

The Private/ Public Dichotomy

Research on women in the Arab World range from gathering statistics on their status to analyzing cultural and social factors defining and influencing the conditions of women.

According to Amal Rassam, there isn't enough data for the construction of a general theoretical framework, and Arab women's status is best understood in terms of the social organization of power, the ideological and institutional means of controlling women's sexually and the sexual division of Labor⁽¹⁾.

The literature includes the Private/ female and Public/ male Dichotomy. According to this dichotomy, status, role and power of women are predominantly in the family and the household, i.e. the private sphere. In this sphere, the power of a woman is directly related to her achievements as a mother, a wife, a daughter or an aunt. Quality of achievement is commonly seen in terms of degrees of conformity to the relevant roles. Even wide exposure of Arab women to education, work and travel has had little impact on evaluating women in terms of their personality rather than in terms of their roles. Whereas, status, role and power of men exist in public life. The power structure of society is concentrated in the public walks of life such as in the economy and the market, politics and law and others. Consequently, it would seem that women and their private sphere are powerless.

However, if we examine social processes of interaction in society rather than social structures, we notice that the private sphere, i.e. women are far from powerless. The reciprocity of influence and interaction, of a man with his wife and vice versa, within the confines of the private world or the family indirectly delegates power to women.

However, this line of reasoning implies a ceiling for women's development and participation in the public mainstreams of society. Consequently, this dichotomy is problematic. According to Rassam, «It is essentially de-

scriptive and of limited use when one is attempting to explain the observed variations in women's status and historical change»⁽²⁾.

Arab women, keeping in mind socio-economic and class determinants of development, are taking a moderate position, i.e. family and employment. To a large extent, Arab women are engaged in the so-called public spheres of life. However, the article «Arab Women's Contribution to Development» (page 7), confirms that the family is still a priority over work for women. This means that the public world is still to a large degree the power arena of men, and the traditional female roles of daughter, wife, mother and aunt consistent with the private sphere, persist.

What is the fate of women who are not part of this private/ public duality through marriage? In this issue of *Al-Raida*. Miss Rose Ghurayyib, a never-married woman herself, discusses the lives, motives and conditions of never-married women. Women who have sacrificed marriage (one locus of private power) for the care and support of parents. Other women, who refrained from marriage because they explicitly entered public life to become career women (exiting the private sphere by so doing). They became the pioneers of women's independence in the Arab world.

These women experience power and independence during their productive years but pay the price of ending up alone later in their lives. When they age, they find themselves with limited material reward from retirement and with no private nucleus to fall upon. In other words, no one to take care of them, to support them and to inherit the glory of their achievements- except the general public itself. ●

Randa Abul-Husn

(1) Amal Kassam, *Towards Theoretical Framework for the Study of Women in the Arab World.* » *Women in the Arab World*, UNESCO, 1985, p. 122-137.

(2) *Ibid*, p. 125.