

The Lebanese Woman and the Labor Market(*)

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“Ladies, I do not want to educate girls to take over the labor market or compete with men in that market, but rather to enable them to manage more efficiently their households and give their children a better education. A lot of activities could take place within the household setting and could be resorted to in case of economic need” (as quoted in Saadé, 1984)⁽¹⁾.

These were the concluding remarks of Mr. Mohammad Jamil Beyhum during the Women's Conference held in Beirut in 1928 and which he had helped organize. Members of the women's associations at that time belonged to the upper-middle class, were quite educated and did not have to worry about earning a living. This was not the case of very many educated Lebanese women who needed to work and had joined the labor market since the beginning of the century. They were particularly active in the silk industry because qualified labor was not really needed there and because they were cheaper to hire (the salary they received was half that of a man for the same amount and quality of work).

It is also worth noting here that women who were not economically active were nevertheless, through their various associations, interested in improving the economic conditions prevailing in Lebanon at the time through encouraging, improving as well as protecting domestic production. In fact, economic issues were thoroughly examined and discussed during their meetings and solutions were invariably suggested to the government.

Prior to independence, women in Lebanon could thus be divided into

three broad groups: the uneducated, "economically active" woman who had to work out of necessity rather than choice; the well to do, educated woman who did not have to work and got engaged in non remunerated social and public work and, in between, a large group of women who essentially stuck to their traditional role of housewife and mother.

How has this situation evolved since then and where does the Lebanese woman stand today?

The Lebanese female labor force

Between 1972 and 1975, women in Lebanon constituted 48.1% of the total population. The economically active women⁽²⁾ amounted to 17.5% of the female population and 18.4% of the total labor force⁽³⁾. The participation of women in the labor force has steadily increased since the 1970s and has reached 27.8% in 1990 (see table 1). Although this rate is still below that of industrialized countries, it is the highest in the Arab world, as reported in Table 2. The increase has essentially been in the non-agricultural sectors where the number of economically active women has more than doubled between 1970 and 1990 (128%), while it remained more or less the same in the agricultural sector (2.94%) for the same period.

Unfortunately, no breakdown of women employment in the non-agricultural sectors is available. However, a study on the occupational distribution of the work force carried out by ESCWA in 1987 indicates that during that year, more than half of the

economically active women were middle level employees with a large portion of them holding governmental jobs or working with educational institutions and banks. The ratio of the female labor force holding independent positions i.e. working on their own was relatively low (less than one third of the ratio for the male working force), while that of the professionals and higher level employees compared relatively well with that of men (3.3% for women and 4.4% for men).⁽⁴⁾ As far as the regional distribution of the labor force is concerned, Beirut ranked first with 20% of the working female force, followed by Mount Lebanon (17.5%). In fact, the overall female labor force in the Beirut region alone amounted to over 45% of the total Lebanese female labor force.⁽⁵⁾

It is interesting to note also that estimates of the activity rates of the Lebanese female population show a substantial increase from around 10% in 1970 to almost 17% in 1990. In fact, except for the age bracket 10 to 14, women in all other age brackets have been systematically working more since 1950.

The main features of the Lebanese female labor force, as suggested by the foregoing discussion could be summarized as follows:

- 1- The rate of participation of women in the labor force has significantly increased during the war period, with a high level of concentration of working women in Beirut;
- 2- The activity rates of women in all age groups have systematically increased since 1950 except in the 10 to 14 age bracket;

Table 1

Lebanon's Population and Economically Active Population
1950-1990

	1950	1960	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990
Total Population (000)	1443	1857	2469	2767	2669	2668	2967
ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION							
Total (000)	457	520	658	771	742	769	914
Males (000)	408	451	533	613	571	568	660
Female (000)	49	70	125	158	171	201	254
Percent female	10.82	13.40	19.04	20.45	23.04	26.19	27.80
AGRICULTURE							
Total (000)	252	199	130	131	106	90	86
Female (000)	38	35	30	34	34	34	35
Percent Females	15.08	17.59	23.08	25.95	32.08	37.78	40.70
NON-AGRICULTURE							
Total (000)	205	321	528	640	636	680	829
Females (000)	12	35	95	123	137	168	219
Percent Females	5.85	10.90	18.18	19.22	21.54	24.71	26.42

Source: United Nations, **World Demographic Estimates and Projections, 1950-2025**, New York, United Nations 1988, P.288.

Table 2

Participation of Women in the Labor Force
In the Arab World, 1988-1989

COUNTRY	% of TOTAL LABOR FORCE
Lebanon	27.2
Sudan	21.5
Morocco	20.3
Egypt	13.5
Kuwait	13.5
Yemen	13.1
Tunisia	12.7
Bahrain	10.3
Jordan	9.9
Libya	8.7
Saudi Arabia	7.1
Qatar	7.0
Syrian Arab Republic	6.8
United Arab Emirates	6.2
Iraq	5.8
Algeria	4.4

Source: UNDP, **Human Development Report 1991**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, Table 16, pg. 150.

- 3- The bulk of the female labor force is engaged in the non-agricultural sectors, although there is a substantial involvement of women in agricultural work that is not formally accounted for;
- 4- More than half of the economically active women are middle level employees in the public and service sectors.

Analysis and Field Survey Results

The sixteen years of strife that have devastated Lebanon have adversely affected its economy. In 1990 the gross domestic product, estimated at \$2.6 billion, was actually less than half its prewar level, when expressed at constant prices. (6) As to the monthly minimum wage, it dropped from \$245 in 1983 to \$70 in 1990, while the minimum expenditures for a family of five were estimated at \$313: \$150 for food, 123 for fixed expenditures and \$40 for other expenditures.(7)

Another major consequence of the war has been the displacement of large

numbers of Lebanese (22.5% of the estimated 1991 resident population, excluding voluntary internal migration), coupled with a high level of external migration (520,000 Lebanese are said to have emigrated during the period 1975-1991, i.e. 17% of the estimated total resident population for 1991).⁽⁸⁾ As a result, the Lebanese labor market became fragmented and lost the bulk of its skilled and qualified labor.

Given these economic and social setbacks, the Lebanese woman had no choice but to join the labor market to insure her survival and that of her family. Economic need seems, therefore, to be the main determinant of the steady increase in the participation of Lebanese women in the labor force. This is corroborated by two field surveys carried out in 1988. The first, on the role of women in the informal sector in the Beqaa region indicates that 92% of the women interviewed worked because of economic need ⁽⁹⁾. The same conclusion is arrived at by the other field survey on working women in the formal sector in Nabatiyeh, where 26% of the women, if given a choice, would rather stay home to take better care of their children.⁽¹⁰⁾ This does not mean, however, that other determinants of women's participation are not important. In fact, the ESCWA survey reveals that, next to economic need, 31.5% of the women involved in the informal sector did so because they enjoyed working, while 71% of the women in the Nabatiyeh study felt that, besides securing additional income that was badly needed by the family, they wanted to keep on working because it had enabled them "to secure a place in society".⁽¹¹⁾

It is also worth noting, here that the increase in the participation of Lebanese women in the labor force had been taking place prior to the war, at a time when economic need was not as pressing. This is clearly evidenced by the number of women that have joined the banking sector since 1966, a sector that has traditionally attracted women

inclined towards office work (see table 3).

The second main feature of the Lebanese female Labor force, namely the increase in the activity rates of women, is substantiated by the limited field survey carried out by the author in four of the top ten Lebanese Banks.⁽¹²⁾ The data collected clearly indicates that the bulk of women working in these banks falls in the 25-40 age group (the percentage

varies between 63.9% and 68.4% for the four banks). This could possibly be attributed to the fact that more and more women are pursuing their university education⁽¹³⁾ and that even when they get married, women keep on working which was not really the case prior to the war. ⁽¹⁴⁾

The lack of statistics on the current occupation of the Lebanese female workers renders the analysis of the third preposition regarding the

involvement of women in the non-agricultural sectors rather difficult. A 1992 survey of the needs and opportunities for skilled workers in Lebanon covering 65 businesses employing over 100 employees indicates that the majority of skilled workers in Lebanon are men (81% men versus 19% women). This is so because many technical jobs require physical strength or carry masculine associations which make them unattractive to women. The study reveals, however, that in some factories and businesses - like textile, paper and pharmaceuticals - women constitute sometimes 90% of the total number of employees. This is also the case in hospitals where the majority of skilled workers are females. ⁽¹⁵⁾

A close look at women's enrollment in the various disciplines at the Lebanese University supports the above

Table 3

Women Employment
in the Banking Sector
1966-1991

YEAR	NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	PERCENT AGE OF THE TOTAL BANKING POPULATION
1966	772	16
1967	819	17
1968	885	18
1969	971	19
1970	1,051	19
1971	1,208	20
1972	1,380	21
1973	1,676	23
1974	2,024	25
1975	2,197	26
1976	2,028	26
1977	2,255	27
1978	2,433	27
1979	2,733	29
1980	3,198	30
1981	3,670	32
1982	4,100	33
1983	4,486	34
1984	4,579	34
1985	4,785	34
1986	5,109	34.5
1987	5,451	35.3
1988	5,734	36.0
1989	5,465	35.9
1990	5,473	36.3
1991	5,569	36.6

Source: Lebanon's Banking Association, Statistical Department.



findings and sheds some light on the future occupational distribution of women in Lebanon. Lebanese women seem to be inclined towards traditional female disciplines, like languages, nursing, library science, etc . . . This tendency, which has always existed, is apparent in the 1982-83 statistics and has been accentuated towards the end of the decade.⁽¹⁶⁾ The choice of such disciplines will ultimately lead women to become middle level employees either in governmental, educational or banking institutions which actually is the fourth feature of the Lebanese female labor force.

Conclusion

Women in Lebanon represent over half the population (51.5% in 1990)⁽¹⁷⁾, a population that has been displaced, that has emigrated, that has lost its high level manpower at a time when it is badly needed to initiate the country's reconstruction. By joining the labor force in large numbers, the Lebanese woman has proved her ability to help a dislocated economy cope with economic disaster. Now that the war is over, her potentials should be geared towards the recovery process, a process to which she could significantly contribute, provided her role is properly defined and planned.

Furthermore, the increased rate of women's participation in the labor force is bound to affect the traditional division of family roles. In other words, now that the Lebanese women are sharing the breadwinner role with men, one cannot but wonder whether Lebanese men are willing to share the housemaking role with women. The experience of other countries - whether developed or developing - is not very encouraging. Indeed women's weaker economic position throughout the world stems primarily from conflicts between career and family, conflicts that are stronger for women than for men. Many different kinds of evidence suggest that on the average, women feel a stronger desire for children than men do and are more concerned about their welfare

after they are born.⁽¹⁸⁾ A relevant and recent illustration of this point is the statement made by Zoe Baird, when questioned about her babysitting arrangement during a Senate Hearing Committee on January 19th, 1993: "Quite honestly, I was acting at that time really as a mother than someone who would be sitting here designated to be Attorney General."⁽¹⁹⁾

In fact, the "symmetrical family" has not really surfaced yet. Unless this happens, some strategies aimed at helping women cope with their double role ought to be devised. These could range from making part-time jobs more easily available, to flexible working hours, to low cost day care, etc... "The stakes are much higher than a simple struggle over shares. the decisions that individual women and men make with respect to work, marriage, fertility and childcare affect their communities and the nation. A wide public policy will seek to take these effects into account - will seek to make private decisions more consonant with the social good."⁽²⁰⁾

Footnotes and References

(*) This is a summary of a paper presented at a Conference organized by the UNESCO on "Les Droits de la Femme au Liban, Situation et Perspectives dans le Cadre de la Construction Nationale". Beirut 29-31 March 1993.

(1) Saadeh Gladys, *Education et Travail Feminin au Liban*, Ph.D dissertation, Paris 1984.

(2) "An economically active" woman is a person who is involved in work for pay or in anticipation of profit.

(3) Monograph of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, *Women and Work in Lebanon*, No. 1, 1980.

(4) (5)(8) International Bechtel Inc. and Dar al Handasah Consultants (Shair and Partners), *Recovery Planning for the Reconstruction and Development of Lebanon, Working Paper 8, Labour supply*, Council for Development and Planning, Government of Lebanon, September 1991.

(6) UNDP, Lebanon, *The Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product for 1988, Beirut 1991 and Lebanon: Extrapolations of GDP for 1989 and 1990*, Beirut 1992.

(7) United Nations, Special Economic and Disaster Relief Assistance, Special Programme of Economic Assistance for the Reconstruction and Development of Lebanon, *Report of the Secretary General, Addendum*, November 1991.

(9) ESCWA, Series of Studies on Arab Women in Development No.16, *The Role of Women in the Informal Sector* (a field survey on Lebanon), United Nations, Baghdad 1989, in Arabic.

(10)(11) Sakaroun, Khadija, *Study on the Conditions of the Working Woman and the Impact of Work on her Family and Social Life in Nabatiyeh*, (unpublished MA thesis, Lebanese University, 1989), in Arabic.

(12) The banks surveyed were: Banque du Liban et d'Outre-Mer, Banque Libano-Francaise, Banque National de Paris and Banque Audi.

(13) In Banque Audi, the number of female employees holding a BA or licence increased from 6% in 1972, to 19% in 1982, reaching 28% in 1992, while in Banque du Liban et d'Outre-Mer 30% of the female employees are BA or licence holders and 4.6% are master holders.

(14) In 1992, 46.3% of the female employees were married in Banque du Liban et d'Outre-Mer, compared to 45% in Banque Audi, (where the rates were 16% in 1972 and 26% in 1982), 40.9% in Banque Libano-Francaise (where the rate was 30% in 1982), 40.3% in Banque Nationale de Paris.

(15) Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, *A Study of the Needs and Opportunities for Skilled Workers in Lebanon*, Beirut, January 1993.

(16) The only disciplines that have witnessed a decrease in female enrollment during 1987-88 are all scientific disciplines: chemistry, physics, medical science, electricity and electronics.

(17) United Nations, *World Demographic Estimates and Projections 1950-2025*.

(18)(20) Fuchs, Victor, R., *Women's Quest for Economic Equality*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988.

(19) Blumenthal, Sidney, "Adventures in Babysitting", *New Yorker*, February 15, 1993.

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