



From the Country to University: Women's Path to Independence in Syria

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Over the past twenty years, Syria has witnessed a dramatic evolution of its female population, especially in rural areas. By moving to Damascus to pursue their higher education, women are gradually able to declare their independence from male domination by living on their own, hitting the job market, and providing for themselves.

Syrian society has experienced dramatic changes over the last two decades in terms of attitudes and mentalities towards women's education. Before the 1980s, the social stigma surrounding female independence and women's desire to move away from their homes made it practically impossible for young rural girls to move to the Damascus University Campus on their own; those who did were just a minority, and such early social phenomena did raise a few eyebrows. Customs and traditional roles in a male dominated society forced women to get married at a young age, and they were only to leave their parents' home to found a new one with their husband. These norms and customs contributed to the belief that higher education was useless for girls. On the other hand, the few female graduates acquired higher social status as well as respect in their hometown for securing attractive positions in public institutions. They were viewed as the

most desirable contenders for marriage as only highly educated and financially established suitors were able to ask them for marriage.

Discrimination against women is a serious problem in Syria, activists say. Many girls are denied education by parents who favor their brothers. The pro-governmental General Union of Women in Syria published a 1995 survey that showed that 35.27 percent of Syria's population was illiterate and most, 25.85 percent, were female.

Since then, the tables have turned and most girls in Syria nowadays manage to pursue their higher studies. With the passage of time, education among females has become predominant in society, leading to an increased level of competition and a real movement of liberalization. Not only has society refrained from criticizing this trend, but also it is highly supporting it these days. Therefore, the shift in values is seen as a major incentive for young girls to excel in their academic performance. The High School Diploma is perceived by young Syrian women living in the countryside as a passport to freedom and independence, paving the way for them to move to Damascus to seek their higher education and acquire their independence, thereby getting rid of male dominance.

Social Implications

Moving to the city and going to college signify major struggles and adjustments for rural girls. With the pressure to succeed, as well as the sudden and direct exposure to a different, larger society, female students are bound to experience psychological transformations in order to adapt rapidly. They find themselves mixing with all sorts of crowds. The absence of parental supervision allows them to interact with young male students.

Many girls show enough aptitude for integration and adjustment and decide they have what it takes to face the new obstacles. They do not hesitate to give in to their social surrounding and all the demands that come along, even if that means compromising their beliefs and the values they were raised with. They embrace some sort of a voluntarily split personality, consisting of being modern, trendy, open-minded, and independent in college, while reverting back to the same young, naïve, girl-next-door type of person they used to be as soon as they go back home during weekends.

In order to be allowed to study in Damascus on their own, young females have to maintain a conservative façade and keep a low profile at home. Back in Damascus, they try to accomplish their own endeavors, those of liberal, independent, and fashionable young women who can deal with all students, male or female. However, everything comes with a price tag. In Damascus, they get caught up in the demands of materialistic urban life and often fail to cope due to their generally limited economic resources. They become obsessed with fashion, hairdos, tattoos, cell phones, parties, etc.; to make a long list short, everything Western style.

Seeking Economic Independence

Many girls start looking for part-time jobs to reduce the financial burden on their family and because they feel the need to break free and rely as little as possible on their parents. However, the salaries they receive from these low-key jobs sometimes prove to be insufficient to compete with the materialistic lifestyles they lead. Encouraged by colleagues, some girls start looking elsewhere for economic well-being by seeking fast, easy, but 'inappropriate' ways of earning money.

Twenty-one-year-old Lama illustrates the drastic changes some girls undergo by telling the story of her friend of the same age, Rania. Rania is majoring in English Literature, a field that has sparked some degree of controversy among students. Most English Literature students are labeled "posh" by other students, for they are famous for their eccentric sense of fashion. Rania comes from a poor family. "During her freshman year," says Lama, "Rania was a modest girl who used to criticize

fashion and the ever-changing values that dominated university life. However, she quickly started changing. From new hairdos to new clothes, tattoos to late parties, she literally became a different person, and quickly acquired a new personality. Her relationships with men and her party lifestyle dramatically took off. She went on to spend more and more, and was always wearing the most refined and expensive clothes, which she claimed were "gifts". She was often seen being dropped off at the dorms by cars bearing military plate numbers. According to her, the people she was hanging out with were just "friends", but she did not sound convincing. One thing was certain though. She was not paying attention to her studies anymore."

Post Graduation Blues?

After graduation, some girls get so involved and accustomed to the campus lifestyle that they do not want to go back to the boring and conservative way of life they used to lead before. However, in many cases, they fail to find a job within their field of specialization, so they see themselves forced to do small jobs. With a degree in hand, some are compelled to go back home and wait for marriage, but not in the traditional way. University life has considerably changed their mentalities. Syrian women are starting to look for their future life partner on their own, and are finally free to accept or turn down suitors. During college, many get involved with someone who will later become their husband. Hence they acquire a certain freedom of choice away from family control and interference, which is exactly what rural girls desire. Twenty-three-year-old Roula, from Sweida, graduated in Fine Arts last year. Her boyfriend, of three years, decided to leave and work in Dubai so he could make some money that would allow him to ask for her hand in marriage. "After graduating, I was allowed to stay in Damascus for six months, where I was offered a job in an advertising company. After that, I had to quit because my parents asked me to go back home, where I failed to find a similarly attractive position. I had to resort to working in a fine art gallery, where I was selling portraits and paintings. But I don't mind, since I will get married to my boyfriend and be able to work and help him provide for our home."

Outlook for the Future

Despite this evolution, laws still do not favor women. Hanan Nijmeh, a lawyer and women's rights activist, affirms that Syrian laws do not offer much protection. Lax legislation on domestic affairs, such as divorce and rape, ease the path of violence against women. According to Nijmeh, "Syrian society, like other Arab societies, is a patriarchy in which there is a struggle between what is traditional and what is new. So violence against women in places where illiteracy is on the rise is



more prevalent than in areas where education is widespread." Nijmeh asserts that a woman in Syria always feels threatened by divorce, as a husband can just dispose of her without giving her any compensation. Although there are no official estimates of domestic violence or rape, activists confirm that victims are in the thousands. Mustapha Habash, Head of the Emergency Department at Al-Muwasat Hospital in Damascus, says he sees three to four victims of violence each month. Few take that step, since it draws in the police. Alia, a high school student, grew up watching her father beat her mother: "I know that she kept silent because she was afraid of getting divorced or thrown out onto the streets. That's why I want to graduate from university and get a decent job, so I won't have to face this situation in the future. My diploma will serve as a social and financial protection for me, so I can feel more secure," she says.

For better or for worse, some marriages ultimately lead to divorce nowadays. Divorce is on the rise in Syria. In the past, many wives did not have any option but to put up with male oppression. They stayed out of fear of society and because they lacked the financial resources that were necessary for their survival. Nowadays, educated

women refuse to tolerate male oppression and when faced with spousal abuse, they ask for divorce since they are able to sustain themselves financially.

Generally speaking, these are crucial times for young Syrian women as they experience a movement of liberalization when it comes to marriage. This movement is illustrated by a set of advantages and drawbacks, as well as drastic contradictions. Activists and General Union of Women (GUW) officials slam some Syrian legislation as unfair to women, but they say things have improved during the last three decades. "Though we are satisfied with the women's situation we have passed many proposals to parliament to amend unfair laws," GUW member Raghida Al-Ahmad says. "We have 26 women in the 250-member parliament and two ministers in the 36-member cabinet. There are 132 women judges and 16 percent of lawyers and 44 percent of teachers are women," Ahmad said.

Syria has had to undergo major changes and adjustments over the last two decades, and the future looks promising. There is still a lot to be done to achieve a state of gender equality; but like anything else, once you let evolution out of the bag, it is irreversible.



Picture Credit: Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR)