

When Is Old Age A Problem?

By Rose Ghurayyib

I once met a middle-aged bachelor at a summer resort whose customers were from various classes and creeds. When asked why he was still un-married, he replied with a frown: "marriage is a very difficult problem!". He kept repeating "marriage is a very difficult problem!" until he finally decided not to marry at all. This man is one of a minority group of men and women who refrain from marriage because they are afraid of the responsibilities and problems.

Recalling the reasons that induced him to get married, an old neighbor of mine told me that he decided to take a wife in order to conform with tradition and comply with public opinion. In other words, he was moved by the "herd instinct", which dominates most people and makes them afraid of deviating from the norms.

I clearly remember the verdict of Mr. Stoltzfus, President of BUC (1940-1958), himself a happily married man: "Every way of life has its advantages and disadvantages, its pros and cons. Both married and never-married people have problems which may be similar or different in nature. Handling these problems successfully directly related to their happiness and welfare."

The examples mentioned above give us an idea about the difference in attitudes that people have about marriage. This difference should warn us against the use of generalizations and sweeping statements. Hence, drawing a parallel between married life and singlehood, Miss Randa Abul-Husn, Editor of *Al-Raida*, considers old age a major problem for never-married women. She says that "these women end up alone in their lives, when they find themselves with limited material reward from retirement and with no private nucleus to rely upon." (1)

This statement seems to be based on traditional thinking instead of actual experience or positive inquiry. It is a well-known fact, nowadays, that the extended family, the backbone of the tribal system, is gradually disappearing in developed and underdeveloped countries like Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world. Today's couples refuse to live with their in-laws under the same roof, and insist on buying or renting a house of their own before marriage. There is a Lebanese proverb which says: "People of the same generation should share life together." This proverb is equivalent to the English saying: "Birds of a feather

flock together." You cannot expect the young to enjoy the company of the old and vice versa. The gap between the two is much too wide to bridge. Even if the children accept to live with their parents, they are so busy with full-time jobs or activities for planning and preparing their future, which keep them away from home most of the time and, in any case, unable to take care of aging or disabled parents.

Old people, whether men or women, married or never-married, sharing life with a family or living in a single apartment, are bound to lead an isolated life and to secure their own means of recreation. From experience, I know that people who have led a busy life and acquired rich experiences, do not feel lonely in old age. On the contrary, they may enjoy a peaceful, restful life in a well-accommodated rest-house here or elsewhere. Resorts for the aged are being set up in all countries, including Lebanon, because they have become a necessity. Some of them fulfill the conditions required to insure the comfort and well-being of old people. They are considered first class homes and they charge high prices. Other resorts, particularly the free ones, are poorly accommodated and require government supervision or assistance from benevolent organizations. In most cases, these resorts provide the aged with the care, which their families are unable to provide. In our Arab tradition, people generally follow the habit of saving face by pretending that "all is well within their homes." Since nobody has thoroughly investigated the real status of senior citizens in this region, proper care remains a matter of doubt, regardless of whether they stay with their families or take refuge in a retirement home.

Women who voluntarily accept celibacy are usually characterized by an independent spirit. They engage in a lifelong profession or in a vocation that provides them with financial independence and security in old age. They can afford a comfortable rest-house or a nursing-home in case of disability, unless some unexpected catastrophe, like war, shatters their lives and destroys their plans. Women who are retired professionals or widows and have a permanent income, enjoy more economic security than housewives. Housewives are unable to have savings because their housework has no monetary value. As a result, they have to depend, on a small share of inherited property or on the dubious help of their children who are usually burdened with the sustenance of their own families.

Therefore, if they feel lonely or bored in their retreat, single women may occupy themselves with knitting, the favorite pastime of Lebanese women. They may play cards, listen to music or to the radio, watch television or drama. If their sight is still good, they may read books, write memoirs and so on. For people seeking rest, well-accommodated old people's homes seem like ideal places. Like social life, solitude has its lovers.

The old Latin adage attributed to Horace : "O blessed solitude, O sole blessedness !" still applies to our hectic days, which require a quiet abode for tired souls, away from the noise and hubbub of modern life.(2) •



(1) Editorial, Never-married Women, *Al-Raida*, Vol IX, # 53, Spring 1991.

(2) "About Women and Old Age" *Al-Raida*, # 20- 22, 1982.

family on the other hand. Thus, many of the respective countries suffer from lack of funding and resources needed to create enough schools. On the other hand, high costs of education and gender socialization, giving priority of education to sons rather than daughters, persist.

Female enrollment in basic education has increased significantly in the last few decades. The increase was mobilized by a number of factors such as a general concensus that compulsory education is the prerogative of the state; education is the natural right of every female citizen; and basic education should represent bare knowledge of every citizen. Consequently, the number of students at the elementary level of basic education has risen from 8.1 m. in 1960 to 24.8 m. in 1985, i.e. a 349% increase. However, these rates are still lower than their counterparts in developed and developing countries. Furthermore, shortage of accom-

modation for all the children means failure to eliminate illiteracy and to develop the potentials of women.

Female Drop-outs from Basic Education

The general definition of female school drop-out is when the student leaves school before the completion of the level in which she is enrolled, i.e preparatory, elementary, intermediate or secondary level, etc. . . .

Education specialists in the Arab world seem to feel that this definition is incomplete. They suggest that it should include the females who cut their education short at a specific level rather than complete all the requirements. Furthermore, they feel that the qualification of the one who graduate should also be a determinant of what they call quality drop-out. Quality drop-out occurs when a female student graduates with poor qualifications and remains unskilled and unequipped to

Table
ILLITERACY IN THE ARAB STATES
(LAST AVAILABLE DATA OR ESTIMATIONS-AGE GROUP 15+)
(BY THOUSANDS)

		MF		M		F	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
*Bahrain	(1986)	53,3	32	17,6	21.1	35,7	43
*Egypt	(1986)	15298,8	55.1	5971,2	42.4	93276	68.2
*Iraq	(1986)	3754,4	42.4	973,4	21.4	2781	64.6
*Jordan	(1986)	363,9	26.4	122,3	16.9	241,7	36.9
*Kuwait	(1986)	115,2	30.4	32,9	17.8	82,3	42.4
*Lebanon	(1986)	255,8	14.7	85,6	10.5	170,2	18.5
*Qatar	(1986)	16,7	31.6	5,4	20.9	11,2	41.6
*Saudi Arabia	(1986)	2166,9	46.4	635,5	26.8	1532,4	66.6
*Syrian A.R.	(1986)	2165,2	38.9	658,3	23.5	1497,9	54.5
*U.A.Emirates	(1986)	97,1	45.6	36,6	33	60,5	59.2
*Yemen	(1986)	3295,6	81.1	1116,4	61.5	2179,1	69.9
**Algeria	(1982)	5880,3	55.3	2297,3	42.7	3583	68.3
**Libyan A.J.	(1973)	608	61.0	200,8	38.7	407,2	85.2
**Morocco	(1971)	6407	78.6	2654	66.4	3753	90.2
**Sudan	(1973) ²	5221,3	68.6	2090,5	55.2	3130,7	82.1
***Tunisia	(1984)	2077	49.3	840	39.5	1237	59.4
**D.Yemen	(1973) ²	736	72.9	254	52.3	482	92.1

cope with change and participate effectively in public development and public employment.

The Rate of Female Drop-out in the Arab World and an Overview of Enrollment by Sex

Surveys confirm that in 1990, the number of females, in the Arab world, who are out of school and are not enrolled in any program (12.3%) remains higher than male non-enrollment (10.1%).

Unequal sex ratios in education are also evident inside the schools and in the programs. Hence, this research reports that, in 1985, females in elementary schools formed only 41% of the student population. At the intermediate and secondary levels, females were only 39% (see Table 2). The gap was significantly wider in higher education, where females amounted to only a third of the student population.

Table 2
Gender Distribution of Students in the Arab World (1985) (2)

(%)	Elementary	Intermediate & Secondary	Higher Education
Female	41	39	33
Male	59	61	68
Total	100.0 %	100.0 %	100.0 %

Illiteracy rates show similar discrepancies (see Table 1). For example, female illiteracy is as high as 92.1% in Democratic Yemen (before unification), and 90.2% in Morocco. It is lowest in Lebanon at 18.5% (see Table 3). Alphabetic illiteracy in the Arab world is also among the highest in the world, reaching 50% in general, and a high of 65% among females.

Hence, the phenomenon of drop-out accentuates the problem. According to the data of the Arab Council for Childhood and Development, the percentage of student drop-out from basic education in 1989, for both sexes, was highest in Yemen (85%) and Somalia (67%). It was lower in UAE (12%), Algeria (17%) and Libya (18%).

The ratio of male to female drop-out was rather low

except in Bahrain and Kuwait (see Table 3). In Bahrain, male drop-out from basic education (6.34%) was double the female drop-out (3%) in 1989. The same case existed in Kuwait in 1980, with male drop-out averaging 6.9% compared to 3.1% for females. However, by 1989, the gap was significantly decreased in Kuwait, putting females on the higher end of the scale at 1.3% compared to 1.1% male drop-out.

Table 3

Percentage of Male and Female Drop-out from the Preparatory level of Basic Education in the Arab World, 1980, 1989

Country	Year	Female (%)	Male (%)	Total
Jordan	1980	2.6	2.1	2.1
	1989	3.1	3.2	2.6
U.A.E.	1980	3.7	3.9	3.8
	1989	3.0	2.8	2.4
Bahrain	1980	1.2	1.8	1.5
	1989	3.4	6.3	4.8
Tunisia	1980	6.7	5.9	6.2
	1989	6.9	6.7	6.8
Kuwait	1980	3.1	6.9	5.0
	1989	1.3	1.1	1.2
Iraq	1980	6.7	1.7	6.2
	1989	6.9	2.0	6.8

Source: *The State of the Child in the Arab World 1990*, Arab Council for Childhood and Development.

In another survey which examined drop-out from formal school in 1982/83 in Bahrain, female drop-out (39%) was higher than male drop-out (36%) at the elementary level. The survey also revealed that the rate of drop-outs varied with age, country, geographical location and sex.

In a study conducted in Syria, the rate of female drop-out is higher than its male counterpart in secondary school and at pre-university levels. At the elementary level, on the other hand, female drop-out was higher in

rural areas (30.02%) compared to urban areas (18.38%).

Determinants of Female Drop-outs

"School enrollment is not, however, the only condition which mitigates against the distribution of educational opportunity between the two sexes in the Arab world. General cultural mores as well as in-school factors prevent women from reaching their full potential." (3)

In the survey reported by the Arab Council for Childhood and Development, a sample of female drop-outs were asked to give the reasons and factors which led them to drop-out of basic education.

1. One third of the respondents said that the main reason for leaving school was financial: they could not afford tuition fees. Another main reason was the inconvenience and difficulty of commuting between home and school in the absence of adequate means of transportation.

2. Half of the respondents said that (cultural) priority given to family care and early marriage was a major reason that led them to drop-out of school.

3. One third of the sample in rural areas and one

third of the sample in urban areas said that they left school in order to help at home and to save the relevant expenses for the needs of the family.

4. Approximately half of the sample related drop-out to teaching methodologies and curricula such as the difficulty of the material and its lack of relevance to their needs.

5. Many respondents related drop-out to in-school factors such as lack of guidance from administrators and instructors, lack of coordination between the school and the parents, and discrepancies in treatment.

6. Approximately one third of the respondents said they dropped out for personal reasons such as loss of interest, failure in class, etc . . .

7. Another third of the respondents related drop-out to poor educational policies and facilities, such as the absence of financial assistance.

According to this survey, the determinants of female drop-out are related to the educational system, such as curricula, lack of guidance, lack of communication between the school and parents, and lack of assistance. Other main determinants are inherent in the social and economic systems of society, whereby the family cannot afford the costs of education. Furthermore, the ignorance of parents hinder the development of their children. Last but not least, the value system, which gives priority of education to sons is largely responsible for the drop-out of females, their illiteracy and their lack of qualification to participate in development in their society. •

(*) Al-Ta'lim al-Assasi wa Tasarub al-Inath fi al-Watan al-Aarabi, Basic Education and female Drop-out in the Arab World, *The State of the Child in the Arab World 1990* Arab Council for Childhood and Development. Translated by Randa Abul-Husn.

(1) Massialas, B.C. and Samir A. Jarrar, *Arab Education in Transition: a Source Book*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1991. p. 68.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid, Massialas and Jarrar 1991, p.56.

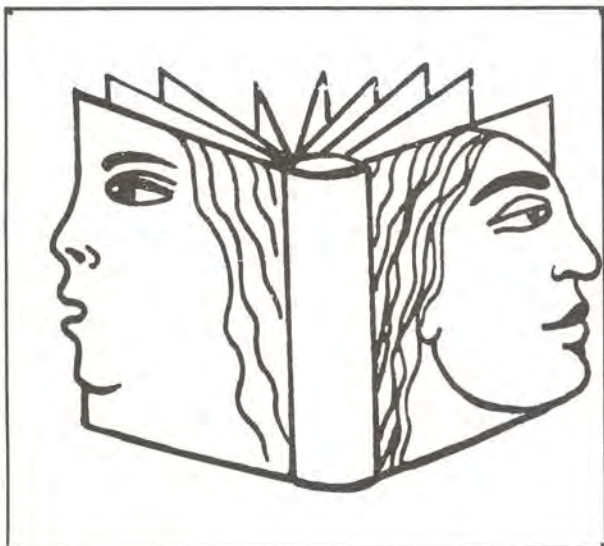


Illustration: Newsletter of the Arab Women's Solidarity Association (Egypt)