

Women, Education and Social Change

Unlearning Abuse

As I walked across AUB's campus one afternoon, I overheard a conversation between two students, a woman and a man. The male student was trying to explain to his friend that there are times when it is necessary for a man to beat a woman. I was tempted to stop. I turned back, and the look on the young woman's face stunned me more than what the young man was saying. She was nodding her head in complacent agreement, and seemed convinced that he was speaking a self-evident truth. The sad part is not just that this actually occurred, but that the young man's comments are not considered an extreme or unacceptable opinion in contemporary Lebanon.

As part of my doctoral dissertation research, I have spent the last six months investigating the history of women's education in Lebanon, specifically, the effect of higher education on Lebanese women's social status. Through my research, I have discovered many signs of improvement and indications of empowerment. Yet, that is all they are: signs and indications. In reality, tradition and culture, melded into religion, are so engraved in people's minds that they obviate the idea that formal education, however comprehensive it may be, empowers women and fosters social change. True awareness and change, I believe, occur only when people feel it is in their best interests to change. Until such awareness dawns, they tend to use the excuse of tradition, culture and religion when they feel threatened by a perceived loss of power. In our society, it is men who decide when and what type of awareness and change occur, when we need to redefine our traditions and reconstruct meanings that fit the world in which we live, or when to return to a patriarchal interpretation of religious life, since many believe that all the ills of the world are due to the fact that we have strayed away from God.

Lebanon has a long history of formal and informal education. Inhabiting a trade center and a gateway between East and West, the Lebanese have been exposed to many conquests going back thousands of years and have adapted to various ideologies and lifestyles. This type of education is priceless; it helped Lebanese society to survive and succeed in a very competitive milieu. The Lebanese continually had to bend and reshape their thinking, because a tree branch that does not bend will break. When formal education was introduced, all Lebanese embraced it. History tells us that this education was not reserved for boys alone, but served girls as well. Girls enrolled in schools (*madaaris*), and many were taught at home.

When the 19th century brought an influx of missionary educators, girls' schools were opened as well. A few wealthy families even sent their daughters abroad to continue their education. A current Byblos Bank "infomercial" tells us that Helene Barudi was the first Lebanese woman to receive a medical degree from London in 1895,

after which she returned to Lebanon to practice. Women were admitted to AUB's nursing program in 1905 (1) and by the 1920's a Women's Junior College had been established and AUB and St. Joseph's University began accepting female students.

Lebanon was one of the first Arab countries to provide higher education for the entire region. More astonishing, it was also the first country to provide women with equal educational opportunities. By the 1950s, education was not the preserve of the wealthy alone. Lebanon's hunger and eagerness for knowledge resulted in women representing approximately half of the student population in most of Lebanon's universities (2) and girls scoring higher than boys in general governmental testing in all fields, including the physical sciences.

Yet, as researcher Mona Khalaf has noted, "Lebanese women have easy access to education....but that education has not enabled them to reach decision-making positions"(3). There is much work to be done, and it is clear that formal education, though crucial for fostering awareness, is not the sole solution to the difficulties women confront in this society. There is another type of education, an informal one known as socialization, which must be addressed. This type of learning is needed to transform awareness into concrete change. Socialization enables the re-examination of ideologies which state that women should be punished if they do not serve men's purposes, *i.e.*, if they do not serve the good of society. An interview with a respected religious cleric, Sayyed Muhammad Hassanein Fadlallah, reveals what many young Lebanese men and women are learning informally. Fadlallah argues that "a man has a right to beat his wife when she refuses to have sexual relations with him, which she should comply with at all times...unless she specifies when she does not want to in the text of the marriage agreement" (4). Another cleric, Father George Dimas, stresses that "there are circumstances that lead to violence and the woman is not always innocent....Many times it is she who instigates the situation" (5).

These men and others invariably cite outdated and selective interpretations of religious traditions and holy writings, and always shape them to benefit and serve men. Several assumptions underlie these beliefs and attitudes. One is that a man has a natural right to force a woman to do what he wants; there is a clear hierarchy and he is on top. Second, we find an arrogant, nonchalant attitude that in most cases of violence, it is the woman's fault. She causes problems and the poor defenseless man is left so perplexed that he simply must resort to violence to correct an injustice done to him. Third is the assumption that a man has a right to use violence against a woman, or anybody else who upsets or frustrates him. This type of discourse is not only expressed by the older generation and the clergy; rather, it is prevalent among the young, both females and males.

The opinions of the two clerics mentioned above are shared by many, especially the fathers, brothers, husbands, and male cousins of young women. The concept of women serving only as mothers and wives, existing solely to please men sexually and provide them with male heirs, is the *sine qua non* of patriarchy. This socially constructed ideology holds back women, as well as men. This worldview is rigid and permits no alternatives; it is reinforced in socialization through stories, examples, proverbs, movies, songs and television programs that aid in educating children and developing their sense of their sex roles and functions in society.

These notions form the basis of Lebanon's Personal Status Laws. If women are created to please men and provide them with children, preferably male, then it stands to reason that if women misbehave and do not provide men with their God-given rights, then men can resort to violence. Lebanese laws reinforce this ideology. The legal code relegates women's issues to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and private family issues. These codes make women completely dependent upon men and their mercy. Women are allotted the status of legal minor; they are assumed to have less capacity and intelligence; thus, they need to be guided, even by physical force.

Interestingly, when women were first accepted to institutions of higher education, they chose to study nursing, medicine and pharmacy. These professions are associated with the physical sciences, which tend to be viewed as more difficult to master than other fields. So, women can be entrusted with the most important tasks of having children, raising them, feeding them, even medically nursing them and others back to health, but women must be beaten into submission for men's pleasures. Perhaps there is no contradiction here. As long as women are seen primarily as nurturers, wives, and mothers, or in other subservient roles which serve men, their submission is unquestioningly accepted. Women who promote such subservient roles will be rewarded, for they serve patriarchy and men's need to control and be powerful. Those women who ask for rights that diverge from woman's traditional role will be viewed with mistrust, even as enemies who are trying to destroy the family and society.

Lebanese society is still in a state of transition and flux after experiencing nearly two decades of instability, chaos and violence, all of which was brought on by men. The post-war era is an important period for reshaping Lebanese society and for reviewing the roles its citizens will play in the future. In June 1993, *Al-Anwar* newspaper published a revealing survey. The results indicated that 60 percent of Lebanese men believe women are equal to men, but feel that women's primary and natural function is found in the home as wives and mothers. Men, however, belong in the public sphere, *e.g.*, work and politics. The men will allow women to go to school and work, as long as they do not abandon their God-given duties to their men.

Why should a society be so eager to educate its women if they belong only in the private realm? One answer is that education and work complement each other as long as they serve patriarchal ends.

The more educated a woman, the better educated her children and the more her husband can benefit from her work in times of financial need. She can even be a source of conversation, someone with whom he can talk. "Every man has a woman behind him who wants to discuss his job with him....if he doesn't discuss it with his wife, he'll probably discuss it with his secretary" (6), notes Mona Khauli, National Director of YWCA in Lebanon. She inadvertently stresses that a man requires that a woman satisfy him intellectually as well, or else he will turn elsewhere for such stimulation. Another example of this type of thinking became apparent when a Professor of Humanities at the Lebanese American University, Nazik Saba Yared, conducted research on battered women. She shared her disturbing results with some of her female friends, and was shocked to hear them say "these women deserved to be beaten, or else they must like to be beaten, otherwise they would not accept it!" (7). This philosophy is shared by many men as well. One husband concluded that his wife did not tell anyone he beat her because she herself believed she deserved it (8).

Yet, many women who experience physical abuse have nowhere to turn. Their families force them to keep it quiet and return to the violent husband "for the sake of the children", or they blame the wife for provoking her husband and make it clear to her that they do not want to know. The woman may come to feel the same way. Unless women begin to participate constructively in reshaping socialization by actively reinterpreting tradition, religion and the complementary roles of the sexes in Lebanese society, the vicious cycle will continue regardless of how well-educated women become. Women must demand to participate in the dissemination of knowledge; they must give voice to new social constructions at all levels of our society: political, legal and economic. Only in this way can we develop just and inclusive social roles for all, not just for men. The prevailing "zero-sum" attitude needs to change. It is only with the help of informal cultural education that society can grasp that women are neither men's enemies nor their slaves. However, the first and greatest challenge is to convince women that they deserve better, that they are as intelligent as men, and that they can contribute more to society than simply biological services.

Mirna Lattouf, Ph.D. Candidate
University of Arizona

Footnotes

- (1) *AUB Alumni Magazine*, 1990, p.12.
- (2) *Al-Raida*, 1995, Vol. XI, No. 68, p.12
- (3) *Ibid.*, p.14.
- (4) *Al-Raida* 1994, Vol. XI, Nos. 65-66, p. 30.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- (6) *Al-Raida*, 1995, Vol. XII, Nos. 70-71, 95, p. 31.
- (7) *Al-Raida*, 1994, Vol. XI, Nos. 65-66,
- (8) *Ibid.*