

Never Married Women

By Rose Ghurayyib

Success and happiness do not depend on marriage nor on single life, but on the ability of the individual to acquire a strong, balanced and self-relying personality.

The tribal tradition which imposes marriage on both men and women for the purpose of insuring reproduction and survival of the tribe or the family, still exists in many communities of both Eastern and Western countries. It is particularly prevalent in developing and undeveloped communities where parents with a low income depend on children for protection and support in old age. The tradition persists in developing countries as well where marriage offers psychological advantages such as companionship and opportunities for growth through good fellowship, exchange of ideas and mutual help.

However, there are exceptions to every rule. Men and women deviate and remain unmarried. This article will deal with the topic of never-married women today, with specific emphasis on Lebanon and the Arab East. The absence of data or studies has obliged me to rely mainly on personal experience, while using a book⁽¹⁾ written by an American author, Barbara Levy Simon, as my literary guide. This book has been most enlightening and has allowed me to draw certain conclusions and comparisons between American and Lebanese and other Arab never-married women.

The author of the book says that the number of never-married women has recently increased in the United States. In 1980, the proportion of never-married women among college graduates, born in 1950, reached 22% versus 9% in 1930. The causes for this increase are: economic independence of women resulting from an increased rate of their employment; use of contraceptive pills permitting casual sex; the influence of the Liberation Movement, which favors women's independence; and finally, higher education, which has made women more choosy of marriage partners.

In Lebanon and other neighboring Arab countries, we have no statistics on this topic. Judging from statis-



tics depicting an increase in the ratio of female to male in the population, we may assume that an increase in the number of never-married women has taken place during the last thirty years as a result of women's growing interest in higher education and employment. The number of men has also decreased because of emigration or military involvement. Furthermore, the economic depression created by the war caused a shortage in lodging accommodation and a rise in prices making marriage very costly, thereby discouraging young couples.

Consequently, war is one of the two main causes which lead to the increase in the number of never-married women. War is an old plague, which has caused more devastation than any other calamity. The modern worldwide wave of protest against war may help reduce negative effects on marriage, such as divorce and separation. The other cause for the increase in the number of never-married women is women's desire for independence. Independence means, in the first place, financial independence. It was denied to women in the past mak-

ing marriage the only choice for those who did not choose convent life. In fact, the vast majority of women all over the world still depend on marriage for sustenance, i.e. for food, lodging and other material needs. This situation reinforces the domination of men as sole providers or money earners in the family. Women's work, no matter how important or voluminous, is undervalued because it has no commercial or monetary value.

In marriage, a woman has to accept her husband as the head of the family, to fulfill his wishes, to bear and raise the children who would carry his name, to perform all the household duties and to take care of the sick and ailing members of the family, all in exchange for food and lodging. If the husband is wealthy, his wealth goes to his children after his death, while the wife gets a small share or nothing at all. As Adrienne Rich says in her book *Of Woman Born*⁽²⁾ «a woman's life is a sacrifice for her husband and children». Nowadays, women who have achieved financial independence through profession and work and who have become conscious of the injustices imposed on them by traditional marriage, hesitate before accepting «just any man» as a spouse. They require an open-minded husband whose level of education is at least equal to theirs. In marriage, they require a degree of independence equal to that enjoyed by the husband, i.e. the right to work outside the home, freedom to spend money as they wish, the right to share in family-planning decisions, the right to practice their hobbies and to enjoy a social life with friends and acquaintances. In short, the women of today refuse to lose their freedom in marriage, or else they refrain from marriage, and consider divorce if married.

When we speak of **independence** as a general goal for never-married women we have to discuss, in some details, the circumstances which led them to choose this life. Interviews arranged by Barbara L. Simon with 45 women give us a clearer idea about the attitude of the modern Western woman towards marriage⁽³⁾:

- (1) 18 out of 30 of the women interviewed considered paid work as central in individual freedom.
- (2) 26 out of 30 of them mentioned their devotion to a job or career as an alternative to marriage.
- (3) 7 out of 30 of the women preferred the intimacy experienced with friends over that offered by marriage.
- (4) a small group, moved by religious motives, decided to join religious orders.
- (5) 12 women interviewed were single, involuntarily, because they sacrificed themselves for the sake of aged parents who needed their care.

- (6) 4 of the women had physical disabilities and gained their living through work and enjoyed a rich social life.
- (7) a good number of them were moved to remain single by ideological motives: serving a political or a religious organization, devoting themselves to a spiritual and passionate social service, seeking self-realization as members of humanity as a whole, discontent with the predominance of male privileged in marital relations.



The reasons the women give for singlehood are related to 19th and 20th century ideologies. They speak of a humanitarian philosophy, (replacing medieval ideas) which advocates a universal equality between individuals, regardless of sex. This philosophy is reinforced by some modern mystics, who affirm that «all the children of the world are our children and all creatures on earth are brothers and sisters, who should live together in perfect harmony».

Does this ideology apply to never-married women in our Eastern culture? Probably! yet on a smaller scale because only few Middle Eastern women are completely independent. Thus, family traditions, here and elsewhere in the world, act as important factors influencing the marital status of women.

Family traditions in our Eastern countries remain imperative. If the desire for independence prevents some of our women from marrying, the lack of independence imposed on others lead them to involuntary singlehood. This happens when the parents monopolize the right to speak for their daughter when a groom asks to marry her. Over-protective and over-demanding parents tend to hinder the chances of marriage for their daughters when they insist on a rich son-in-law. The same thing

may happen when poverty or avarice prevent them from giving her a dowry and again when needy parents refuse to give their daughter in marriage because they depend on her work for sustenance.

On the other hand, strong **attachement to the family** may induce some women to remain unmarried. In Barbara L. Simon's report, this attachment plays an important role in the lives of these women. Most of the women interviewed reported daily contact or extended phone calls with parents or siblings. Companionship offered by family members, namely sisters sharing one apartment, acts as a form of compensation for the women who decided to lead a single life. Familial demands in case of long sickness or old age of family members are among the causes for women's single status in this country and elsewhere. Traditions expect women to make filial sacrifices which **are not** expected from men.

When family members are not available as substitute companions for never-married women, they may resort to long lasting friendships with women of their age or who share their likes and dislikes. Among the 50 interviewed by B.L. Simon, 15 lived with a friend, sharing a room, an apartment, home or residence in a retired family. On the whole, these women claim that their lives have been enriched by friends and intimates. Sharing life with another woman relative, sibling or friend, is especially recommended for unmarried Eastern women because traditions do not offer them the alternative of living alone.

If companionship and friendship are recommended as assets for never-married women, **work** stands as a necessity. It is imperative for achieving economic and social independence and may be the goal for which these women sacrifice marriage. Work is most enjoyable and profitable, giving them prestige and social status and allowing them to perform creative and essential tasks! to many of them, work, like marriage, is a vocation to which they may devote their lives. Most of them, however, complain about a limited choice of occupations. Female occupations seem to be concentrated in six main fields: secretarial work, household tasks, book-keeping, elementary teaching, salesgirls and waitresses.

They also complain about the discriminatory treatment which makes their salary lower than that of men performing the same job. They are engaging in new vocational and training possibilities, assuming more responsibility in the executive fields and enjoying increased pay and more opportunities for promotion.

The complaints and demands mentioned above are

common to all working women, regardless of whether they were married or single, Eastern or Western.

While it is true that work may be a form of enslavement or exploitation at the hands of a dictatorial boss, a working woman usually finds compensation in the money she earns. On the other hand, if she is completely dissatisfied with the treatment she receives, she may look for a more satisfactory job elsewhere. While in marriage she is tied to one man for life.

The problems caused by **aging** and **retirement** affect never-married women just like married ones. Having practiced self-reliance since early childhood or youth, "these never-married women are wonderfully able to adapt themselves to the needs and demands of old age" says B.L. Simon⁽⁴⁾. They rely on personal savings, social security, pension obtained from long service, public assistance. Fifty one percent of the interviewees did part-time work after retirement. As far as residence is concerned, 42 out of 45 lived with other women friends or family members.



Conclusion

The phenomenon of never-married women has existed since the dawn of civilization. The circumstances and motives leading to this status varied, including physical and mental impairments, devotion to a sacred mission like priesthood, sisterhood, guardianship of the hearth fire in the Temple of Vestor, the Roman goddess. Today, the Women's Liberation Movement has awakened women's desire for independence and has contributed to an increase in the number of never-married women.

Single life for women is not a disaster as traditional people tend to believe. The interviews of B.L. Simon show that singlehood was frequently voluntary and that it does create some discontent, but not for long. Having been brought up in an atmosphere of submission,



women whose circumstances forced them to remain single, manage to overcome their difficulties and accept their lot as the will of fate.

Discussions regarding who should take care of the elderly may arise among family members. Never-married women frequently, either take or are given, by default, responsibility for old and dying family members. Most of them express bitterness over the insensitivity of siblings, especially brothers who refrain from sharing such tasks.

While we acknowledge the existence of problems in single life, we should remember that those presented by traditional marriage are not less exacting. Success and happiness do not depend on marriage nor on singlehood but on the ability to acquire a strong, balanced, self-relying personality. Here I like to quote one of the fifty women interviewed by B.L. Simon who said «I had a nice life... I've just done the thing I've wanted to do, money permitting. If I wanted to travel, I found a way. If I got lonely, I made new friends. If I wanted youngsters around, I found some. There was never a big deal about happiness. You either make it yourself or you don't»⁽⁵⁾.

In Arab countries, the writings of Sigmund Freud and his followers about women's sexuality have had little influence. Our women still live under the influence of Christian and Moslem teachings of respectable womanhood, which preach chastity and sexual control. Hence, the respect which society shows to nuns is also projected on never-married women who devote their lives to a career or to the care of ailing parents. While it is true that public opinion as a whole considers single life as an unfavorable deviation from the norms, yet since every

never-married woman has her particular reasons for not marrying, people should have an understanding attitude.

According to B.L. Simon, the recent increase in the number of never-married women in America may continue in the future. The same increase will probably take place in other countries for the same reasons prevalent in America. The International Movement of Planned Parenthood and the Malthusian Theory requiring birth control in order to avoid over-population, may be considered as an additional stimulus for the expected increase.

To prevent an excessive or harmful deviation from the norms, we should turn to the initial causes and try to remedy or eliminate them. First, war has to be completely abolished. Second, marriage and family relations must undergo an evolution. It means creating better understanding between parents and children and more democratic relations between the spouses. It also postulates encouraging young men and women to attend social gatherings, perform common tasks and form lasting friendships based on mutual respect and understanding instead of materialistic and physical interests. These recommendations apply particularly to our Lebanese and Arab society. ●

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- (1) Barbara Levy Simon, *Never Married Women*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987
 - (2) Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York: W.W. North, 1976.
 - (3) Simon, *Ibid.* p. 30-62.
 - (4) *Ibid.* p. 161.
 - (5) *Ibid.*, p. 15
- (☆) Illustrations from *International Women's Tribune Center (IWTC)* feminist emblems.