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# Women and Wasta: The Use of Focus Groups for Understanding Social Capital and Middle Eastern Women

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### Abstract

Social capital is the use of informal networking to secure access to resources and opportunities. Often identified as an asset for offsetting deficiencies in societies, research on the phenomena is limited. This paper describes a qualitative study using focus groups with young adult Emeriti women representing three social-economic groups who were interviewed by the author in order to explore the topic of social capital, specifically a form of social capital defined by the Arabic term “wasta”. The women discussed their experiences of how wasta persists regardless of social and religious laws forbidding its practice and how they might use it in their own futures. The focus groups had notable differences in their perceptions of wasta, but as women, they did not see themselves as having access to this form of social capital. The study findings indicate that for these participants wasta is perceived as a cultural paradox that intersects with gender and class as a social construction that reinforces patriarchal and class privilege.

### Keywords

Women and Social Capital, College Students and Social Class, Focus Groups, Ethnography

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*Social capital is the use of informal networking to secure access to resources and opportunities. Often identified as an asset for offsetting deficiencies in societies, research on the phenomena is limited. This paper describes a qualitative study using focus groups with young adult Emeriti women representing three social-economic groups who were interviewed by the author in order to explore the topic of social capital, specifically a form of social capital defined by the Arabic term “wasta”. The women discussed their experiences of how wasta persists regardless of social and religious laws forbidding its practice and how they might use it in their own futures. The focus groups had notable differences in their perceptions of wasta, but as women, they did not see themselves as having access to this form of social capital. The study findings indicate that for these participants wasta is perceived as a cultural paradox that intersects with gender and class as a social construction that reinforces patriarchal and class privilege. Keywords: Women and Social Capital, College Students and Social Class, Focus Groups, Ethnography*

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The term social capital has become known as a commodity or process by which individuals, communities, and developing nations improve their economic and social positions through the exchanges of knowledge, resources, and assistance (Grenfell, 2009; Putman, 2000; Saton & Benson, 2005). It is correlated with many measures of individual and community well-being with increased prevalence of its use being associated with improved individual health, educational outcomes, and economic stability (Burke et al., 2009; Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu and Passeron’s (2000) use of the term cultural capital is often correlated with social capital. They believe that cultural capital comes from education and is essential for achieving opportunities for employment and social status. Though the term social capital is a predominately Euro-American occurrence, it is seen as a cross-cultural phenomenon that is highly valued and nurtured in some communities (Siisiäinen, 2000).

In Middle Eastern countries there is a term used to describe this type of social capital but it often is spoken of in the negative. In the United Arab Emirates, the term “wasta” implies that one is obtaining or providing favors to another. Wasta has come to be recognized as the predominant factor in how many receive desirable jobs which in turn generates controversy and disdain (Cummingham & Sarayrah, 1993; Zahrat, 2001, December 23). This form of social capital is seen as belonging only to men. Paradoxical to Middle Eastern culture, Islam condemns this practice and judges it as being socially unfair to those without power or privilege. This strong religious teaching results in making this a topic forbidden to talk about in public.

This article offers insight into how some Islamic women from the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) perceive access and use of the social capital identified as *wasta*. It begins with a discussion of social capital and explains why it is worth examining from the perspective of Middle Eastern women. A description of the participants, data collection, and analysis are presented followed by a discussion of the data presentation. In conclusion, the article presents implications for understanding the social construction of this practice and areas for future study.

## **Social Capital**

Social capital has been identified as being essential in community development and improving economic health for marginalized populations and economically impoverished nations (Coleman, 1988; Kilby, 2005; Pawar, 2006; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Siisiäinen, 2000). The term social capital was made popular by Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital* (1995). Social capital is an informal process by which individuals exchange resources of time, talents, and favors for social and economic opportunities. Putnam (1995) also identified social capital as a resource coming out of civic responsibility as it can build community alliances by helping people establish a sense of connection through membership and shared work on civic projects. As trust builds between organizational members, favors are exchanged, knowing that each will do for the other as needed. True social capital is a dialectical exercise built on trust and reciprocity. Building social capital as an individual skill for the poor and marginalized is seen as a civic responsibility that is frequently suggested for improving well-being and life outcomes (Kilby, 2005; Marshall & Batten, 2004; Seccombe, 2000). Current writing on social capital focuses on community organizing and civic responsibility (Kilby, 2005; Putnam, 2000), as well as health and education policy formation (Bulboz, 2001; Greenbank, 2009; Greenfell, 2009). Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) identified three areas of human resources needed for such social exchanges: cultural, economic, and social capital. Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) assert that insufficient cultural capital prevents the working class and the poor from equal access to economic opportunities that in turn provide access to social capital.

Though the practice of using social capital is believed to be helpful, some have questioned if it can be instituted in societies where power and wealth is maintained within oppressive cultural norms or social institutions (Edgerton, Peter, & Roberts, 2008). Societies with culturally embedded beliefs of oppression hamper the building of trust that is essential to the social exchange of favors. In addition, there is speculation that gender and ethnic differences in perception and use of social capital will challenge the belief that a lack of knowledge of how to network and exchange favors keeps many people from benefiting from the practice of social capital (Kilby, 2005). More specifically, feminist perspectives suggest that women's access to and use of social capital contradict current Euro-American models, raising questions regarding gender and social class bias in defining social capital (Pawar, 2006). Given conventional wisdom regarding how we have come to define social capital, there is a need for research in this area with women and populations outside of Europe and the United States. In particular, social capital from a Middle Eastern woman's perspective is absent from current writings and could contribute to our understanding of gender, class, and social perspectives.

In the Emirate of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), a women's university operated by the government offers higher education for national women who meet academic and English competency standards. The U.A.E. government provides post-secondary education for women as it desires to become more nationalized in its own educational facilities and administrative workforce (Findlow, 2000). The sample for the current investigation drew from women attending this university. Women at the university came from across the Emirate and represented multiple socioeconomic classes. In addition, there was a broad spectrum of Islamic religious observance ranging from conservative to moderately liberal. As a female faculty at this women's university, I found that opportunities for friendships and close personal conversations became available over the course of an academic year. Through informal discussions with many young women outside of class, I was able to build a bond of trust which allowed me to establish rapport and entry into conversations that revealed insight into beliefs and practices of women from upper middle and working class families.

The topic of *wasta* was frequently touched upon in these social visits. Many of the women talked about the privilege they saw given to some students at the university. Stories about gifts given to faculty, excused absences, and even admittance into the university were attributed to a student's *wasta*. Though the stories were interesting, the taboo nature of the practice made it intriguing. There are many contradictions between cultural practice, religious teachings, and personal behaviors of these Middle Eastern women, and exploring the topic of *wasta* was particularly relevant. For many of these women, their ability to secure a job upon completion of their studies at the university is dependent on the networking skills that Westerners call social capital. However, for these Emirati women, the use of social capital or *wasta* is something they need but shouldn't use. Gaining understanding of how these women perceive this paradox provides insight into the phenomena.

## Method

The research method chosen for this study was qualitative with an ethnographic framework used to explore the meaning of *wasta*. Ethnographic methodology entails the collection of data through several methods within a given culture. The researcher is immersed in the culture, incorporating behavior, artifacts, and interviews to create data used to understand cultural phenomena (Creswell, 1998; Greene & Browne, 2005). Conversations, media stories, and social experiences were used in the study design and data collection.

Several factors contributed to the decision to use focus groups for collecting information about women and *wasta*. Focus groups work well for encouraging participants to explore topics that have shared social meaning but are seldom discussed (Madriz, 1998; Morgan, 2004; Smithson, 2000; Vicsek, 2010; Wellings, Branigan, & Mitchell, 2000). Since the practice of *wasta* is a social phenomenon, it was important to see how women constructed its meaning as a social group. In contrast to Western cultures where individual identity supersedes group membership, Middle Eastern group affiliation generates strong ideation with greater values on knowledge being co-constructed (Marshall & Batten, 2004). The use of focus groups for creating a sense of community and safety for the participants allowed for this co-construction. This kind of interaction

has been documented as a valuable research tool when exploring cultural norms (Greene & Browne, 2005; Kitzinger, 1994). The support found within focus groups is important, since negative religious and social connotations make it difficult to get people to talk about *wasta* outside of close social networks.

Questions used in the focus groups were based on information from media news stories, classroom discussions, informal conversations, and campus urban legends shared by students and Euro-American faculty at the university. As rich as the conversations and experiences were, my experience of them was as one who is on the outside looking in. Since I was unable to speak Arabic, non-English encounters needed translating. As Murray and Wynne (2001) have identified, researching without skills in the native language of the participants prevents one from absorbing nuances. However, the university's language of instruction was English, as is most of the business and commerce conducted in the U.A.E., particularly in Dubai. This allowed enough entry to see and experience the multiplicity of the Emirati women's beliefs through the family studies courses we shared and the opportunities I had to socialize with them outside of formal school studies. Securing translators to assist with the focus groups allowed the participants to speak Arabic if they chose, providing them with the opportunity to express thoughts they would not know how to say in English (Murray & Wynne, 2001).

## **Participants**

Three students from a previous research methods course volunteered to work on this project. Since the topic emerged over a series of discussions about *wasta* during the research class, the student researchers were equally interested in the subject. I held pilot discussions with the research assistants to help them understand their own beliefs and experience about *wasta* and to assist them in learning how to encourage others to share their ideas.

Access to a sample population was very limited. In the U.A.E. the majority of women seldom leave their family home. Therefore it was decided that university students should be invited to participate. Permission to conduct the study and invite the female students was secured through the university's Institutional Review Board. The IRB deemed participation in the focus groups to be of minimal to low risk for inflicting any emotional distress and judged the study to be of such a benign nature it did not require family permission. Precautions were taken to reduce the likelihood of students feeling forced or coerced into participating. First, only students who did not currently have me as a professor were identified for participation and second, both the invitation to participate and the informed consent stated that participation was not mandatory and there were no penalties for declining or withdrawing.

Focus group participants were between the ages of 19 and 22 years old and were students from a government university for women in the United Arab Emirates. Students at the university could study business, family science, communication, education, computer technology, science, and math. The family science major was the most popular course of study at the university in Dubai. Culturally, these students were generally conservative with strong Islamic ideologies that leaned toward isolating women in the home away from the public domain of work and business. In addition, these women were less interested in academics and employment prospects, and were more likely to view

their studies at the university as a means of preparing for their lives as wives and mothers. Though not typical of all university women, they may be more representative of moderate conservative Middle Eastern women.

Participants for the focus groups were selected from a roster of 3rd year university students, who were in their first year of family science courses. The student research team assisted in identifying women believed to represent three social classes, often referred to informally by the women as “having wasta, having some wasta (mostly through friendships) or not having wasta.” The rosters of potential participants were classified based on family name recognition and peer group affiliation. Forty-five women were invited to participate in three different lunch focus groups based on their wasta classification. Though they knew we would be talking about Islam and the practice of wasta, they were not told how they were selected for which lunch date. Fifteen women from each of the three categories were invited to the lunches. Believing participation would not be 100%, the hope was to have three focus groups, each consisting of 8 to 12 women representing different experiences and perceptions of wasta. The three individual focus groups met on separate days and had respectively 16, 11, and 10 participants. The first group had one participant who was not invited but was a close friend of one of the invitee’s who was perceived to have significant wasta.

### **Focus Group Process**

The purpose of the meeting was explained while the women finished their lunch. A list of the questions to be discussed were read to the participants so they knew what they would be discussing, after which it was explained in both Arabic and English that their identities would remain anonymous, they had the right to participate or refuse, and could leave at any time without penalty. In addition, it was explained that the session would be recorded and the information they provided would be used to write about the use of wasta by women. Only the research team would have access to the data which would be stored in a locked file in the primary investigator’s office. Once they understood the purpose of the focus group as well as their rights, they were asked to sign an informed consent to participate, which was written in Arabic. One Arabic research assistant facilitated translations as needed from English to Arabic and Arabic to English. Everyone who came to the lunch chose to stay. Each session lasted 50 to 60 minutes. Transcripts from the recordings as well as the written notes were transcribed and translated by the student researchers.

Once the housekeeping tasks were complete, a research assistant asked seven questions in English:

1. Tell us what you think of wasta. How do you understand it?
2. Have you ever seen or used wasta in your own life?
3. Do you have or do you need to go to someone else for this kind of help? If yes, whom do you go to?
4. Has anyone ever come to you for help?
5. Where do you think people use wasta?
6. Does wasta make a difference in a person’s life? Could it change the way you are living now?

## 7. How have you seen your mother use wasta?

If clarification was needed by the participants the translator would restate the question in Arabic. Discussion in all three groups was in English, but there were times when the participants would speak in Arabic. Following the discussion, the collected notes and recordings were translated into English by the research assistants and then prepared for analysis.

### **Analysis**

Focus groups generate data in ways that are different from individual interviews and narratives. With an emphasis on the group construction of meaning and experience, rather than an individual, details of analysis come from the collective process (Freeman, 2006; Kitzinger, 1994). The audio transcripts and notes taken during the focus groups were reviewed by the research team. The data were read and reread to identify themes and meanings within the participants' answers. The student research assistants worked individually and cross compared their categories for similarities and differences with attention given to discussing personal beliefs to reduce bias. Analysis of focus group data entailed identification of themes that emerged within individual groups' discussions. Then as a team, we collapsed the data into summary statements that reflected groupings and categories of the participants' responses (see Appendix, Table 1. Wasta Focus Group Matrix).

### **Results**

Thirty-seven women participated in the focus groups. Sixteen were classified as having "high wasta." High wasta women were believed to be influential and able to secure favors such as gaining special treatment from the university's administration through family connections. Their fathers were viewed as being important either through wealth or because they held highly-esteemed government positions. Eleven were classified as having very little or "low wasta." They were viewed as having little to no influential abilities for securing favors from administration through family connections. Their fathers were viewed as being working class often in the employment of another family. Ten were classified as having "some wasta" as determined not so much from their father or family's positions, but more through friendships with women at the university who possessed high wasta.

Women with high wasta appeared to be uncomfortable talking about wasta as it related to their personal use. In this group, there was a tendency for a couple of the women to speak on behalf of those sitting close by. During the meeting time, the women would speak first to each other in Arabic then one or two would speak as though they were interpreting. Though willing to describe wasta as using one's family connections to secure advantages, they clarified that such activity was frowned upon.

Miss, we do not speak about these things. It is forbidden so we do not talk about it. Our law does not permit it, it is wrong to ask for such favors.  
(Participant 26)



Wasta was described as something that could be used if really needed. Wasta was not taken lightly, since asking for something would put one into another person's debt. These women did not see themselves as having wasta but saw their fathers, grandfathers, brothers, and uncles as having such power or influence.

My brother had a teacher who asked him for help. This teacher needed a visa for his daughter so she could come into Dubai. He asked my brother for help because he knew my father could help. These things I could not do. Everyone knows this. (Participant 24)

When asked how they had seen their mothers use wasta they talked about helping relatives with things like getting jobs or medical care. One woman said,

My mother uses my father's name<sup>1</sup>. She calls the doctor when my baby brother is sick and she never waits. She goes right in. (Participant 29)

Though only a couple of the women spoke, all would nod their heads in agreement with how they had seen their mothers influence their fathers. When asked if they would be able to make such arrangements on their own, they believed that they might be able to if their husbands were well-respected and that it would be important to marry someone who would be capable of such things.

Similar to the "high wasta" group, women with "some wasta" defined it as being a favor that you secure from someone with a high position. Though they did not give examples of personal experiences with wasta, they shared stories of how they "knew people" who received choice jobs, placement in good schools, and even getting a "nice" telephone number through friendships and family connections.

I know of someone who could not get a job. He asked his friend from the university to ask his father for help. His friend got him a job with the telephone company.<sup>2</sup> (Participant 14)

For this group there was more discussion about the need to marry into a good family. Like the women with high wasta, they thought that marrying into a good family was important but they also discussed the importance of their future husbands needing to get good jobs in business or the government so their children would get into good schools, as well as having employment opportunities. When asked how their husbands would help them, one woman stated,

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<sup>1</sup> Women do not take their husbands' names when they marry. They keep their fathers' names. Therefore, this woman was explaining that her mother's husband's name was more influential than that of her father.

<sup>2</sup> The perception of having a good job was often equated with working in a nice building. Etisalat, the national phone company of the United Arab Emirates, had a distinct and beautifully designed office building in Dubai. The phone company was often identified as a highly desirable place of employment by the women in all three focus groups.

My sister is married to the son of my father's partner. This is a good marriage for everyone. It is good for my family and his family. Insha'Allah<sup>3</sup> they will have many sons. (Participant 15)

Another woman shared,

Insha'Allah, I will marry someone with lots of wasta! (Participant 12)

Though the all of the women laughed at this statement they also agreed that it is important to marry someone who can help their family, and though the use of wasta is frowned upon, having wasta is very important.

Eleven women with "low wasta" came to the third focus group. In marked contrast to the other groups where a couple of women appeared to be speaking on behalf of the group, all of these participants spoke freely and appeared less constrained. The definition of wasta given by the women matched the other two groups but went further in that there was a shared perception that it was a means of gaining something which was not deserved and socially discouraged. Using wasta or seeking wasta was not seen as being good. Asking for wasta put a person into another person's debt, which could create problems for the person seeking assistance. Access to wasta was viewed as being limited, with the women expressing how important it was but available to only a few. They did not talk about how they used wasta but focused on how they were denied. One participant stated,

Sometimes you ask for help and you really need it. It's really hard to ask. Then you get turned down and sometimes in trouble for asking. (Participant 2)

Several women told stories about how people had received promotions or good jobs through wasta and not through education or hard work. The women shared a perception that good jobs were given based on wasta and that one's family name was more important than one's abilities. As a group they viewed wasta as belonging to a select few and that you needed to be born into a family with wasta so that your relatives could help you. One participant talked about a story that had recently been in the news:

There was a story in the news about a man who had his job in Customs who should not have this job. He lost his job but his uncle probably got him another. (Participant 4)

Another woman shared this story,

Yes, your name is important. I have a cousin who changed his name to Al-Maktoum so people would think he is in that family so he will get special treatment. (Participant 7)

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<sup>3</sup> Insha'Allah is a phrase that is often used to express that what one hopes, believes, or desires is the will of Allah (God).

Related to the importance of being connected to families believed to have high *wasta*, one woman told of how she knew of someone who bought a license plate with a low number so others would think he was in the royal family.<sup>4</sup>

Since the other two groups had discussed the importance having a husband who could bring their families opportunities, an additional question was posed to this group asking them how they might be able to obtain *wasta* through marriage. The question seemed to puzzle the women since they were skeptical that they could marry someone of a higher status than themselves. One of the women stated,

Marriage is arranged and someone from a family with *wasta* will not be arranged with someone with no *wasta*. That is a story that is not true. These are nice stories but they do not happen. (Participant 2)

While another asked,

What do you mean? Can you marry someone with *wasta*? Marriages are made in families and if I marry in my family<sup>5</sup> how that would give me more *wasta*? (Participant 4)

### **Discussion**

In relation to the women's perceptions regarding their own access to *wasta*, there were consistent responses in the "high *wasta*" and "some *wasta*" groups confirming an inability to access such power on their own and needing their fathers or future husbands. Overall, the women's perceptions support Bair's (1998) theory of women borrowing social capital from men. For the "low *wasta*" group, their inability to see how to improve their personal *wasta* is supported by research that explains this mental block. Hogan (2001) identified a lack of access as crucial to understanding how one develops social capital: if you have none, it is very difficult to acquire. For all of the women, their perceived lack of *wasta* may well be tied to their isolation from the social opportunities that would provide access to cultivate social capital. On the other hand, these women describe themselves as having access to *wasta* through their fathers and husbands and see themselves as the "whole being greater than the individual." This was expressed in the "high *wasta*" and "some *wasta*" groups in their identification of the importance of marriage for expanding family *wasta*.

The experiences of the women with "low *wasta*" seem similar to low-income college students at prestigious universities in the United States. Aries and Seider (2005) found that low-income White students often felt disadvantaged next to their wealthy fellow students, believing them to have privileges allotted through cultural capital. Though it is believed that participation in university education affords the development of social capital, the reality for low-income students is that they are often marginalized from

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<sup>4</sup> License plates are issued numerically by importance with lower numbers belonging to the families of the Emirati Sheiks.

<sup>5</sup> Marriages in the UAE are arranged with a preference to marrying within extended families. Marriages between cousins are most preferred as it maintains strong family lines. Though there are some marriages outside of blood relation these are more difficult to arrange for families with limited means.

those with whom they are expected to network in the future (Aries & Seider, 2005). Greenbank (2009) identified the need for cultural capital to assist working class youth in attaining accessibility to more productive career options. Simple things, such as clothes and speech, become social markers indicating one's socio-economic class (Bourdieu as cited in Grenfell, 2009; Greenbank, 2009). Though lower or working class students may not be outright rejected by their peers, they may instead become invisible (Greenbank, 2009). This appeared to also be true for those Middle Eastern students considered to be low *wasta*; though they are very aware of those students with power and influence, those students with *wasta* do not seem very aware of them. As to the question posed to the low *wasta* students about the possibility of improving their *wasta* through marriage, their response of puzzlement and disbelief that one could change their life is reminiscent of 'fatalism', which is the belief often attributed to those in lower economic social classes as having no control over one's fate (Seccombe, 2000).

The women with some *wasta* did not speak of using *wasta* to get a good job but instead spoke of how *wasta* could be used to help their future children. They saw themselves as being brokers of *wasta* for their family in that their marriage could bring advantages to their fathers and brothers as well as the children they may have. The strong sense of loyalty to family is indicative of traditional Arabic Islamic culture, which is grounded in the strength of blood relationships (Findig, 2001). Favors are not secured by the women themselves; rather, they are granted through a woman's intercession to her father, brother, uncle, and eventually, son. The ability to make such arrangements is directly tied to the *wasta* that the family holds.

Hogan (2001) identified that in Western society, a family's social capital is also directly tied to the activities of the father, with little recognition of a mother's network of activities and their children's attainment. Hogan (2001) also suggested that the more networking opportunities people have the more social capital they have. For traditional Islamic women there are few networking opportunities outside of their family's home, which in turn limits their ability to gain access to business social networks.

The focus groups suggest similarities in how women use social capital in both Western and Middle Eastern cultures. This may suggest similarities in cultures, gender and social class in spite of what may be larger ideological differences in these cultures. This creates areas for future study since this study appears to show more similarities between Euro-American and Middle Eastern women in relation to social class limitations and advantages than were expected. Though Euro-American women have more activities outside of the family home, much of the research on social capital dismisses women's networks by giving more credence to men's abilities (Bair, 1998; Hogan, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Saxton & Benson, 2005). As with many aspects of the lives of marginalized people, social research may also be missing important information about social capital, gender, and other marginalized populations.

There are several limitations to this study. The use of a small sample from a women's university is not representative of the larger female population in the Middle East. The lack of proficiency in speaking Arabic hampered the primary investigator's understanding, creating a dependency on the research assistants who themselves were students. The assistants worked hard to overcome bias but they often were not able to completely understand how their beliefs shaped their own perceptions and translations. In addition, the use of focus groups was both a benefit and limitation. As a benefit, it

allowed for social construction and discussion of a topic seldom spoken of in public. As a limitation, the discussion emerged more from a group think process with an absence of dissention.

This research had as its focus how young Emirati women viewed the paradox of social capital/wasta and how it could help them gain access to opportunities in the future. It found that for these college women, there was a shared belief that social capital is not something they themselves have. Rather they see themselves as needing men in their lives to broker their access to desired resources. Those with wasta viewed themselves as being powerful in assisting their family in securing more power, as well as providing opportunities for their children. In contrast, those women who had low wasta viewed the use of social capital as being illegal and unfair, and though many would like to benefit from wasta favors, they do not see themselves as being able to reciprocate in a fair manner. In terms of practical application of this knowledge, it was originally thought that insight into wasta would assist in helping female college students recognize ways to build social capital. However, as a social construction for Emirati young adult women, it appears that wasta may best be understood as an indicator of privilege that acts a socio-cultural barrier between gender and social classes, rather than as a tool they can access for future employment.

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## Appendix

Table 1. Wasta Focus Group Matrix

High Wasta		Women	Some Wasta		Women	Low Wasta		Women			
Statements, Actions, Emotions & Discussions		General Themes		Statement & Discussions		General Themes		Statement & Discussions		General Themes	
<i>Question: Tell me about Wasta? What is it? Where have you see it used?</i>			<i>Question: Tell me about Wasta? What is it? Where have you see it used?</i>			<i>Question: Tell me about Wasta? What is it? Where have you see it used?</i>					
Hesitant to speak, Spoke first to each other in Arabic		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Concern</li> <li>➤ Legality</li> </ul>		Quiet, do not speak right away. The question is asked again only now it is phased as; <i>Do you know anyone who has every used wasta?</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wasta is forbidden but people use it all the time.</li> <li>• Allah forbids wasta but some people don't care.</li> <li>• The best jobs go to people with wasta, it doesn't matter what they know it is who they know.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Legality</li> <li>➤ Privilege</li> <li>➤ Resentment</li> </ul>			
M (speaking for everyone) said that they do not use wasta, that using wasta is wrong, Islam does not allow for it		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Legality</li> </ul>		Yes, there is a person I know who got a job at the phone company. He asked a friend of his at the university to ask his father to help him get this job.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Knowledge</li> <li>➤ Story about someone else</li> <li>➤ Social Connection</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was a story in the news about a man who had his job in Customs who should not have this job. He lost his job but his uncle probably got him another.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Legality</li> <li>➤ Privilege</li> <li>➤ Resentment</li> </ul>	



<p>Several women say that using wasta is wrong. They do not use wasta.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Legality</li> </ul>	<p>Wasta is good but it is also not good. If you ask someone for something you must give something back so you have to be very careful</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Obligation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, your name is important. I have a cousin who changed his name to Al-Maktoom so people would think he is in that family so he will get special treatment.</li> <li>➤ Another student said she knew someone who bought a low-number license plate so people would think he was in the Sheik's family. Privilege</li> <li>• Story about someone else</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Privilege</li> <li>➤ Story about someone else</li> </ul>
<p><i>Question: Have you ever seen your mothers use wasta to get something for you or a brother or sister? Have you ever heard about a time when your father may have used wasta for someone?</i></p>	<p>I know someone who got into the university because their father had wasta. She should not have gotten in but her father. . . .</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Privilege</li> <li>➤ Story about someone else</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a girl here who has missed many days and she does not get in trouble because of her wasta.</li> <li>• Another said she had a friend who went to a student who had a family member who worked at the hospital and asked for a wasta favor. The favor was to have a note excusing her absences so she would not get sent out of the university.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Privilege</li> <li>➤ Story about someone else</li> </ul>	
<p>Yes, my mother has used my father's name to take my baby brother to the doctor's. She never waits to see the doctor. She calls and tells them who my father is and what he does for Sheik Maktoom and they take her right in. She never waits.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Recognition of Privilege</li> <li>➤ Family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One person I know got a good phone number. <i>When asked to explain what a good phone number is she said:</i> It makes music!</li> <li>• Another woman said that her brother has a friend who got a new phone that cannot be brought yet but his friend got one for him.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Privilege</li> <li>➤ Story about someone else</li> <li>➤ Social Connection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Few people have wasta.</li> <li>• One person said that you are either born with it or not.</li> <li>• There are students in this university who did not get 700 on their Tofel. They should not be here but they have lots of wasta and that is why they are here.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Privilege</li> <li>➤ Story about someone else</li> </ul>

<p>One woman said that her mother spoke to her father and asked him to help her sister go to London for a medical treatment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Access to special resources</li> <li>➤ Family</li> </ul>	<p><i>Question: Who do you know with wasta? Your parents? Your friends? Do you have wasta?</i></p>	<p><i>Question: Is it good to ask someone for Wasta help?</i></p>		
<p>M spoke for the others saying, Of course, sometimes our fathers help people they know in special situations like getting jobs but we do not talk about these things.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Access to resources</li> <li>➤ Denial</li> <li>➤ Legality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No, we do not have wasta. Maybe our fathers, maybe our uncles, but not us. (all agreed)</li> <li>• Another said that she would marry someone who would have lots of wasta The other women laughed and chided her but agreed that they all wished to marry men with lots of wasta.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Lack of Wasta</li> <li>➤ Recognition of Male Power of Wasta</li> <li>➤ Desire for Wasta</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No, not good but sometimes you have to.</li> <li>• If you do ask for help you have to give something back and that could be bad.</li> <li>• Sometimes you ask for help and you really need it. It is hard to ask. Then you get turned down and sometimes in trouble for asking.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Access to resources</li> <li>➤ Need</li> <li>➤ Obligation</li> <li>➤ Power</li> <li>➤ Resentment</li> </ul>
<p>One woman said that her father sometimes says that this person or that person owes him a favor but it is not right to talk about such things.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Obligation</li> <li>➤ Denial</li> <li>➤ Legality</li> </ul>	<p><i>Question: Is it important to have wasta? Can your husband help you have wasta?</i></p>	<p><i>Question: How can you get wasta? Is there anything you can do? Can you marry someone with wasta?</i></p>		
<p><i>Question: Do your mothers have wasta?</i></p>	<p>One woman said that her sister married the son of her father's business partner and this is a good marriage. It will bring more wasta to both families and if Allah's will, she will have many sons who will bring more wasta to the family</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Recognition of Male Power of Wasta</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One woman said that she helps one student who is not very good in their science class. She thinks this will help her later.</li> <li>• Another woman said that your family either has it or not, you cannot make wasta.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Obligation</li> <li>➤ Fatalism</li> </ul>	
<p>M: No, only our fathers and uncles and maybe our husbands will.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Lack of personal Wasta</li> <li>➤ Recognition of Male Power of Wasta</li> <li>➤ Family</li> </ul>	<p>Another woman said that it is important. Having wasta helps our children. When you have wasta you can have a nice home and your children can go to the better schools.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Desire for Wasta</li> <li>➤ Privilege</li> </ul>	<p>One woman asked: What do you mean; can you marry someone with wasta? Marriages are made in families and if I marry in my family how that would give me more wasta?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Fatalism</li> <li>➤ Puzzled</li> </ul>

<p><i>Question: But your mothers have been able to do things for your family. Will you be able to do such things?</i></p>	<p>Another woman said that good jobs are hard to get and some need help. A good marriage with connections will be important for my sons.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Privilege</li> <li>➤ Recognition of Male Power of Wasta</li> </ul>	<p>Marriage is arranged and someone from a family with wasta will not be arranged with someone with no wasta. That is a story that is not true. These are nice stories but they do not happen.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Fatalism</li> </ul>	
<p>M: We might be able to do such things if we have good husbands. It is important to have good husbands so our fathers will work to make a good marriage. They will find us a husband from a good family, this is very important.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Recognition of Male Power of Wasta</li> <li>➤ Privilege</li> <li>➤ Family</li> </ul>				

**Key**  
M: represents the woman who acted as spokesperson for the High Wasta group

- Designates a different speaker
- General Themes

### **Author Note**

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