

Life among the Poor in Cairo,

by Unni Wikan⁽¹⁾

The author presents her book as "the story of life in a poor quarter of Cairo as it is experienced by the poor themselves". It relates the experience of one who took part in the daily activities of those she studied, learned to think as they did and to experience the conditions under which they lived. It is the method of the social anthropologist, often called "participant observation."

The purpose of the work is "to open the eyes of as many readers as possible to the humiliating human conditions created by poverty; to show how poverty pervades and vulgarizes all aspects of life, debases social relations and cripples individual potential for development and happiness."

Poverty is defined as a situation "where the better-off and the worse-off agree on a low evaluation and the deprivation is transformed into social defeat and disgrace." (p.27)

About two thirds of the six million inhabitants of Cairo live in areas which both Egyptians and we would characterize as poor.

The author studied 17 families living in 13 houses situated in 5 back streets which are like alleys, 2-3 meters wide, piled high with dirt and refuse.

Two of the families are Coptic Christians, the rest are Moslems. In seventeen families, 100 people have 57 beds at their disposal. The houses are built of brick, mostly 3 storeys high; some have only one floor. The families live in separate flats which have little ventilation, poor lighting, are hot in summer, damp in winter, infested by cockroaches and other vermin.

People live so close to each other that neighbors can easily look into the flat opposite if the curtains are open. Lack of privacy creates friction which will occasionally explode in angry confrontations. Noisy quarrelling is a characteristic part of these people's lives.

The streets are swarming with children playing, screaming and shouting. Outside many front doors are women sitting or standing, observing the life around them. These door sitters come from the darkest, lowest flats; they feel the need to leave their stuffy rooms. They are not tied to continuous housework and have nothing to occupy their free time.

Husband-Wife Relationship

A man should be authoritative, prefer the company of men, give priority to his own pleasures, look after and protect the women of his household.

A woman should be humble, obedient, loyal. In spite of her attachment to her own family, her duty is first to her husband's family.

A woman should not work outside the home,

except when she is forced to do so by widowhood or divorce. Otherwise her work is a source of shame to the husband as provider.

Men can move freely. They are generally ill at ease in the home where there are noisy children, no fresh air, no space. They like to go to cafés. The flat is a place for women to meet.

Social Relations

Women do not like to be alone. They usually form friendships which provide them with a forum for obtaining social recognition. In their visits, they talk about money, about food, about the husband who is always criticized or condemned while the wife is always considered superior. Actions and sayings of other women are interpreted and criticized. A woman characterizes others in such a way that, explicitly or implicitly, her description can be turned into an emphasis of her own assets.

Moral values are judged egocentrically as kindness toward one's self rather than to people in general. The standard expression used to emphasize the noble character of a friend is: "She's very good, she loves me!".

Relations among relatives are not usually very successful. Those on the mother's side are the most intimate. Yet, though the members of the same family may support each other and form a united front on certain occasions such as quarrels against the outside world, their relationship is marked by jealousy and friction, cf. the Egyptian proverb, "Relatives never love each other". The proverbial enmity between the wife and the mother-in-law applies here as elsewhere. The wife believes that her in-laws are constantly preoccupied with trying to manipulate her husband against her.

Children's Social Experiences

Children are taught to obey and respect their father. Their socialization is mainly the mother's responsibility. Since the father has no concern for or understanding of them or their needs, it is the mother who places their needs above her own, e.g. saving from her housekeeping money may give them the chance to go to school.

In the frequent conflicts occurring in the quarter, children especially are exposed to attack or revenge. They may be used as scapegoats or as pawns in the game against family enemies. Experiences gained by the children in this manner must contribute strongly to teaching them mistrust in people.

In the father's absence, the older brother is responsible for the children as provider and protector. The same is true of the older sister who takes care of her younger brothers and sisters in the mother's absence.

Divorce creates for the man several problems which make it a costly and burdensome step in case of

⁽¹⁾ Translated by Ann Henning. Tavistock Publications, London, 1980.

remarriage: the problem of providing for two families, and that of the children exposed to the ill-treatment of the stepmother. A widow often gives up the idea of remarriage in order to devote herself to the care of her children.

Intrigues and problems surrounding marriage

While it seems that the conventions surrounding courtship and marriage are changing in the direction of granting a woman greater freedom of choice, traditional practices continue to work to the contrary. According to these practices, the bridegroom acts as an independent individual toward the family of the bride. He obtains exclusive rights regarding his wife, can even refuse to let her see her parents. He can decide about how she should be dressed and how she should wear her hair.

Two days before marriage, a list is made of articles that the bride will bring in her dowry. The list is the bride's proof of her property and a way of preventing the husband from selling it off in her absence.

"One conspicuous feature of courtship and marriage in this community" says the author, "is how it intensifies old conflicts and creates new ones. This happens both because many people have parallel and competing interests in boys and girls as marriage partners, and because the marriage negotiations in themselves create a battleground where other conflicts can also be played out." (p.85) "Envy and gossip are general features of Egyptian culture but are intensified in a poor environment." (p.94)

Married life is apt to be spoiled through the intervention and manipulation of relatives, neighbors and friends.

A woman has to struggle to keep her husband within her power by using the following means:

1. Demands for material items, to satisfy her and the children's needs.
2. Shaping the children as she wants and thus forming their attitude toward their father.
3. Using male relatives to mediate in her favor.
4. Forming alliances with male relatives against a mutual enemy.

An impulsive husband may be driven to the ultimate sanction against his wife: the threat of divorce, sometimes over trifles. However, since divorce entails great expense, he may resort to less drastic sanctions. He can hurt her by emphasizing the beauty and character of other women, ignoring her completely when she is at home, sharing none of his daily experiences with her, never praising her.

In the first years of marriage, adjustment to marital status is a difficult and slow process for both parties. Egyptian national statistics show that about 50% of all divorces take place between spouses who have been married for less than two years. During this period, it is natural for the parties' relatives on each side, above all for mother and older sister, to guide the inexperienced, newly married couples in the art of

maneuvering and manipulation.

The presence of children gives a woman strength and self-confidence. They may serve as a safeguard against divorce. The husband becomes more concerned about money saving for his children; he feels less responsible for his parents and relatives.

It is specially when her children reach their teens that the woman becomes domineering and aggressive. Her husband becomes more dependent on her, in-laws less difficult, and the husband more tolerant of their presence.

How do the poor realize themselves in such an environment?

Self-realization means to them a struggle to think well of themselves, to obtain recognition from others rather than to live up to internalized values and standards. It is not a question of being true to themselves but to make others recognize their superiority, which may be mere words or make-believe.

Hence, they insist on keeping up appearances and on concealing material defects from other people's eyes. They are careful to show off new clothes, to display the trays of cakes which they send to be baked at the bakeries during Ramadan. Their best furniture is displayed in the guest room. They create little circles where they can boast about themselves without being contradicted.

Possibilities of Change

Social scientists are divided into 1) those who blame society for the existence of poverty and attack the uneven distribution of wealth, 2) those who blame the poor themselves, as for example Oscar Lewis who developed the concept of "culture of poverty", and emphasized the necessity for the poor to eliminate this "culture" and adopt the way of life of the middle class.

As a matter of fact, there is evidence of pathology among the poor. Poverty destroys human capacities. According to a Lebanese proverb, it is a main source of contention among people.

On the other hand, we cannot overlook the role played by such wretched conditions in producing what Oscar Lewis calls the "culture of poverty". To effect a change in their lives, it is necessary to devise a strategy for the poor to follow, based on an understanding of the interplay between all the factors that create the miserable situation. The author of the book concludes by saying that the families she studied would be willing to change their "culture" or way of life should they receive adequate help. Here are some of the difficulties that stand in their way:

1. Obstacles faced by poor students. Though education is free, success is not easy for them because of poor hygienic conditions at home and at school, conflict-ridden home environment, overcrowded classes, poor quality of teachers. Instead of spending 12 years in high school, poor students spend 16 years.

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