

A Cultural Dimension to Women's Issues

Dr. Layla Nimah, Assistant Dean, BUC

Dr. Layla Nimah was appointed Assistant Dean at Beirut University College, in Spring 1992. She comes from North Lebanon and has completed her high school studies in Tripoli. She later received a Bachelor's degree in Math from the Lebanese University in Beirut (1963) completed a two year program in Math at the Sorbone in Paris (1965) and a Ph.D. in Physics from Utah State University (1973).

She is trilingual and has been significantly exposed to three relatively distinct cultures, at least. Her ideas are very much her own. She feels very strongly about understanding the needs and structure of our own country and avoiding a superficial import of Western or other concepts. In the interview we spoke about why she chose Physics for her studies, how she coordinated between career and family consisting of a girl and a boy aged 22 and 17 respectively; how she perceived Beirut University College as a co-educational institution which, was a women's college; and various women's issues.

Al-Raida: Why Physics and Math?

Dr. Layla Nimah: Physics came by accident when I went with my husband to the United States. We attended the same university and Physics was the most appropriate field for me given my background in math. Why Math? I was good at it and was encouraged to pursue it. Have I had a better background I would have liked to go into medicine.



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If you can go as far as a Ph.D. in Physics then why didn't you apply for medical school?

The University we attended did not have a medical school.

How do you view the difference between administrative work and teaching?

I was an administrator before, the Principal of St. Mary Orthodox College. But I can say that I enjoy teaching and working with students a lot.

Physics is not a common field for women any more than men, whereas teaching falls more within the accepted professions for women. How do you feel about that?

With physics you can become a professor or a researcher or a combination of both. When I returned to Lebanon there were no research projects in process so I had

to travel often, usually in the summer to attend conferences and conduct research. Being a mother it was not always easy.

What did you do with the children when you traveled?

I took them abroad with me. It is not possible to be a full time researcher in my field here and avoid traveling.

How did you manage to keep up with all of the roles involved in being a married woman and mother and a career woman?

It takes a lot, but you have to learn not to lose the order of your priorities. It is sometimes frustrating but if you WANT to do it, you have to find a balance between the family life and the career. A person can choose not to marry and be only a career woman. Marriage is a choice. If you choose both then you have no right to sacrifice your family for your career, because they also have their rights and needs.

When your children were young, did you have enough time for them?

I never stopped working, but I always made it a point to be there when they came back from school, even if I had to leave for a meeting later. I would explain to them that I had to leave and come back. I was there, at least the first hour, in case they had problems or special needs.

How did you manage when they were babies?

My daughter was born in the United States and I had to leave her with a baby-sitter when she was only 18 days old. I was working on my dissertation and had to go or else it would have delayed my graduation for another two years. It was very hard for me emotionally, but we both survived.

Did it get in the way of your work or performance?

No, because I kept thinking that I did not want to blame her for not getting my degree. I felt that feeling this way one day would put a strain on our relationship and because I love her so much, I do not want any guilt associated with her. With my son it was different because he was born in Lebanon during the war and my parents were around to help me out.

BUC was a woman's college and now it is mixed. How do you evaluate that in terms of performance and morale?

At one point, the women could say this is our college, they cannot say that anymore. That's true, but you have to look at the needs of the country. In our part of the world there is a need for mixed colleges and universities. A women's college has its advantages but women must also learn to be in a mixed society, which starts from being in a mixed institution.

On the other hand, being in a women's institution they may have more activities of their own. Nowadays most of the proposals for

activities in BUC, up to 90%, are presented by men. Men in our region are more aggressive and girls seem to shy away.

Do you notice that in your classes?

I do not have any female students in my classes. Yet I do not believe that females cannot achieve as much and I do not differentiate between the sexes in any field of study. It is simply the way they (women) are brought up and the setup that society reserves for them.

As a Dean how would you react to a

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proposal for a Women's Studies Degree keeping in mind cultural as well as academic considerations for establishing such a major?

It is something worth considering. I would consider it very seriously.

How do you think it would benefit the region, keeping in mind the controversies surrounding women's issues?

I think we are confusing the condition of women in our region, the cultural background with feminist theories of the West. Our theories and our needs must be relevant to a realistic understanding of our culture and its customs. A lot of the opposition to the women's movement here is a result of this confusion.

Furthermore, when speaking about liberation, I do not think that men are more liberated or free to be so. They do not have more freedom of thought just because they are more outspoken. They too are bound by so many rituals and expectations.

In many ways society follows a certain path which is essentially

patriarchal regardless of whether you are liberated as an individual or not. How has that been reflected in your work as an administrator?

I deal with all administrative matters and situations from a professional point of view and as a human being. Fortunately, I am not discriminated against as a woman and I do not invite it.

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World recently held a Conference on Women and the Environment. What is your opinion and evaluation of the Conference?

It was a very important issue. However, I noticed that a large majority of the participants were women and only a few men. Issues like the environment crisis, AIDS, smoking and others are HUMAN issues and should not be segregated by sex. One can highlight the role of women in the environment, but since decision-makers in Lebanon are all men, action is really in their hands. We still need male support and cooperation to get anywhere. (When I say support I am not implying protection or that women are weak creatures.) In many ways it is a universal condition. Just imagine how much more we can achieve if we had a dozen of liberated men who would work sincerely with women. How we deal with our problems should be consistent and tailored to our own needs, culture and background and realities. This is what I mean when I say we have to be careful about importing foreign ideas.

Are you saying we should not emphasize gender differences and inequalities?

I am saying that issues involving men and women and the well-being of the entire society must be dealt with as human issues. This does not mean that women's rights and liberation are not important. We have to be very clear on issues related to women and fight for them, as a struggle in itself •