

Working Women and Women's Work

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In discussing the issue of "women and work" or "working women," whether in Lebanon or elsewhere, what is usually meant is not women and *work*, but rather women and *public employment*. The distinction is very significant. Equating the term "work" with "public employment" directs the discourse to a primarily male perception of work - a view that what is done in the public sphere alone has the status of *work*.

Until the advent of a money-based economy all family members contributed to the needs of the household and what was produced in surplus out of this communal effort was exchanged for the surplus of others. No money was exchanged and no person's labor was given a value that could be quantitatively compared to anyone else's. Everyone *worked* - or perhaps by current standards, no one *worked*. The advent of a money-based economy was accompanied by a movement of some family members out of the home to be employed in shops, factories and offices. And since pregnancy, birth and nursing tied women directly to the needs of childcare, most of those who moved out into the public sphere were males. This was further reinforced by social and religious constraints on male-female interaction. The direct result was that most men in the modern sector of the economy exchanged their labor for money while most women did not.

The direct relationship of public employment to money has given labor an *objective* value that can be compared to the labor of others and has made the monetary value of one's

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work a source of pride, honor, status and power both in the public and the domestic sphere. It has, in turn, lowered society's perception of the value of unpaid work regardless of the contribution it makes to the overall productivity of society. When referring to women who are not engaged in employment for financial rewards - people often say that she "doesn't work" or that "she's just a housewife." And while they may say that she is engaged in *housework* or *women's work* such usage of the term *work* in no way implies the status that is ascribed to public employment - or *real work*. Such a perspective denigrates those women who choose to contribute to society primarily as housewives making them feel that their work is worthless or, at best, marginal since it is not financially compensated.

This problem can be partially

rectified by acknowledging the financial value of domestic work. What would it cost to hire people to care for the children, administer to those who are ill, cook, do the laundry, maintain a clean house, and otherwise manage the complexities of a household? Even so, there is no way of calculating in monetary terms the social benefit of having these tasks performed out of love and personal concern by a member of the family. Using money as the *objective* standard of worth, furthermore, hides the fact that housework is less repetitious, more creative and requires more administrative expertise than most public employment, and contributes in critically important ways to the needs of society.

Birth control, the baby bottle, and less constraining norms of male-female interaction have made it

possible for more women to engage in public employment. But these factors have not, in themselves, resolved the problem of who is to do what has traditionally been viewed as women's work. There are a number of options available each with different social implications.

One option is for the woman to work in the public sector and take care of all domestic work as well. Many Lebanese husbands consider themselves to be liberal because they "don't mind" if their wives "work" as long as it does not interfere with their fulfilling their domestic responsibilities. Such a view, however, assumes that the woman's public employment is a *privilege* that can be withdrawn if she does not also fulfill her domestic *obligations* whereas the man's public employment is not similarly conditional or expendable. Furthermore, it assumes that domestic responsibilities are *her* obligation and are not shared by all members of the household. Beyond this, it places a burden on her to fulfill two demanding jobs compared to his one, leading to the likelihood that she will be unable to meet the expectations of both her employer and her husband. In this option as in other options it is important to consider the impact on the socialization of children - that is, the teaching of social society's norms and values. In this option children learn to see their father's work as more important than their mother's. And their primary caretaker is most likely to be both physically and emotionally drained by the stress of her circumstances. A variation of this alternative would be to reverse the roles so that both spouses work in the public sector but the husband, rather than the wife, assumes all domestic responsibilities. As a mental exercise this variation demonstrates the gender discrimination of its reverse but the implied primacy of the wife's public employment would be unlikely in



Lebanese society except under highly unusual circumstances.

A second option would be for the husband and wife to share the domestic responsibilities. It would imply the comparable worth of the public employment of both so that the domestic burden does not place a greater strain on one spouse or the other relative to their public employment. It also removes any gender identification from domestic responsibilities. The view that what women do is somehow less valued than what men do is irrelevant if men and women are both willing to do the same type of work as needed by the household. Although each individual might specialize in work they do best, this division of labor need not be along traditional gender lines. In addition, this option socializes children to have a more gender-neutral perspective on work - both domestic and public - than earlier generations. It also encourages a more egalitarian relationship between husband and wife and a perception that their marriage is more of a partnership than a patriarchy. Sharing domestic responsibilities, however, exposes the

couple to critical evaluation by a public that maintains traditional values of gender stratification and division of labor. Men who lack a strong self-image may fear being viewed as effeminate if they are seen doing *women's work* while women may fear being viewed as domineering. On the other hand, they can serve as role models to others and contribute to the development of different, more gender-neutral social values and norms.

A third option is for the husband to stay at home and assume all domestic responsibilities. The househusband has become increasingly common in the western world, particularly in cases where the husband is between jobs, has retired, or has health problems that limit his employment opportunities. The sociological implications of doing "women's work" are greater than in the second option. The feeling of marginality and low self-esteem that many housewives feel is even more pronounced for men since they are not fulfilling the social expectation of providing for their families. And children find it difficult to bridge the distance between family and social norms in regard to their

fathers. The circumstances that lead to this option, however, may minimize its effects particularly in cases where it is temporary or comes at the end of a successful career.

A fourth option is for children to assume increasing responsibility for domestic chores as they become capable of doing them. The training in early childhood which is necessary to make this option viable takes great patience and is sometimes initially more work than help. The demands of domestic chores may be met by resistance and resentment from children who observe their friends doing far less. And such responsibilities may conflict with other demands on children's time like homework and play. But the benefits extend far beyond getting the jobs done. Having children help at home can increase their skills, teach them responsibility and give them experience in cooperating to accomplish a task. It can also give them a sense of self-worth, and a feeling that they are valued and contributing members of the family. The work they are responsible for may be divided along gender lines, reinforcing gender-based values about work, but it may, instead, be assigned on a gender-free basis, socializing children to a more gender-neutral perspective on domestic work in the same way that their parents' employment gives them a more gender-neutral perspective on public employment.

A fifth option is to draw on the extended family to perform domestic tasks, a particularly viable option in a society like Lebanon where kinship ties are strong. Parents or siblings of either spouse who are not themselves engaged in public employment can provide a valuable service to society by fulfilling domestic tasks, thus freeing others who may be more qualified or have greater opportunity to work in the public sphere. Such a

close relationship among the different generations in a family, particularly between in-laws, can cause strain due to a lack of privacy and independence, as well as due to generational differences in values and criteria for establishing authority and respect. On the other hand, this option can reinforce family ties and teach children to appreciate the contributions different generations can make to a family. Older relatives can pass on their cultural heritage while gaining a feeling of self-worth that may otherwise be undermined by the debilitating aspects of aging.

A final option that has become increasingly evident in Lebanon is the employment of a domestic servant. This option frees everyone in the family from doing the work and thus largely removes the burden of domestic responsibility. However, since domestic servants are almost invariably female this option reinforces the traditional gender-identity of domestic work. It also denigrates further the worth of domestic work since now it is done by people who clearly are viewed as being socially inferior to their employers. On the other hand, it raises the status of both spouses, but particularly the wife, to that of an employer at least in the home. With this option children are socialized to see domestic work as beneath their status, so that if their parents, their friends or they themselves must at times engage in such work it reflects negatively on them. Children also become class conscious and respect for elders becomes tempered by a cross-cutting stratification by class, particularly if they are allowed to command the domestic servants. They learn about deferential behavior, observing that some people must stand while others sit and some must eat alone in the kitchen while others eat together at the dining room table. Finally, since domestic servants are increasingly of a different race and

nationality not represented in other status levels of Lebanese society, children learn that certain races and peoples as inferior to their own. In addition, these foreign domestic servants often serve as important socializing agents for children even though they do not share the society's language or culture and are alien to its norms and values. Finally, the existence of domestic servants impinges on family privacy and the view that the family is a corporate, self-contained and self-sufficient unit.

While the models above are distinct options, in fact, various combinations of these are possible which modify their social implications. The purpose of presenting these options is not to discourage women from participating in public employment but to encourage both men and women to consider carefully the alternatives available to them. In order for women to be able to expand their opportunities to achieve self-worth and contribute to society, both men and women need to appreciate the positive value of working in the home as well as in public employment. Such a perspective will allow society to have the broadest pool from which to select those with the best qualifications to serve its diverse needs. For this to happen, however, work in all its forms, whether in the public or domestic sphere, needs to become gender-free and needs to be valued, not in dollars or liras, but in the actual contribution it makes to society •

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