

# Young Lebanese Women Have No Problems

I must admit that for some time now I have been quite frustrated by the fact that young women are not involved in the women's movements in Lebanon. Since I started working with *Al-Raida*, I am the youngest person attending local activities that address women's issues.

I wonder why the young are absent. Is it because of the mundane and conflict-free approach existing women's movements use to address controversial issues? or the ambiguity and relativity surrounding Lebanese women's status and freedom?

Or more yet, young women seem to feel they do not have a problem, so why create one for them!? Relatively speaking in comparison with many other Arab countries, young Lebanese women have more social freedom and more working opportunities than they have restrictions. Life styles are compatible with European and other western cultures, especially among the upper and middle class elite. Women from poorer classes are more marginal with respect to intellectual discourse and changing patriarchal attitudes because their worries are more situational in terms of securing a living and an identity for themselves, and their families. In these traditionalist backgrounds, discourse on feminist is forbidden. Consequently, those who need mobilization and liberation most cannot raise issues, while those who need it relatively less and have more freedom are the ones who entertain the idea.

Therefore, the situation is such that the question of dependency on a male

guardian and the "feminine" image of being sexually attractive but not sexually active is enough for self expression and for progress. Since childhood, young women are conditioned towards marriage, and from that perspective the end justifies the means.

This situation suits men quite well, and maybe it suits young women even more. They do not see why they must take the turbulent road of confronting society. For even marginalizing subtle rituals and highly patriarchal role-expectations do not, relatively speaking, restrict these women's desired "movements". The system and men confer on women to use their charm and domestic talents as the functional method for achieving status. In fact, rather than revolting against typification, younger generations are mastering the art.

These conditions represent the situation of most young women who have lived in Lebanon throughout the war. Some of the ones returning from Europe, the US, Australia and other developed countries, now that the war is over, seem to feel differently about it (see interview with young professional Lebanese women returning to Lebanon, pg.7-10). In fact they are at awe at the manipulative skills and tactics of their sisters here. They are constantly intimidated by the resistance they meet when they question the system and are therefore alienated. They are compelled to adapt rather than produce changes.

Ah! but change is not impossible. The people of Lebanon who emigrated

to escape the war are many. Their return entails new ideas and lifestyles, which can be enforced despite the resistance because the situation is ambiguous and open to questioning. Furthermore, the newcomers may contest the status quo and thus create a precedent for the other young women who are aware of their needs and unable to express them.

The change need not come from an external force only. The internal force itself has not surfaced, mainly because the movement has been so well sheltered by socially affluent women who are not always questioning their lives but prefer to offer their help to needy women.

Post war Lebanon is in a state of readjustment to peace and to creating law and order. Part of this order must be a revisit to traditional gender roles and relations in the context of structural and social changes. Young Lebanese women should be the vehicle for change. They should become aware of their alternatives and of their needs and should define their roles before heading towards becoming the age old Lebanese women. Maybe that age old woman is really more realistic and functional for them, but they should at least know why and how. Those for whom a different Lebanese woman is imperative should be given the chance to express themselves without being trivialized and alienated.

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