative data from interviews illustrates that *older fathers who did not have access to education can also be highly encouraging* of their children's pursuit of higher education, as they understand firsthand the value of education available to their children. However, they may face obstacles to meaningful involvement. For example, in interviews, participants with fathers who had few educational opportunities and low attainment were very encouraging of education, but their involvement in activities, such as reading, homework help, and pursuing higher education, may be limited by their own educational attainment.

“My father was not educated but he learned the Holy Qur'an [...] My mum was illiterate but was very keen that we study hard. My parents used to ask us if we passed the exam or not [...] they did not care about details but we felt they cared a lot about our studies.”

(Dana, Bahrain)

Fathers may face barriers to involvement in their children's education because of the limits of their own experiences and educational pathways, which may be further compounded and complicated by low SES.<sup>10</sup>

#### **4. Limited connections between schools and fathers are a barrier to meaningful involvement.**

Father involvement in schools is sparse in the Middle East, caused in part by social pressure and norms, and schools primarily valuing parental involvement to address

poor academic performance or intervene in negative behavior (Dubis & Bernadowski, 2014; Faour, 2012). With education systems that are often gender segregated, fathers often do not feel comfortable visiting their daughters' school. Combined with weaker relationships between GCC fathers and sons and dominant gender roles, wherein fathers in the GCC often perceive education as the responsibility of the mother, GCC fathers limit their involvement in both their sons' and daughters' education. This presents an opportunity for schools to facilitate father involvement by creating spaces and events that are welcoming to fathers and invite them to be involved in students' struggles and achievements.

#### **5. A lack of research limits what is known about father involvement in children's education in the GCC region.**

Without sufficient and ongoing research, it is difficult to identify challenges and make informed policies to maximize the quality and impact of father involvement on education. This points to the importance of designing and supporting research, such as this study, which identifies and analyzes regional trends through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Region- and nation-level studies can build on this research by examining father involvement in education that distinguishes factors such as logistical, literary, social, and intellectual involvement. Also, studies that compare GCC fathers' perception with their children's perception of fathers' involvement in their education would be valuable in identifying discrepancies in perceived involvement. Further research can also give clarity to factors that influence father involvement in education, such as the role of psychological control and self-esteem in educational attainment.

#### **Recommendations**

Although GCC fathers face challenges in engaging in their children's education, these offer an opportunity for fathers, educators, and policymakers to engage in meaningful father involvement. Taking into account the results of this study, there are numerous ways stakeholders in the GCC can work to foster impactful father involvement, which would promote social and emotional well-being and a highly educated local workforce. To address the challenges of father involvement in the GCC as described above, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Design public messaging campaigns that promote father involvement and reshape social norms** by highlighting the impact fathers have on their children's academic achievement and well-being beyond material terms, emphasizing the type and quality of involvement over quantity. These campaigns should

<sup>10</sup> Alghazo, 2014; Kuru Cetin & Taskin, 2016; Ridge et al., 2018; Vellymalay, 2013

portray the role of the father and the national family in diverse ways that include families with working mothers, and particularly emphasize the importance of fostering robust father-son relationships.

- **Promote school as a place where fathers go by offering workshops and school-run events focused on engaging fathers** in home-school partnerships, with gender-sensitive plans for father involvement in gendered spaces and gender-segregated schools. Schools can develop learning enrichment programs designed for father involvement for low-, mid-, and high-performing students at various educational stages, promoting father involvement by reading or engaging with current events and social and political topics together.
- **Develop systems of mentorship and academic advising that involve fathers** in identifying student strengths and university pathways. These programs can give opportunities for fathers to share their own educational pathways, highlighting how fathers of various educational attainments can be practically involved in their children's education. Also, mentorship should focus on fostering father-son relationships by giving fathers specific ways of encouraging their sons' educational development, achievement, and higher education aspirations.
- **Encourage father involvement by establishing workplace standards of paternity leave and flexible scheduling.** Paternity leave is a valuable way for fathers to be involved in their children's lives from birth, building habits and mindsets of father involvement that continue as their children begin school. Flexible scheduling can help fathers balance work and family, as it can enable them to attend events related to their children's education, including parent-teacher meetings, extracurricular events, and university visits.
- **Conduct and support ongoing research on father involvement and education in the GCC,** particularly focused on measuring diverse factors of involvement and their relationship to educational attainment and career success. Future research can compare fathers' perception of their own involvement with their children's perception, examine changing dynamics in father involvement over a child's lifetime, and short-term and long-term impacts of father involvement on education in the GCC. Continued region-level research on the GCC is also important for building understanding of the unique regional trends and factors in father involvement.

Fathers in the GCC face numerous barriers to meaningful involvement in their children's education. Through focused and coordinated efforts, the GCC can overcome these challenges and foster quality father involvement. A father's involvement in education significantly impacts the educational attainment of their children, which shapes their

career options and pathways. Fathers have a long-lasting influence on their children's self-esteem and wellbeing, as well as impacting how the next generation of fathers and mothers will be involved with their future children. As fathers in the GCC become more involved parents, they can positively reshape gender roles and support mothers who are also working and parenting. Thus, empowering GCC fathers to meaningfully engage in their children's education will benefit fathers and their children as well as mothers, educators, administrators, and future employers, strengthening families and more widely education systems and economies in the region.

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