

The Effect of Wives' Employment on the Dynamics of the Lebanese Family (1)

In Lebanon, as in other developing countries, the female activity rate is increasing. The participation of women in economic production has been reported to be 17% of the total labor force. (ECWA, 1978). Although this rate is small compared to western nations, it is probably the highest in the Arab World.

Women's employment outside the home is a new phenomenon that presupposes changes in the traditional cultural patterns which confine women to the home, define their role as being mothers and homemakers and their main functions in society as being childbearing and housework. This strict segregation of roles carries with it specific definitions of tasks, the nature of which affects the entire life style of the family. (Hilal, 1971; Keddie, 1978; Antoun, 1968).

In Lebanon, there are very few studies on the impact of women's employment on family dynamics.

This lack of data has stimulated the authors, who are college students taking a course on Arab women, to investigate this problem, and test the following hypotheses:

1. Employment of wives affects the traditional division of household tasks.
2. Employment of wives affects the traditional authority structure of the family.
3. Employment of wives affects the traditional value system with respect to attitudes towards the role of women.

Methodology

The data collected on family dynamics was restricted to three areas, namely, household division of tasks; decision making in the family; and attitudes towards sex-roles. Data were gathered by means of a questionnaire, administered to married women in an interview situation. The questionnaire consisted of four parts: first, background information; second, questions on division of household tasks; third, decision making; and fourth, a five point scale to measure attitudes towards sex-roles. The sample was purposively selected from three cities, Beirut, Jbeil, and Baalbeck. A total of fifty three married women were studied, of which twenty-eight were working and twenty-five were not. The two groups were matched in age and education. The respondents were selected to be all under thirty years of age and having at least a secondary school education, that is a Baccalaureat part II.

Results

The majority of the sample (62%) was aged between 25 and 30 years, and reported to have been married for more than five years (59%). Working women had a better education than those not working; sixty-four% of the former had a university degree compared to 32% of the latter. Similarly, husbands of working women were better educated than husbands of those not working, where 75% and 60% respectively had completed university education. There were twice as many working women with no children

than non-working, and data revealed that there was an association between number of children and occupation of mothers. That is, working mothers had in general less children than non-working.

The majority of working wives (57%) occupied administrative and clerical positions: 25% of them were professionals, that is teachers, university professors, nurses and lawyers: 7% had managerial positions in the public sector; and 7% were helping in the family business. Only one (3%) was found to be self-employed. On the other hand, their husbands' occupations were found to be higher in status than theirs. Thirty-two% of them were professionals, 32% had managerial positions, 25% were employees and 10% were self-employed. When the occupational status distribution of husbands of working women was compared to that of husbands of non-working, the data revealed that the latter had a higher occupational status. Forty% were professionals, 24% had managerial positions, 12% were self-employed and 8% were in family business. Only 16% were found to be employees.

When women were asked about their work history, 35% reported that they had never worked outside the home, and 32% reported to have worked before and after marriage.

However, the majority of working women (61%) when they were asked to give reasons for working, gave a traditional response: "for financial reasons", while the rest said for "self-fulfillment" (29%), "out of boredom" (7%), and for "economic independence" (3%).

In order to investigate the effect of women's work on the authority structure of the family the data were cross-tabulated in a comparative table. The results indicate that in general, the percentage of husbands making decisions alone was consistently higher for non-working than for working women. The only exceptions were in decisions concerning buying and selling property and social visits, where a larger number of husbands of working wives were reported to take the decisions alone. On the other hand, there were proportionally more working wives than non-working who admitted making decisions on their own. There were almost twice as many deciding on buying and selling property, budgeting household expenditures, shopping for food and expensive items, children's discipline and social visits. However, they showed similar patterns of responder in choice of children's schools, vacation and travel. The only situations where non-working women had more initiative were shopping decisions for clothes, outings and recreation. The equalitarian nature of the authority structure in terms of decision making is evidenced by the results. For this specific group of women, whether employed or not, a large portion of couples decide together on most matters, except for food shopping, which seems to be a prerogative of the wife.

However, it should be noted here that in general there are more working women reporting equalitarian attitudes than the non-working. The category "others", refers to a variety of responses, such as in-laws, brothers, sisters, other relatives or servants, especially in the case of buying food.

Division of household tasks was cross-tabulated in order to compare the performance of tasks by the different members of the family. The results indicate that washing,

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cleaning, cooking, feeding babies, and ironing are performed mostly by mothers in the case of non-working women and somewhat shared in the case of working wives. However, it is only in the case of employed women that both spouses share in performing these household tasks and this in less than 25% of the cases. On the other hand, only three non-working women reported that their husbands helped in child care. Data also revealed that traditional sex-segregation of tasks in terms of location of activity was striking in both groups, but more significantly so in the case of non-working women. Tasks requiring technical skills or contacts outside the house premises were mostly performed by men. The majority of answers given by non-working women show that husbands take care of daily shopping, paying bills, taking children and other family members to physicians, and repairing. The same trend is noticeable for working women but occurs less frequently.

In order to find out whether the actual behavior of family members in terms of authority structure and division of household tasks is based on a change in the value orientation of these women, answers of the two groups of women on a five point sex-role orientation scale were tabulated. It is evident from the data that working women are less traditionally oriented than the non-working women. The only instances where similarities appear and both groups take a rather traditional stand, show in situations that involve a deterioration of relations with husband and children. On the other hand, the items which received the least traditional answers from the working women were related to sexual discrimination in employment, double standards, premarital sexual behavior and division of household tasks.

Conclusion

The general hypotheses advanced in this study, that employment of wives affects family dynamics in terms of authority structure, division of household tasks, and attitudes towards sex-roles has been substantiated.

In line with other findings from industrialized societies (Pietrowski, 1971; Michel, 1971) the results of this study indicate that Lebanese working women share more in decision making than the non-working, and the operative authority structure in their families tends to be equalitarian. However, data indicated that for a substantial group of non-working wives decision making was shared among the spouses. This finding is not paradoxical, and does not weaken the argument that wives' employment affects the authority structure of the family. On the contrary, it gives evidence to the fact that women's participation in the labor force strengthens the existing equalitarian trend. On the other hand, the data on division of household tasks supported the hypothesis that women's employment outside the home gave them more opportunities to be helped by their husbands in housework. These results agree generally with previous findings (Michel, 1971). However, we should note here that if husbands do more "feminine" tasks, the wives also start to share more in the performance of "masculine" tasks. (Blood & Wolf, 1960). As for the influence of employment on the sex-role ideology of women, the data have given evidence to the existence of an association between working women and a change in their attitudes towards traditional sex-role orientation; a finding that is in line with previous research. (Pietrowski, 1971).

Progressive Family Status Laws in South Yemen

The new "Family Law No. 1", promulgated by the government of the Arab Peoples' Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1974, represents a progressive step toward the liberation of Yemeni women as compared with former family laws based on commercial benefits and feudal privileges.

1. The new family law requires the parents or guardians to obtain the agreement of the betrothed before concluding any marriage.

2. Presents exchanged during the period of engagement should be considered as symbolic gifts, not exceeding a certain cost, and should not be returned upon breaking up the engagement.

3. This law fixes the minimum age for the bride at 16, that of the bridegroom at 18; the maximum age differential between the spouses should not exceed 20, unless the woman is over 35.

4. No second marriage may be contracted by a man except through an authorized court, provided it

has been justified by one of the following reasons :

1) medically confirmed barrenness of the wife
2) medically confirmed chronic and incurable disease of the wife.

5. The spouses carry out an equal share of responsibility in maintenance and care of the family.

6. The Mahr (dowry paid by the bridegroom) whether paid in advance or at a postponed date, should not exceed 100 dinars.

7. The adult son or daughter should be responsible for maintenance and care of disabled parents.

8. Divorce should never be unilateral.

9. No divorce may occur except by court decision; no court is allowed to legitimate a divorce unless all attempts have been made to bring about a reconciliation of the couple in question.

The inheritance law, however, has not been included in "Family Law No. 1", whose most important items have been here related.