

The Lebanese Youth: Scattered Approaches

■ Shafic Shuaib

Coordinator of the *Arab Adolescent Girl Report* – CAWTAR, 2003

The attempt to establish civil peace in Lebanon that began a decade and a half ago, is still marked by the absence of social planning policies. According to the latest report on socio-economic conditions in Lebanon, the "official handling of social dimensions has been limited to generalities and remains governed by the assumption that social problems depend on finding solutions for economic growth. As a result, although the government's interest has shifted away from that of previous governments after the Taif agreement*, putting the emphasis on economic reform rather than reconstruction schemes, governmental policies did not change their approach to social issues. They still consider social issues to be a variable depending on expected economic transformations."¹

Although the official authorities that supervised the making of this report and licensed it have asserted that its content expressed opinions of the researchers who produced it, they recognize that public policies on social issues are lacking in Lebanon. This acknowledgement indicates that there is a problem in this respect, indeed a problem far more alarming than the statement itself. In addition, one can say that the shortage in these strategies is severe, while the need for them is increasing by the day

as a result of the growing socio-economic crisis in Lebanon. This need is mostly felt among the middle classes and the young labor force arriving in the labor market unable to find decent jobs. This in turn leads to various repercussions, among which is the massive migration of the Lebanese youth to various parts of the world.

The deficient handling of social issues and its impact, especially among the youth, is widespread in the Arab world and is not merely a Lebanese specificity. The 2002 and 2003 *Arab Human Development* reports examined these issues at length and submitted statistics on illiteracy, unemployment, living standards, educational issues, women, youth, as well as problems the Arab world is facing on issues of freedom, knowledge, and empowerment.² These socially significant figures were the foundation on which the Bush-led American administration relied to justify the "Greater Middle East" project³ without, though, touching upon the real American targets behind this scheme. The contention was: "If the Middle East advances along the same path it has followed so far, causing an increase in the number of youth who lack decent jobs and education, and who are deprived of their political rights, this shall jeopardize stability in the whole region and the common interests of the G8 members."



(Canada, France, Italy, Germany, United States of America, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Japan, European Union, Russia.)

Lebanese Young Women: Conceptual Problems

A CAWTAR Center study on teenage issues in the Arab world, based on a series of national monographs, documentaries, and analytical studies, some of which were conducted in Lebanon,⁴ revealed problems with the keys and tools to be used for the implementation of this study, mainly as to defining the “young girl” by age and in concept, along with approaching issues of interest to her at various levels, the main criteria used, and intellectual references.

Furthermore, the documentary report monitoring teenage issues in Lebanese studies, conducted in line with the monographic study, revealed an obvious weakness in the evaluation of concepts and the information structure in this field.⁵

A- The Problem of Determining the Age Group

Similar to other developing countries, the population of Lebanon is manifestly young: The population amounted to 3.1 million in 1996, among which 585,000 were young men and women, i.e. less than 19 percent of the total population.

The number of young people is expected to increase in the next twenty years to reach 714,200 in 2016, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentages of the Youth in the Total Population, 1970-2016 (Thousand/percentage)⁶

	1970	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
Youth	376.8	585.2	612.4	628.2	655.4	714.2
Total	2126.3	3090.7	3363.5	3636.0	3897.6	4138.6
%	17.7	18.9	18.2	17.3	16.9	17.3

The tendency to use the concept of *footowwa* (adolescence) as a synonym *shabab* (youth) poses some ambiguity in specialized Lebanese studies as to age limits on the one hand, and concepts used to refer to this age category on the other.

According to United Nations estimates published in the late 1980s, the youth are those who are between 15 and 24 years old.⁷ Others consider the youth to be those aged between 17 and 24 years old.⁸ In the study “The Youth and Development”, the youth is the category of 13 to 25-year-olds.⁹ Some con-

sider that “the Lebanese young people are those who have completed the adolescence age (15 to 16 years) and have not yet stepped into psychological and socio-economic stability (23 to 30 years old).”¹⁰ Dr. Zuhair Hatab points out in the global field survey about the youth in Lebanon that the youth are those who are 10 to 24 years old.¹¹

Hence, it appears that the criteria for determining who the young people are along with the corresponding age limits reflects a series of complicated issues, involving more than simple considerations, especially when the different behavioral considerations are heeded.

B- The Problem with *Nodj* (Maturity) and *Boulough* (Adolescence, Adulthood, Legal Age, and Puberty)

It is worthy here to note the ambiguity of the Lebanese official assumptions regarding legal limits of *nodj* (maturity) and *boulough* (adolescence, adulthood, legal age, and puberty) among the youth. The Lebanese law resorts to two measures: legal maturity and political maturity. An adolescent is said to be legally mature when s/he completes 18 years of age, for s/he becomes subject to legal liability at this age and may assume public functions. As for political maturity, it is when one becomes entitled to exercise his/her right to vote in municipal and parliamentary elections; that is, at twenty-one years of age.

Along with legal maturity and political maturity, *nodj* (maturity) and *boulough* (adolescence, adulthood, legal age, and puberty) in Lebanon are determined by religious edicts. Each denomination has its own age limits at which boys and girls are considered to have become young persons. These age limits are not only different from one denomination to another, but also between boys and girls; hence, their minimum age of marriage also differs. This is obviously quite an ordeal in a country like Lebanon where there are 18 different denominations, and where personal status is still based upon religious laws.

Below are some examples of the different ages of maturity as to different denominations in Lebanon.¹²

C- The Problem with the Concept

In their book entitled *The Growth Psychology of*

Table 2: Minimum Age for Marriage..... for the Male and the Female/ by Confession

Catholic		Orthodox		Evangelical		The Islamic Shari'a	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
16	14	17	15	18	16	13	9

Adolescents,¹³ Dr. Yacoub and Dr. Dam'a Yacoub discuss the confusion that common people and intellectuals experience whenever they encounter three terms: Puberty, Adolescence, and Youth.¹⁴ Likewise, the aforementioned studies reveal much confusion in employing the concepts of *mourahaka* (adolescence) and *mourahek* (adolescent). Researchers tend to confuse between the concepts of *al-mourahek* (adolescent), *al-shab* (youthful), *al-nashe`* (young), and *al-yafe`* (adolescent or pubescent) interchangeably. As a result, the meanings of these concepts and the differences between them become ambiguous and intermingling.

This state of confusion takes another dimension in Lebanon: Lebanese law considers *childhood* to correspond to the concept of a minor, which ends at 18 years of age, as in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Furthermore, there is a number of other distinctions within each age group, such as: a minor capable of discretion, a minor not capable of discretion (15 years old), conditional work permit and prohibition from working (13 years old), exemption from criminal liability (until seven years of age) and gradual succession to

criminal liability (13 and 15 years old), to state a few. All of these distinctions are shown in Table 3 depicting the different positions in the Lebanese legislations.

D- The Predicament of Intellectual References in Lebanese Studies

The review we have conducted on the studies on youth in Lebanon shows that so far, researchers have drawn the concepts from studies on the youth conducted in the West and implemented them in Lebanon. In our opinion, this explains the ambiguities and intermingling of concepts when researchers use any one concept. These arise from the lack of careful examination and development of the concepts, and from discarding the deep-rooted socio-historical differ-

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Table 3: A Comparison Between Items from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Personal Status Laws Regarding the Definition of the Child in Lebanon¹⁵

	The CRC	Lebanon	Notes
Age of adulthood	18	18	
Minor capable of discretion	Not specified	15	
Minor not capable of discretion	Not specified	12.5 to 18 for females 16 to 18 for males or true maturity	
Minimum age of marriage	Age of adulthood	9 to 15 for females; 13 to 17 for males	In reality it is 27.7 for females and 31 for males
Parents' consent to the marriage	Obligatory in all cases	Necessary for the marriage to be legal	Prevailing customs and habits could pressure and influence the choice they make especially in the case of girls
Parents' approval of the marriage	Not specified on condition that it does not conflict with the individuals' opinions and welfare	Mandatory for minors, so is the permission of the marrying clergy	Parents' will to marry their minors is often sufficient, irrespective of the minors' consent
Child custody	Not specified	It differs from one denomination to the next, but it is in general 7 years for males and 9 years for females	



ences between our societies and those of the West. The concepts used by researchers in the West emanated from objective facts, experiences, and knowledge accumulated in their societies. These conceptual tools developed in the midst of a long-term process of knowledge accumulation, accompanied by meticulous study and analysis of the trends of social change and development over several historical phases.

For instance, five centuries ago, adolescence (*mourahaka*) was an alien concept in a number of societies. These societies recognized only two life stages: childhood and adulthood. European societies only differentiated between “a child” and “an adolescent” in the 18th century, upon the invention of the steam engine. So much so that many consider that the concept of “adolescence” (*al-mourahaka*) is associated with the industrial revolution; namely, the changes it introduced to the structure of the educational system as a result of the professional needs of industrial development.¹⁶

Undoubtedly, the concept of “adolescence” did in fact originate in the 19th century, and it has been systematically linked with the working class ever since, through violence, gangs, and crimes committed in protest of the conditions imposed by the industrial world. As a result, the first surfacing of the youth was under the equation: youth=nuisance (*al-shabab/ al-iz'aj*). Later on, the changes

that accompanied the development of capitalism in Europe changed that equation making it: youth amusement and fun (*al-shabab / al-lahoo*). This new concept was fostered through the consumption values that targeted the youth and molded their behavior. It introduced a handful of changes in their dances, choices of music, dress codes, hairstyles, and the like; in other words, the concept of teenagers (*al-ilshreeyoun*). These two concepts (youth and teenagers)

and their dimensions were thus mixed and youth (*al-shabab*) became by definition associated with nuisance and fun. The youth became a category of their own; they were neither children nor adults, but somewhere in between (*beyniyoun*).¹⁷

Dr. Al Amin further states that the developments in the educational system (*al-nitham al-ta'limi*), which resulted from the socio-economic developments led by capitalism

in Europe, are behind the above-mentioned transformations in adolescence and adolescents (the youth). In fact, the transitional stage in the educational system defined that life stage between childhood and adulthood. The composite definition of youth (*al shabab*), in its age and educational dimensions, is directly related to high school and university years. This is why this stage is limited to those who are between 16 and 22 years of age. Given the projected developments in the modern educational system, the upper limit could reach 25 years.

As such, these two dimensions (age and education) define and determine the youth. If one criterion is not met, namely in the case of school or university dropouts, the other (i.e. age) is sufficient to determine a youth. As to parents of that age, they are to be discarded of this category.

E- The Youth: Meanings and Concepts in Need of Regeneration and Redefinition

1. In light of the above, we believe that crystallizing the concept of youth and its related meanings necessarily depends on the unique circumstances lived by each community throughout its socio-historical progress. Furthermore, as is the case of any conceptual and scientific product, this concept needs constant assessment and regeneration in the light of the development and change in the general conditions in the community under study. We did not encounter that as we reviewed the existing studies on youth in Lebanon. Hence, there is a need to examine the various definitions of the concepts being used, in the light of the specificities of the Lebanese society and other similar societies.

2. Social specificities cannot be overrated in today's world which is characterized by integration, openness, and communication in the framework of globalization and the cosmic village. Nowadays, deeming the developmental paths of each community to be independent and unaffected by external factors would be a methodological error and an exaggeration; so is contending that the external factors are more influential than internal ones. Neither one prevails over the other; they rather intermingle, interact, and intertwine constantly and continuously depending on the circumstances, situations, and balances of power.

3. Approaching issues related to the youth in general, and young women in particular, needs this methodological equation and efforts to avoid exaggeration. They need to head towards realizing and respecting the following: The criteria on which are built the issues pertinent to the youth are not independent entities; they ought not be pulled outside their respective social, economic, historical, and cultural milieus. They must not be dealt with and considered applicable in all places and at

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all times, without discussion and inquiry. Hence, there is a need to intensify the production of monographs in this domain, given their wide range of approaches and direct scrutiny of the status quo and situations pertaining to the youth, their matters, and scopes of development.

4. In light of all of these givens and methodological necessities they impose, the question becomes: How can we re-examine the reality of the youth in Lebanon? Especially that the preliminary inspection of this reality (reviewed in the sections above) has revealed that we are indeed facing a problematic: Should one set to study the reality of the youth in Lebanon in general, or should we approach the study of young women separately? Are we actually

facing a reality in which there are two groups: "Young Lebanese Men" and "Young Lebanese Women"?

This consideration is especially significant given that young women and men in Lebanon are raised according to different sets of values, behaviors, habits and customs. These inconsistencies become particularly alarming in certain fields such as the issue of patriotism and national belonging, due to deeply rooted problematics that prevent reaching a unified perception of the history of Lebanon and that are unable to agree upon the basic patriotic givens as to concept of the state enemy, the constituents of national choices, and the relations with Arab and neighboring countries.

END NOTES

* The Taif agreement marked the beginning of the end of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990).

1. Consult: A Group of Researchers, *The Socio Economic Situation in Lebanon: Reality and Perspectives (Al-Wad' al-Iktisadi wal Ijtima'i Fi Loubnan: Wak' Wa Afak)*, 2004, a Ministry of Social Affairs publication in Cooperation with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Norwegian Center for Applied Research in the Social Sciences (FAFO), Beirut, Lebanon, p.63.

2. Consult the statistical annex and the list of tables, *The Arab Human Development Report 2002*, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Arab Fund for Socio-Economic Development (AGFUND), a publication of the Arab Regional Office of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), printed in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

3. Consult: The "Greater Middle East" project. *Al-Hayat Newspaper*, 13/2/2004.

4. CAWTAR Center, *Teenagers' Issues in Lebanon (Kadaya al-Mourahekin wa al Mourahekat Fi Loubnan)*, unpublished study by Dr. Mona Fayad, Mr. Adib Nehmeh and Dr. Chafic Cheaib.

5. Chafic Cheaib: Within the aforementioned study, the following Arabic references were reviewed: 26 books, five studies, eight theses/dissertations, nine articles from Lebanese newspapers in addition to four French publications and 15 English ones. They all discussed youth and teenagers' issues at various levels and scopes. They constitute all the references available to us in university libraries and with publishers in Beirut, Lebanon, 2002.

6. *The National Human Development Report in Lebanon, "Youth and Development" (Al-Shabab wal Tanmia)*, published by the UNDP, in cooperation with the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), Beirut, Lebanon, 1999, Table No. 402, p. 60.

7. See Hekmat el Zein, *The Youth in the Civil Society: Initiatives, Commitment, and Participation towards National Unity and Development (Al-Shabab Fi al-Jam'iyat al-Ahliya: Moubadarat, Iltizam, wa Mousharaka fi Sabil al-Tadamon al-Watani wa al-Tanmiya)*, Conference on "Building Youth Policies to face social changes in Lebanon", UNESCO Publications, 1999, p.36.

8. Dr. Hashem al Husseini, "Children, Adolescents, and

Youth Problems in Lebanon" (*Moushkelat al Atfal, wa al Nashi'a, wa al Shabab fi Loubnan*), part of a joint research *Situation of Some Social Groups in Lebanon (Wake' baad al-fi'at al-Ijtima'iya fi Loubnan)*, published by the Ministry of Social Affairs and The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Beirut, 2000, p.3.

9. *The National Human Development Report in Lebanon, "Youth and Development" (Al-Shabab wal Tanmia)*, op.cit. p.11.

10. Dr. Jean Murad, *The Lebanese Youth and Social Challenges (Al-Shabab al-Loubnani wa al-Tahaddiyat al-Ijtima'ya)*, The First Intellectual Symposium of the Youth (Al-Nadwa al-Fikriya al-Shababiya al-Oola), *The Dialogue of Generations (Hiwar al Ajjal)*, a book published by Shabab Loubnana al Wahed, 1997, p.46.

11. Dr. Zuhair Hatab, *Lebanon's Youth Facing Today's Hardships (Al Shabab al Loubnani fi Moujahat Asfat al Asr)*, publication of the Association for Family Planning in Lebanon (Jam'iyat Tanthim al Osra fi Loubnan), Beirut, 1997, p. 22.

12. Alice Keyrouz, A regional workshop on "Teenagers and Early Marriage in Arab Countries" (*Al-Mourahikeen wa al-Mourahekat wa al-Zawaj al-Moubakker fi al-Moujtama'at al-Arabiya*), Larnaca, 1-4/3/2001, published in agreement with Al Furat for Publishing and Distribution (*Al-Furat Lil Nashr wa al-Tawzi'*), Beirut, Lebanon, P.42.

13. This is the title of a book by A. Gesell, published in 1970 by P.U.F. Paris.

14. Ibid. p. 17, emphasis was introduced by the author of this paper.

15. "The Situation of Children in Lebanon," 1993-1998 (*Awda' al-Atfal fi Loubnan*), *The Lebanese National Report on the follow up of the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*, prepared by Adib Nehmeh, published by the Ministry of Social Affairs – the Higher Council for Childhood, Beirut, October, 1998, p. 21.

16. Consult: Mona Fayad, *The Child and School Education*, The Arab Cultural Center, Dar el Bada', Beirut, 2004.

17. Consult: D. Adnan Al-Amin, *Which Educational Policy for the Youth in Lebanon? A seminar on "Building Youth Strategies to Face Social Changes in Lebanon"*, UNESCO Publications, Beirut, 1999, p.p. 110-14.