

Family Planning and the Working Woman in Lebanon ⁽¹⁾

In 1966, the United Nations proclaimed the right of couples to plan the number of their children. In 1968, the International Conference on Human Rights, held in Teheran, confirmed the basic right of married people to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their offspring. Their right to receive adequate information regarding family planning was equally recognized. Again in 1974, at the International Congress of Bucharest, the same rights were endorsed by United Nations agreement.

Lebanon was one of the signatories of the above agreements. Yet, in spite of this fact, the Lebanese government has not performed any positive steps toward the application of the U.N. decisions regarding family planning. In the Lebanese penal code, two articles condemn all activities tending to encourage the use of contraceptives. First, Article 537 states that any one who prescribes or publicizes the use of contraceptives will be liable to a penalty of one month to one year imprisonment, besides the payment of an indemnity of 25 to 100 Lebanese pounds. Second, Article 538 decrees the same penalty for anyone who sells or offers for sale any contraceptive articles.

These two articles contradict the Human Rights Charter and show a clear discrepancy in governmental attitude. Efforts have been made by socially active groups and individuals to bring about a change in the above laws, but they have been to no avail.

Another obstacle to family planning in Lebanon is the small number of women, at the child bearing age, who have access to birth control information. If the population of Lebanon is estimated at 3 million, the number of women at the fertile age should be around 675,000. If we estimate at a quarter of this number, i.e. around 170,000, the number of women who really desire their pregnancies, we may consider the remaining 500,000 as subject to having unwanted pregnancies. A restricted number of these women, mainly from the rich and educated class, are within reach of contraceptive methods, while the majority of rural women and those of the poor urban class remain totally ignorant of any information about these methods.

The Family Planning Association in Lebanon was created for the purpose of contributing, as far as possible, to the handling of a problem which is beyond the capacity of governments in developing countries, where people suffer from a shortage of physicians and adequate health centers. The activities of this Association have been mainly directed to the most needy areas of the country: the relatively unprivileged rural villages of South Lebanon. A recent survey made by the Association showed that 75% of the women interviewed were willing to use contraceptives. Seventy% asked to have adequate information on this topic. Only 30% had already received some information about it and most of them declared that they had an unwanted number of children.

Family-planning and fertility control are often in positive correlation with the level of education of the parents but more directly with that of the mother. Education usually leads a woman to postpone the time of her marriage, to seek work outside the home and to acquire further knowledge about her problems and those of her environment including those of birth control and family-planning. This fact is more evident in urban districts where women have easier access to education and work and, therefore, have real interest in limiting the number of their children.

In rural districts, though women have to put up with a double burden on account of their work at home and in the field, they are still enslaved to the tribal tradition that a large number of children gives social prestige and ensures security in old age. To change people's mentality, a deeper study of the problem is necessary. One of the factors of change should be the instauration of economic and social reforms which would make parents less dependent on children in case of disease and old age. Another factor is to show them the advantages of a small family as being more economical, and safer for the health of mother and children.

Egyptian Women in Parliament ⁽¹⁾

"Egyptian women are now guaranteed a quota of 30 seats in parliament. Amendments to the law on Personal Status have not only improved women's rights in divorce but have also provided reforms in the spheres of work and politics.

Married women now have the right to enter the labor force without consent from their husbands. In the past, a woman who worked against her husband's wishes was placed legally in the category of "nashaz", or disobedient, thereby losing the right to maintenance and jeopardizing her ability to obtain a court divorce.

The amendments to the Law on Personal Status were submitted to the National Assembly in a decree from President Sadat and passed by a vote of 380 to 12, after having won the support of many religious leaders, including the Head of Al-Azhar Mosque, the Grand Mufti and the Minister of Waqf.

(1) International Women's News. Vo. 75, no. 2, June 1980, p. 31.

(1) Condensed from an article (in Arabic) on this topic by Dr. Adnan Mroweh, president of the Family Planning Association in Lebanon.