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Critical Review

Critical review of family well-being and cohesion indexes: a multidimensional approach to measurement in the Arab world

Ahmed Aref*, Sharifa Noaman Al-Emadi[†]

ABSTRACT

The absence of measurable indicators for family well-being poses significant challenges in the Arab context. Without a standardized framework for assessment, it becomes difficult to identify areas of concern and allocate resources effectively. Moreover, the lack of quantifiable data hinders the development of targeted interventions and policy initiatives aimed at promoting family well-being. Hence, the establishment of measurable indicators for family well-being is a critical step towards promoting strong, resilient families in the Arab region. By providing a comprehensive framework for assessment, monitoring, and comparison, these indicators can inform policy decisions, enhance intervention strategies, and ultimately contribute to the overall well-being of families and individuals across the region. This article delves into the intricate landscape of family well-being, exploring its diverse dimensions and critically examining the gaps in the existing indexes and the role of measurable indicators in guiding effective interventions and policy decisions. Addressing the urgent need for measurable indicators, this article outlines a novel family well-being index for the region. Comprising three pillars – economic security, emotional well-being, and social connectedness – and relying on 12 practical indicators, the index provides a foundational framework for comprehensive assessment, data-driven interventions, and informed policy decisions. This framework offers a concrete step towards promoting family well-being and fostering a thriving future for families across the region.

Keywords: family well-being index, family cohesion index, measurable indicators, mental health, economic security, critical review, Arab countries

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1. INTRODUCTION: WHY DO MEASURABLE INDICATORS MATTER?

Family well-being, a complex and multifaceted concept encompassing the various aspects of family life, serves as the bedrock of societal stability and progress. It encompasses economic security, emotional well-being, social connectedness, and overall family functioning. Understanding and promoting family well-being is crucial for fostering healthy communities and thriving individuals.

The development of measurable indicators for family well-being is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it provides a systematic approach to evaluating the overall health and functioning of families. By identifying key domains of family well-being, such as economic security, emotional well-being, and social connectedness, policymakers and researchers can gain a holistic understanding of the factors that contribute to family stability and resilience (Suess, 2014).

Secondly, measurable indicators serve as a valuable tool for monitoring progress over time and identifying trends in family well-being. This information can be used to inform policy decisions, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and track the impact of social and economic changes on families (UNICEF, 2013).

Thirdly, measurable indicators facilitate cross-cultural comparisons, allowing for the identification of best practices and the sharing of knowledge across different countries and regions (UNFPA, 2014). This is particularly relevant in the Arab context, where there is a growing recognition of the need to adapt family-oriented policies and programs to the unique cultural and social dynamics of the region (Najjar, 2022).

The development of measurable indicators for family well-being in the Arab region requires a multi-pronged approach that involves collaboration among policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. It is essential to consider the diversity of family structures and experiences within the region, ensuring that the indicators are culturally sensitive and inclusive (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2016). Additionally, the engagement of families in the development and evaluation of these indicators is crucial to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.

2. NAVIGATING THE LANDSCAPE OF FAMILY WELL-BEING IN THE WORLD: THE GUIDING ROLE OF MEASURABLE INDICATORS

2.1 Illuminating the path to evidence-based family policies through measurable indicators: the case of OECD Family Database

Measurable indicators, quantifiable measures of various aspects of family well-being, serve as invaluable tools for assessing family well-being, tracking progress, and identifying areas for improvement. These indicators, when effectively utilized, can inform policy decisions, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and monitor the impact of social and economic changes on families.

In countries like Finland and Denmark, comprehensive data collection and analysis of measurable indicators have contributed to the development of effective family policies, resulting in high levels of family well-being (UNICEF, 2013). Conversely, countries with limited data on family well-being face challenges in developing targeted interventions and assessing the impact of policies on families (UNFPA, 2014).

In the realm of family well-being, measurable indicators serve as beacons, guiding policymakers and researchers towards evidence-based decisions that enhance family stability and resilience. Among the valuable tools available for this endeavor is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Family Database, a comprehensive repository of data on family structures, labor market positions, public policies, and child outcomes in OECD countries and partner economies (OECD, 2023).

Developed and maintained by the OECD, the Family Database encompasses a wealth of information spanning over 70 indicators across four main domains: family structure, labor market position of families, public policies for families and children, and child outcomes (OECD, 2023). This comprehensive dataset enables policymakers to track trends, identify areas for improvement, and assess the effectiveness of family-oriented policies across a diverse range of countries.

The significance of the Family Database lies in its ability to illuminate the complex interplay between family dynamics, socioeconomic conditions, and government interventions. By providing a standardized framework for data collection and analysis, the database facilitates cross-national comparisons, allowing policymakers to learn from best practices and adapt policies to suit their unique cultural and social contexts.

2.2 A critical analysis of family cohesion as a determinant of family well-being

Family cohesion, a fundamental construct within family systems theory, refers to the strength of emotional bonds and connectedness among family members. It encompasses feelings of unity, support, and shared values that contribute to a sense of belonging and security within the family unit (Barber & Buehler, 1996). Research has consistently demonstrated the multifaceted implications of

family cohesion for overall well-being, highlighting its role in promoting resilience, enhancing mental health, and fostering academic achievement (Neto et al., 2020; Rivera et al., 2008).

Family cohesion is a complex concept that has been conceptualized in various ways. Olson et al.'s (1983, 2019) Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems identifies cohesion as one of two key dimensions, along with adaptability, that define family functioning. This model posits that family cohesion ranges from disengaged (low cohesion) to enmeshed (high cohesion), with balanced cohesion representing a healthy and functional family system.

Despite its widespread use, the Olson model has been criticized for its limited applicability and lack of consideration for external factors influencing family cohesion. While the model provides valuable insights into internal family dynamics and relationships, it fails to adequately address the broader context in which families operate. This oversight can lead to misinterpretations and ineffective interventions, as external factors can significantly impact family cohesion. To fully comprehend family cohesion, a more holistic approach is needed that encompasses both internal and external influences.

Other conceptualizations of family cohesion emphasize the emotional and relational aspects of family dynamics. Moos and Moos's (1994) Family Environment Scale assesses cohesion through dimensions such as cohesiveness, expressiveness, and family conflicts. These dimensions capture the sense of unity, open communication, and ability to resolve conflicts constructively, all of which contribute to a cohesive family environment.

In general, a substantial body of research has consistently demonstrated the positive associations between family cohesion and various aspects of well-being. Studies have shown that strong family cohesion is associated with increased resilience among family members, enabling them to cope effectively with stress and adversity (Walsh, 2003). This resilience is attributed to the sense of support, shared values, and problem-solving skills fostered within cohesive families.

Furthermore, family cohesion has been linked to improved mental health outcomes, particularly among children and adolescents. Research has consistently shown that individuals from cohesive families exhibit lower rates of depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems (Rivera et al., 2008). This positive association is attributed to the emotional security, positive role models, and sense of belonging provided by cohesive families (Al-Emadi et al., 2023).

The impact of family cohesion extends to academic achievement as well. Studies have shown that students from cohesive families tend to demonstrate higher academic performance, increased motivation, and a greater sense of well-being in the school environment (Neto et al., 2020). This positive relationship is attributed to the supportive learning environment, positive reinforcement, and emphasis on education fostered within cohesive families.

Family cohesion stands as a critical component of family well-being, influencing resilience, mental health, and academic achievement. By fostering a cohesive family environment, individuals can reap the benefits of enhanced well-being and overall life satisfaction. The strategies and interventions discussed in this article provide valuable guidance for promoting family cohesion and creating a nurturing environment that supports individual and collective well-being.

2.3 Economic security: quantifying the financial foundations of family well-being

Economic security, a fundamental determinant of family well-being, can be measured through indicators such as income levels, employment rates, and access to affordable housing. These indicators provide valuable insights into the economic well-being of families and help identify areas for intervention.

Economic security plays a crucial role in shaping family dynamics and overall well-being. Financial stability contributes to positive family interactions, reduces stress, and promotes healthy child development (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2001). Conversely, economic insecurity can lead to increased family conflict, parental depression, and child behavioral problems (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002).

For instance, in countries like Switzerland and Singapore, high employment rates and comprehensive social safety nets contribute to high levels of economic security for families. Conversely, countries with high poverty rates and informal labor markets, such as Ethiopia and India, face significant challenges in achieving economic security for their populations (World Bank, 2023a, 2023b).

Governments play a critical role in promoting economic security and, consequently, family well-being. Policy initiatives that focus on job creation, increasing access to education and training, and providing affordable housing can significantly improve the economic prospects of families (Hoynes & Schanzenbach, 2018). Additionally, social safety nets, such as income support programs and childcare subsidies, can provide essential support to families facing financial hardship.

Measuring the multifaceted concept of “household economic security” within a nuanced family well-being index necessitates selecting indicators that accurately capture its diverse dimensions. The body of knowledge proposes three initial measurable indicators of economic security, focusing on household income levels, employment rates, and access to affordable housing, as follows:

- Household income lies at the heart of economic security, acting as the fuel that drives the ability to meet basic needs, engage in social activities, and invest in education and health. However, a raw figure can be a blunt instrument, failing to account for variations in household size and location. Adjusting income for these factors provides a more finely-tuned lens, one that acknowledges the differing demands and costs encountered by families in diverse circumstances (Sen, 2008). National household income surveys and cost of living indices serve as vital data sources for this indicator, helping to paint a picture of income adequacy adjusted for the realities of each household context (OECD, 2020).
- Beyond the mere presence of income, the indicator of employment rates delves into the dynamics between participation and contribution. This captures not only whether working-age individuals are employed but also their active engagement in the labor market, seeking employment or actively contributing their skills and talents (Standing, 2011). Labor force surveys and unemployment statistics provide the raw data for this indicator, offering a glimpse into the extent to which families are plugged into the economic engine and driving its wheels (ILO, 2022).
- The fortress of family well-being rests upon a foundation of secure and affordable housing. This indicator therefore focuses on the proportion of households expending less than a predetermined percentage (e.g., 30%) of their income on housing costs, revealing the burden of shelter relative to available resources (UN-Habitat, 2018). Housing expenditure surveys and housing price indices become instrumental here, painting a picture of how much roof families can afford over their heads without sacrificing other essential needs (Weicher, 1983).

A robust family well-being index requires not only meticulously chosen indicators but also a commitment to continuous refinement. Disaggregation by factors like household composition, age, location, and ethnicity is crucial to capture the diversity of experiences and ensure no family falls through the cracks of our measurement net. Integrating qualitative data, such as surveys and interviews, alongside quantitative indicators, can further illuminate the subjective perceptions and lived experiences of economic security within families (Sen, 2008). Also, ongoing validation and refinement through research and stakeholder engagement are essential to ensure that the indicators remain relevant and effective in capturing the evolving landscape of economic security within families.

The focus on quantifying and monetizing social relations, particularly economic security, can be problematic. While these indicators provide valuable insights into family well-being, they can also lead to oversimplified and potentially inaccurate conclusions. For instance, the emphasis on income levels as a measure of economic security may overlook the strong cohesion and support systems found within families living in poverty. Additionally, the monetization of social indicators can result in static assumptions that fail to capture the dynamic nature of family relationships and the complex interplay of external factors that influence family well-being. A more holistic approach is needed that considers both quantitative and qualitative measures, acknowledging the limitations of relying solely on economic indicators and recognizing the diverse ways in which families can achieve well-being.

2.4 Emotional well-being: assessing the mental health and family dynamics that underpin family well-being

Emotional well-being, a critical component of family well-being, can be assessed through indicators such as rates of mental health problems, parent–child relationships, and family communication patterns. These indicators provide insights into the emotional health and functioning of families. In countries like Iceland and Norway, strong social support systems and comprehensive mental health services contribute to high levels of emotional well-being within families. In contrast, countries with high rates of violence and conflict face significant challenges in promoting emotional well-being

within families (UNICEF, 2019a, 2019b).

A family's ability to operate effectively and harmoniously, known as family functioning, plays a crucial role in promoting emotional well-being among its members. Indicators of healthy family functioning include clear and open communication patterns, constructive conflict resolution strategies, and a shared sense of purpose. These factors foster a supportive and nurturing environment that empowers individuals to thrive emotionally and mentally. When families struggle to maintain healthy functioning, it can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and emotional distress for all members. Conversely, well-functioning families provide a buffer against life's challenges, enabling individuals to navigate difficulties with resilience and emotional stability.

Emotional well-being plays a central role in shaping family dynamics and overall well-being. Positive emotional health within families is associated with increased resilience, reduced stress, and enhanced child development). Conversely, poor emotional well-being, characterized by mental health problems, strained relationships, and ineffective communication, can lead to family conflict, parental stress, and child behavioral issues (Davies & Cummings, 1998).

Interventions aimed at promoting emotional well-being within families can have a positive impact on family dynamics and overall well-being. These interventions may include family therapy programs, parent-child training courses, and mindfulness-based practices (Newland, 2015). Additionally, creating a supportive and nurturing environment within families can foster emotional well-being and resilience (Davies & Cummings, 1998).

The broader literature on emotional well-being identifies four initial indicators that delve into the depths of emotional well-being, focusing on rates of mental health problems, parent-child relationships, family communication patterns, and family functioning:

- Rates of mental health problems serve as a poignant indicator of emotional well-being, revealing the presence of internal struggles that can disrupt family harmony. This indicator delves into data on diagnosed mental health conditions within families, accounting for age, gender, and type of conditions to paint a nuanced picture of emotional challenges (WHO, 2022). Early childhood development surveys, adolescent mental health surveys, and national mental health reports provide crucial data points, allowing us to identify families potentially in need of support and resources.
- The parent-child relationship forms the bedrock of family emotional well-being. This indicator explores the quality of these bonds, focusing on factors like attachment styles, emotional warmth, and responsiveness. Observational assessments, parent-child interaction surveys, and child self-report measures gather invaluable data, offering insights into the nurturing environment that shapes children's emotional well-being and family dynamics (Bowlby, 1982).
- Communication patterns within families act as the lifeblood of emotional connection. This indicator examines the frequency, openness, and constructiveness of communication, exploring how families express emotions, resolve conflicts, and share experiences. Family communication surveys, interviews, and observational analyses shed light on these nuanced interactions, revealing potential communication obstacles or enriching patterns that foster emotional well-being.
- The final indicator delves into the broader tapestry of family functioning, encompassing themes like clear and open communication, constructive conflict resolution, and a shared sense of purpose. Observations of family interactions, family functioning assessments, and interviews can illuminate these vital dynamics, revealing families' ability to navigate challenges, celebrate successes, and build a collective sense of identity (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983).

It is worth noting that the rise of mental health interventions has spawned a burgeoning market for mental health professionals, both certified and uncertified. This trend is prevalent in both developed and developing nations. While this surge in mental healthcare services is commendable, it has also led to the emergence of unprofessional individuals who lack proper training and credentials. Additionally, many schools of mental health treatment tend to focus on science and practices while

neglecting the significance of religious and spiritual aspects, which are particularly crucial in the Arab world. This exclusion can hinder the effectiveness of mental health interventions, as it fails to address a fundamental facet of life for many individuals in this region. It is essential to ensure that mental health services are provided by qualified professionals who adopt a holistic approach that encompasses religious and spiritual considerations to deliver culturally sensitive and effective care.

2.5 Social connectedness: capturing the strength of family and community bonds that foster family well-being

Social connectedness, another crucial aspect of family well-being, can be measured through indicators such as social support networks, community engagement, and a sense of belonging. These indicators provide insights into the strength of relationships and support systems within and outside families.

It is worth highlighting that in many cultures, extended families provide a network of emotional support, financial assistance, and childcare, contributing to the overall well-being of individual members (Aref, 2014).

In collectivist societies like Mexico, strong family ties between extended families and nuclear ones, besides community bonds, provide a robust support system for families, fostering social connectedness. In contrast, individualistic societies like the United States and the United Kingdom may face challenges in maintaining social connectedness within families due to factors such as geographic mobility and work–life imbalances.

It is crucial to recognize that collectivist societies, while often characterized by strong extended family ties, may also face challenges in maintaining social connectedness. The emphasis on group harmony and collective responsibility can sometimes lead to suppression of individual needs and preferences, potentially hindering the development of strong individual relationships and personal growth. Also, evidence shows that while extended families can provide valuable support and connection, their excessive involvement in the affairs of nuclear families can lead to tension, conflict, and ultimately divorce.

Moreover, the concept of individualism, often associated with Western societies, should not be viewed solely as a barrier to social connectedness. While geographic mobility and work–life imbalances can indeed pose challenges, individualism also promotes self-reliance, autonomy, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment, which can contribute to a sense of purpose and well-being that can be beneficial to both individuals and families. Therefore, individualism should not be viewed as a direct contradiction to familism. Instead, they can complement each other, bridging gaps rather than creating them (Aref & Fallentine, 2023)

This paper proposes four initial indicators that delve into the tapestry of social connectedness, focusing on social support networks, community engagement, sense of belonging, and strength of extended family ties:

- Social support networks act as the first line of defense against life's challenges. This indicator explores the quantity and quality of social connections that families possess, exploring the presence of friends, neighbors, and other informal support systems. Surveys, network mapping techniques, and observational analyses of family interactions can shed light on these crucial connections, revealing families that may be isolated or lacking adequate support (Aref & Khodr, 2022).
- Community engagement reflects the extent to which families actively participate in their surrounding communities. This indicator examines levels of involvement in community events, organizations, and activities, revealing families' sense of connection to their broader social environment. Participation surveys, volunteer records, and observations of community engagement can provide valuable data points, highlighting families that are actively contributing to and benefiting from their communities (Harraka, 2013).
- The feeling of belonging forms the cornerstone of social connectedness. This indicator explores the extent to which families feel accepted, valued, and integrated within their social groups, be it their community, neighborhood, or extended family. It is worth highlighting that the political and socioeconomic contexts play a major role in shaping the sense of social inclusion/exclusion, particularly among migrant families (Aref, 2021). In general, family interviews, belonging surveys, and assessments of social isolation can illuminate this subjective experience, revealing families who may feel marginalized or disconnected from their social environment (Maslow, 1958).
- The strength of extended family ties serves as a powerful indicator of social connectedness. This

indicator focuses on the frequency and quality of interactions with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives, examining the sense of support and connection these relationships provide. Family genograms, interview data, and observations of intergenerational interactions can offer valuable insights into the tapestry of family ties, highlighting families that lack access to this crucial source of support and connection.

3. KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR THE ARAB WORLD

The concept of family well-being holds particular significance in the Arab context, where families play a central role in social and cultural life. As noted by Al-Krenawi and Graham (2016), Arab families are characterized by strong bonds, extended kinship networks, and a shared sense of responsibility and mutual support. These factors contribute to a strong sense of community and resilience in the face of adversity (Almalki, 2020).

However, the Arab region also faces unique challenges to family well-being, including political instability, socioeconomic disparities, behavioral deviations, high divorce rates, and the ongoing impact of conflict and displacement, etc. These challenges can strain family relationships, increase stress levels, and limit subjective well-being (Abudabbeh, 1996).

The development of measurable indicators for family well-being is particularly important in the Arab context, as it can provide a standardized framework for assessing the impact of these challenges and informing the development of targeted interventions and policy initiatives.

When developing measurable indicators for family well-being in the Arab context, it is crucial to consider the unique cultural and social norms of the region and sub-regions. For instance, conceptualizing an index for the Gulf countries would carry more differences than similarities if you compare it to the Mashreq countries. Even in the same sub-region, a country is different from another. Nevertheless, any index should incorporate different sets of indicators that reflect internal and external factors, including but not limited to, spousal relations, quality parenting, the importance of extended family networks, community support, and religious values (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008).

It is crucial to make use of the well-established indexes. For instance, indicators could be developed to assess the strength of intergenerational relationships, the level of involvement in community activities, and the extent to which families adhere to traditional and religious practices. These indicators would provide valuable insights into the unique aspects of family well-being in the Arab region. However, it is more important to develop a contextual-based index employing a bottom-up approach.

Measurable indicators for family well-being can also guide the development of effective interventions and policy decisions. By identifying areas of strength and weakness, policymakers can allocate resources more effectively and tailor interventions to address specific needs (Abudabbeh, 1996).

In brief, the development and utilization of measurable indicators for family well-being is a critical step towards promoting strong, resilient families in the Arab region. By providing a comprehensive framework for assessment, monitoring, and comparison, these indicators can inform policy decisions, enhance intervention strategies, and ultimately contribute to the overall well-being of families and individuals across the region.

Table 1 outlines example dimensions and indicators for a family well-being index, through a systematic literature review provided in this paper. It reflects a meticulous weaving together of diverse strands of knowledge, ensuring a consolidated view of family well-being from multiple perspectives. It is worth highlighting that a comprehensive family well-being index should not be treated as one size fits all and should be contextually customized.

Table 1: Family well-being index: dimensions and indicators.

| Dimension | Indicator | Description | Example of data sources | Example measures |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|--|
| 1. Economic security | Household income levels | Median household income adjusted for household size and location. | National household income surveys, cost of living indices | Median adjusted household income |
| | Employment rates | Percentage of working-age individuals in the household employed or actively seeking employment. | Labor force surveys, unemployment statistics | Percentage of employed/actively seeking work |
| | Access to affordable housing | Proportion of households spending less than a defined percentage (e.g., 30%) of their income on housing costs. | Housing expenditure surveys, housing price indices | Percentage of households with affordable housing |
| 2. Emotional well-being | Rates of mental health problems | Prevalence of diagnosed mental health conditions within families, accounting for age, gender, and type of conditions. | Early childhood development surveys, adolescent mental health surveys, national mental health reports | Rates of specific mental health diagnoses |
| | Parent–child relationships | Quality of parent–child bonds, focusing on attachment styles, emotional warmth, and responsiveness. | Observational assessments, parent–child interaction surveys, child self-report measures | Observational scores of warmth and responsiveness |
| | Family communication patterns | Frequency, openness, and constructiveness of communication within families. | Family communication surveys, interviews, observational analyses | Scores on family communication scales |
| | Family functioning | Ability of families to navigate challenges, celebrate successes, and build a collective sense of identity. | Observations of family interactions, family functioning assessments, interviews | Family functioning scores based on observed interactions |
| 3. Social connectednes | Social support networks | Quantity and quality of social connections that families possess (friends, neighbors, etc.). | Surveys, network mapping techniques, observational analyses of family interactions | Number and strength of social connections |
| | Community engagement | Levels of involvement in community events, organizations, and activities. | Participation surveys, volunteer records, observations of community engagement | Scores on community engagement scales |
| | Sense of belonging | Extent to which families feel accepted, valued, and integrated within their social groups. | Family interviews, belonging surveys, assessments of social isolation | Scores on belonging measures |
| | Strength of extended family ties | Frequency and quality of interactions with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives. | Family genograms, interview data, observations of intergenerational interactions | Frequency and closeness of extended family relationships |

4. CONCLUSION

Families, the bedrock of society, play a pivotal role in shaping individual and collective well-being. In the Arab region, families hold a particularly prominent position, serving as the primary source of social capital, relational support, cultural transmission, and emotional nurturing. Recognizing the significance of families, there is a growing need to establish measurable indicators for family well-being, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to and hinder familial prosperity.

Finally, in the absence of reliable metrics, navigating the multifaceted landscape of family well-being in the Arab region proves daunting. This article sheds light on this crucial gap, proposing a framework for the family well-being index that should be tailored to the unique context of each country. By meticulously weaving together economic security, emotional well-being, and social connectedness, this index empowers policymakers and practitioners with the tools they need to understand families' strengths and vulnerabilities.

The provided framework marks a foundational step towards nurturing strong, resilient families, laying the foundation for a flourishing future across the Arab world. By embracing the power of measurable indicators, concerned policymakers and think tanks can illuminate the complex tapestry of family well-being, ensuring that no family falls through the cracks and every individual thrives within a supportive ecosystem.

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