

The Lebanese Imbroglia

By Rose Ghurayyib

In the introduction of a book he wrote about the Lebanese war, the well-known journalist, Joseph Abu-Khalil, says: "Some countries are called ill-fated because their misfortunes come from natural catastrophes such as floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tornadoes, etc

In Lebanon, our misfortunes derive from our submission to ignorant, despotic or corrupt leaders, whose misrule has led a developed and flourishing country into ultimate ruin and misery."

In a period of change and evolution, our leaders, representing secular, religious or intellectual categories, stand as the pillars of traditionalism. In an age of liberalism, they keep us chained to ancient forms of slavery, while they declare to their native subjects, and to uninformed foreigners, that Lebanon carries the torch of freedom in the Arab World. Only recently did I realize how flagrant

our political life is, when I read in Al-Raida (#57, p.9)⁽¹⁾ that women form 25 percent of the Syrian Parliament and 40 percent of the professors of the Syrian University. Meanwhile, in Lebanon, we have only one female deputy and 14 percent of women professors at the Lebanese University.

In the same issue of Al-Raida, (pg. 19)⁽²⁾ the interview between lawyer Laure Moghaizel and journalist David Livingstone, gives a sad report about legislation in Lebanon. The Personal Status Code includes seventeen different codes representing the seventeen religious communities of Lebanon. When we think that Personal Status Codes cover the by-laws of marriage, divorce, inheritance, custody of children, burial procedures, and other family matters thus governing a person's life from birth until death, we realize how they (the codes) stand as barriers to practical knowledge and intermarriage between the various sects. The lack of free

choice has led many couples to convert from one religion to another or to perform civil marriage outside Lebanon.

The laws concerning inheritance are particularly complicated. Hence, while the Christian communities grant men and women equal shares in inheritance, the Muslim ones reduce women's rights to half of those enjoyed by men. If a Christian woman marries a Muslim, she cannot inherit him unless she converts. The same applies to a Muslim woman married to a Christian husband. Such a marriage is not recognized by the Orthodox Christians nor by the Orthodox Muslims, who, however, tolerate the marriage of a Muslim man to a Christian woman.

These laws were probably created to ban inter-marriage between people of different religious denominations and to keep Lebanon divided among seventeen mini-states. While Personal



Status laws stand as keepers of the status quo and as impediments to unity and personal freedom, the penal and civil laws contain flagrant forms of injustice against women, such as the inadequacy of their testimony or signature in public transactions. If they want to start a trade, or travel abroad, they have to obtain the permission of the husband. A most flagrant form of injustice exists in the law connected with crimes of passion or "crimes of honor", which scarcely impose any penalty on the male perpetrators. A few days ago, I read in a paper about a man who was arrested on several charges, one of which was the dynamiting of College Hall, the most ancient and monumental building in the American University of Beirut. The man readily admitted that he had killed his sister because he saw her walking with some young men, but he vehemently denied having any connection with the blowing up of College Hall. He knew that the latter crime would condemn him to several years in prison, while the crime of honor of his sister was an act of bravery to save his family's honor and therefore deserved only a few

weeks imprisonment.

Unjust legislation against women exists everywhere, particularly in Third World Countries. Yet persistent united efforts, even in that part of the world does not fail to bear fruit. In Brazil, the Confederation of Brazilian Women succeeded lately in reforming the law concerning crimes of passion or honor using various forms of pressures including demonstrations, conferences, broadcasts and press campaigns (3).

In Lebanon, the promulgation of optional civil laws of Personal Status is as necessary as a counterpart to the seventeen codes in number. In addition, the following steps could be taken:

1. Return the displaced to their homes which they were forced to leave in accordance with the plan prepared by those who intended to divide Lebanon into minor sectarian states. This step may be immediately taken since it has been officially approved.
2. Increase the number and raise the standard of public or government

schools which attract and bring together students of various creeds and classes. Private, sectarian schools may equally contribute to national unity if they implant in their students, who represent various creeds and classes, a common, moral code based on tolerance, human brotherhood, mutual respect and cooperation.

3. Create a liberal-minded generation of men and women, ready to work together on the task of arousing women's awareness regarding their political rights, preparing them to participate in the legislation as members of parliament, and try to redress their injustices and wrongs which stand as the source of women's complaints •

(1) "Middle Eastern and Arab Women Speak", *Al-Raida*, #57, Vol.X. p.9

(2) "Problems Facing the Women's Movement in Lebanon", Interview with Lawyer Laure Moghaizel by David Livingstone, *Al-Raida*, #57, Vol.X, p.19-20

(3) see *Time*, December 1990.



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