

# Triple Trouble: Mixed Marriages and Interlocking Forms of Discrimination in Lebanon

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For a number of years now I have been researching, writing, and lecturing on gender issues, with an emphasis on the condition of women in the Arab world. I knew the statistics, most of the related data, and several stories about the plight of individual Arab and Moslem women in these patriarchal societies. In brief, I knew my subject. At least I thought I did, until I got married. What had previously been mostly an academic exercise suddenly and unexpectedly became a personal saga.

With the fulfillment of a lifelong dream (i.e. meeting the right person), came the harsh reality of mixed marriage in Lebanon. With my husband being non-Lebanese and of another confession, I was in double trouble. To start with, being Moslem myself, I could not marry a Christian in my own country without one of us giving up his/her religious identity and acquiring the other's. Being convinced that we chose each other for who we were and not for what we were to become, this was just not an option. Conversion under such circumstances could only be a real alternative, I guess, when one of the partners is convinced of the other's religion, or, perhaps, when both partners are not believers anyway and, for some reason, cannot go to Cyprus<sup>1</sup>. None of these was the case for us: as mature adults who knew who we were and what we wanted of life and of each other, we sought union in difference, despite difference, maybe even because of difference. Actually, one of the things I respected the most in my husband was his profound faith in God. The fact that he approached God in a different way than I did was an advantage rather than a handicap for the relationship. We both knew that, if wisely managed, this difference

could help us grow through interaction, exchange, and especially challenge. To renounce this difference out of administrative necessity would not be in line with what we most deeply believed in, both as individuals and intellectuals: pluralism rather than homogeneity, inclusion rather than exclusion and free personal choice rather than submission (to unjust state laws).

Our civil marriage was celebrated in a European country. The latter was neither my country of birth nor my husband's. The marriage contract gave us equal rights and responsibilities. We were starting our life together on an equal footing. We also wanted to celebrate our union in each other's tradition. We thus arranged additional wedding blessings for our respective families: a Christian one in North America and a Muslim one in Lebanon. The first hurdle was overcome.

Of course, and I knew that (at least hypothetically) as a Lebanese feminist, civil marriage can only solve the most immediate problem of legalizing interfaith marriages. Other complications soon had to be faced. Upon coming back to Lebanon, I was confronted with another legal matter touching me on a very personal, intimate level: children. Although I was able to retain my religious identity through civil marriage, I realized/remembered that our children (to come) will automatically only carry their father's religious identity. This was unacceptable to my husband and I. If we believed in free choice for ourselves, we certainly wanted the same for our children.

Another related problem I was faced with was inheritance. As a future Muslim mother with 'Christian' chil-



dren, I was not going to be able to pass inheritance to them because of their 'pre-decided' non-Muslim confession. Although the parents can choose to and manage to free themselves from the shackles of confessional personal status laws in Lebanon (through civil marriage), their children's lives continue to be regulated by it. Our feelings of injustice could only be mitigated by the fact that we did not have any children yet. I guess we will have to cross that bridge when we get to it.

With the honeymoon over and married life settling in, little did I suspect that my problems were only going to get worse. I was soon to embark on the almost impossible mission of first documenting our marriage in Lebanon and then getting the residence permit for my husband. Not only did I experience first hand the slowness and inefficiency of bureaucracy in Lebanon (which was to be expected), but I soon realized that some of the governmental apparatus were simply incapable of dealing with my 'peculiar' situation. It felt

like most of the government officials and professionals (lawyers) that I had to deal with were encountering this 'situation' for the first time in their bureaucratic lives! As a Lebanese woman, it seemed I was not expected by the Lebanese authorities to marry a non-Lebanese. This suspicion became a conviction after one

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full year of being sent back and forth from one governmental office to another to get a signature, or present a certain document, or sign an affidavit. Their list seemed to be inexhaustible. Worse yet, having started the whole process in Tripoli (where I had more 'wasta'<sup>2</sup>), but being myself born and a registered resident in Beirut, I actually only managed to complicate matters. It was then that I also experienced, at my own expense (both financially and physically), how uncoordinated the highly centralized bureaucracy in my country was.

But the worst was yet to come. I would have gladly 'lived with' Lebanese bureaucratic inefficiency if it were not for one small incident. At the same time I met my (North American) husband, a (male) friend was meeting his Western European future wife. Our marriages were only a few weeks apart. He and I both thought we were very lucky to have met our soul-

mates. We both felt very happy, and we both were amused, even bewildered, that things were happening simultaneously and very similarly to us. The Lebanese government, however, had a different opinion about our respective marriages. Upon sharing with my friend my 'adventures' with Lebanese bureaucracy – after all, who can understand my hardships more than he does?, he told me, in his own words, that his wife's acquisition of Lebanese citizenship (she is an EU citizen) was 'a piece of cake'! As for my North American husband, to be allowed to only reside in Lebanon (citizenship is of course out of the question), a camel had to practically pass through the proverbial eye of a needle.

It was then that I became aware of the 'triple trouble' of being a Lebanese woman: Lebanon was not only a country infected by religious sectarianism complicated by (typical) incompetent Middle Eastern bureaucracy, but it was also a country with a unique combination of racism and sexism. Why were foreign men practically denied access to the country through mixed marriages? Why were foreign women, by contrast, welcomed in? The first logical explanation lies in the fact that Lebanon is a patriarchal, patrilineal society, where all aspects of an individual's life are traced back to the father, the head of the family: family name, social identity, authority, custody, religion, inheritance, health care, and so forth. Another explanation is that Lebanon is a racist country that has actively sought, through legislation, to keep 'unwanted foreigners' out. Naturally, the 'unwanted' here are not North Americans or Westerners in general – this category being an absolute minority in the cases involving mixed marriages. Those the government wants to exclude are more likely to be from an 'inferior' race (e.g. Africans or South Asians), or undesirable politically (e.g. Palestinians). From a legislative/bureaucratic perspective, the fact that a Lebanese male could easily marry a Palestinian or African woman whereas a Lebanese woman is actively discouraged from marrying even a Westerner (!) is just an example of the irony of Lebanon's interlocking racist and sexist laws.

I have often lectured on the various forms of discrimination exercised by the Lebanese government on its nationals, especially women: confessionalism, racism and sexism. I never realized how interlocking these forms could be. Now I have a first hand, personal example to give in corroboration. Unfortunately it is my own.

## End Notes

- 1 Unlike in Lebanon where it is not available, civil marriage can be easily contracted in nearby Cyprus.
- 2 To have 'wasta' in Arabic is to have access to influence peddling.