

# The Case of Lebanese Women in Argentina

Walter Muller

Trans-Atlantic travel experienced an extraordinary boost in the middle of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, increasing the number of immigrants who intended to go to South America. From that moment forward they not only hailed from Europe, as had been the case with the majority of immigrants until then, but from the newly-incorporated Mediterranean region, including Lebanon.

The vast majority of Lebanese immigrants were young, unmarried men (Muller, 2006). This was due in large measure to pressure exerted by the Ottoman Empire over them, thus opening the doors of exile.

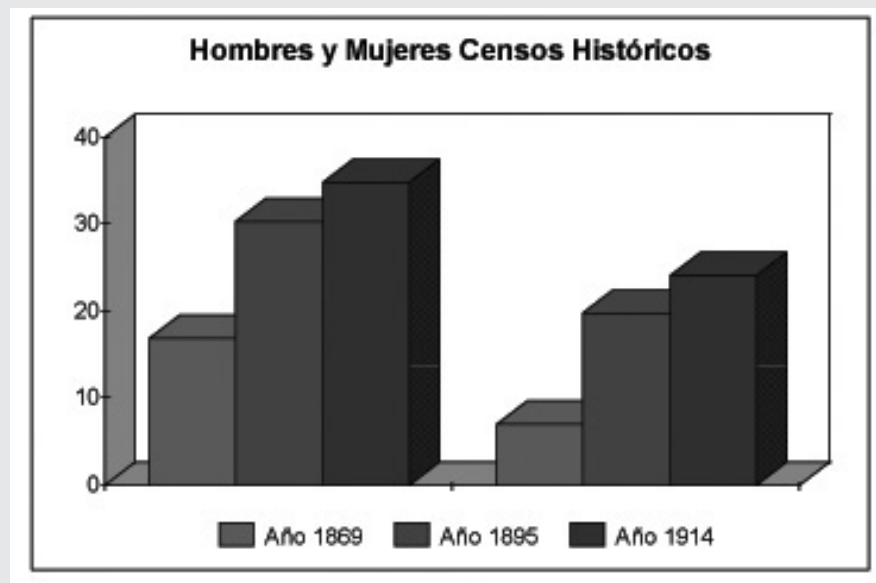
Argentina's various national censuses show the following facts and figures (Lattes, 1972):

However, while the figures show a substantial numerical weight in favor of men, the impact of women's arrival was substantial for the following reasons:

- They came accompanying male relatives fleeing the Ottoman Empire.
- They accompanied their fathers.
- They came in order to marry fellow Lebanese who had taken root in the host society.
- They arrived with their sons and daughters in order to reunite with their previously-arrived husbands.
- They made the trip alone.

## The Arrival of Lebanese Women in Latin America

The arrival of Lebanese women to Latin America was of great importance for the formation of



Lebanese Men and Women Immigrants in Argentina by Historical Census 1869, 1895, and 1914 (Lattes, 1972).



Pasaporte Atué Rosa. French Mandate Era passport, 1921. Passport issued by the French Mandate in Lebanon in 1924 [of a Lebanese woman and her son] (CAILL: Centro Argentino de Investigación sobre la Inmigración Libanesa (Archive))

endogamous marriages, within which the origins of cultural identity was preserved and transmitted to descendants in the host society.

The cultural legacy carried by Lebanese immigrants (including language, cuisine, and oral family history) was as a whole transmitted by Lebanese mothers since they were the ones with whom children spent the bulk of their time. Lebanese immigrants who married women of other nationalities experienced more difficulties in passing on the culture of origin.

Women in Argentina and other Latin American countries, as in other parts of the world, had to overcome many obstacles in order to achieve equality, though many women in Argentina have distinguished themselves in the pursuit of women's causes. These women should be honored for openly supporting the achievement of a more just and egalitarian society. Among them stand out Alicia Moreau de Justo, Victoria Ocampo, Eva Duarte de Perón, and the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo. Among the latter two groups today, many of them octogenarians, we find individuals demanding to know the fate of children and

grandchildren who “disappeared” during the last military dictatorship in Argentina from 1976 to 1982.

Immigrant women in Argentina were also pioneers in forming debate clubs, committees, and women's associations, and in most cases dedicated themselves to charitable activities. Lebanese women were no exception. Shoulder to shoulder with men, they undertook charity work in different provinces, collected funds to assist the needy, produced clothing, and collaborated with religious and educational organizations.

In the decade of the 1930s women's organizations proliferated throughout the country. Women congregated, debated, and coalesced around goals they labored collectively to achieve.

To cite an example of what took place in that period, we take the case of the Circle of Ladies of the Province of Buenos Aires. As its president wrote, “The Confederation of Charity of Argentina, an association of veritable social significance given its diversity and breadth, is comprised of 14 working groups, each of which was created to cater to the



Lebanese women in the Sociedad Libanesa de Rosario, 1928 (CAIIL Archive)

needs of each province, and a Supreme Council that coordinates activities of the working groups in the service of the nation”.<sup>1</sup>

Within Lebanese institutions women formed women’s commissions, performing charitable activities for the community and society in general. Their associational activities gave them access to human and material resources necessary to achieve the goals they had laid out for themselves.

In the context of the times, such activities were truly significant, though not well received given women’s participation in society. However, women’s committees always lent prestige to the association, providing innovative ideas and bringing a touch of quality and fine-tuning to all institutional activities (Baclini, 2003, p.30). Lebanese women’s activities in the different urban institutions to which they belonged were considerable, both in an organized (namely through committee work) or non-organized fashion.

Lebanese women consistently collaborated in social and cultural activities, organizing dinners and lunches attended mostly by women (men participated in their own separate meetings), proof of how

Lebanese women increasingly demanded their own space both within the Lebanese community and society in general. Their activities were a source of emulation to other women seeking their own social space.

It is a fact that women began to conquer new spaces and acquire forms of conduct previously only allowed to men. A publication from that time period illustrates the mindset found in the first decades of the twentieth century: “Who has taught you to doubt or to discuss things pertaining to doctrine, morality, or governance of the Church? You must have learned it from the serpent of paradise. If you want to know so much, why not simply obey? (Palau, 1927).

Texts like these demonstrate the extent to which conservative Argentine society denigrated women’s participation in society. However, with perseverance they managed to meet the challenge: “Women confronted prohibitions and limits. They learned to move freely throughout the cities, far from the supervision or protection of men. They learned to exercise their rights and know their own bodies. They learned the price and responsibility of independence” (Sarlo, 1999).



Meeting of Lebanese women, end of 1940's (CAILL Archive)

Lebanese women counted on the courage born of having left their native Lebanon and of having to forge a shield to protect them from the pain of exile. Undoubtedly their actions contributed to the achievements that women enjoy today in Argentina. They realized how to open paths and unify their efforts to further the cause of their sex: "The Lebanese woman is a perfect mixture between the strong cedar that grows despite adversity and the water of the Mediterranean that molds to the winds that blow at its shores" (Daher, 2010).

Walter Muller is Professor of History in the Instituto Superior del Profesorado No. 22. "Maestro Addad" (San Lorenzo, Argentina). Director, Centro Argentino de Investigacion Sobre la Inmigracion Libanesa (CAILL) Email: moguir@hotmail.com Translated by George A. Abdelnour

The Lebanese Susana Yoma, a recent arrival to Argentina, at the start of the 20th century. (CAILL Archive)



---

**ENDNOTES**

1. Women's Circle of the Province of Buenos Aires. Confederación de Beneficencia de la República Argentina. Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1938.

**REFERENCES**

- Baclini, J.** (2003). *Sociedad Libanesa de Rosario: 75 Aniversario*.
- Daher, N.** (2010). La Mujer Libanesa. *Revista Ahlan*, Sociedad Libanesa de Rosario. Rosario, Argentina.
- Lattes, A. E.** (1972). La migración como factor de cambio en la población en la Argentina [Migration as a Factor of Population Change in Argentina]. Buenos Aires.
- Muller, A.** (2006). Immigrantes libaneses, una impronta particular. *Revista Libano*.
- Palau, G.** (1927). La mujer de la Acción Católica. *Pensamientos y Consejos de la Compañía de Jesús*. [Women of Catholic Action. Thoughts and Advice of the Jesuits]. Madrid, Spain.
- Sarlo, B.** (1999). Una mirada al futuro. *Mujeres Inolvidables*. Barcelona, Spain.