

# Traditions Limit Horizons

## Young Professional Lebanese Women Return to Post-War Lebanon

Interview by Randa Abul-Husn



Dr. Hanine Abdallah

**D**r. Hanine Abdallah (H.A.), 28, holds a Ph.D. in Economics from Virginia Tech, and Dr. Nadia El-Cheikh (N.C.), also 28, holds a Ph.D. in History from Harvard. They both left Beirut in 1985 and returned in 1991 and 1992 respectively. Both were faculty members at the American University of Beirut, when they agreed to sit for this interview to tell of their experience as young professionals returning to Lebanon after the war. Both have had to readjust to traditional expectations which created significant friction with their families and relevant social circles. Their feminism and social values made them feel alienated. "You eventually get to the point where they make you feel you are the only 'weird' one around," said one of them and the other readily agreed.

As we sat in the conference room of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Hanine jokingly said that *Al-Raida* got her in trouble at a business meeting. For as she was fetching something from her briefcase, she removed *Al-Raida* which immediately caught the attention of the men in the meeting (my impression was that she was the only woman there). They inquired

about it, looked at it and immediately labeled her "Oh! now we know what you are, we should be careful of what we say." Remarks of this nature continued at various 'comic' moments of the meeting. Nadia, on the other hand, having observed these offensive/defensive situations chose not to express her own feminism in public for the first six months of her return to Beirut. "I actually have chosen not to talk about it."

• **Why not?**

N.C. The reaction to our feminism is very negative from men as well as women. We get a scared and disgusted look. People don't know what it means, are not conscious of it, and their backlash is very instinctive. There is no awareness. They think it means we want to hit men over the head and be more like them. Basically, they are afraid of changing the roles they play.

H.A. They also think it is extremist.

*N.C. When you come back and you think you have achieved so much .... they tell you "Is this what you learned?... You should have only learned from your book!"*

*Suddenly, it's like you might as well have married at eighteen*

The resistance of the ones who seem more liberal is also quite surprising.

N.C. The liberals are liberal in this very unaware way. It is like 'If I am free, I can have a job, go out with my boyfriend and spend the night out, so what more do I want?' For them it is all about being able to express one's self a little bit sexually, and that is enough. I think this is why, in other Arab countries, liberated women's group are more radical than here. Here, feminism is wishy-washy and tampered down with the idea that we supposedly have more freedom. Therefore, the atmosphere is pretty much cooled down and the debates are seen as redundant and unnecessary.

• **Who can you talk to then?**

N.C. I talk to my students mostly. In the beginning they are amused but eventually they accept me and become more involved. It is much more difficult to talk to older people, because they trivialize it. To them feminism is out of fashion, 'Oh! you are still a feminist?!' it's like saying 'Oh! you are

so trivial.' This pettiness is what really puts me off, much more than the disgusted looks.

H.A. My initial reaction, when I first returned to Beirut, was to argue earnestly. Now I confine my arguments to people I can communicate with intellectually.

• **What problems do you face living with your parents again?**

N.C. I am not living with my parents. I live in an apartment building. If it had been a faculty apartment on campus the move would have been easier because it would be judged as a good business deal. As far as I am concerned, I just wanted my space, so I pushed and insisted on having my own place. Now that I have it, I find myself spending more time at my mother's place.

H.A. I still live with my parents, but I spend very little time at home, because I lack the space I have grown accustomed to. Instead, I spend a lot of time outside the house, and I go out more frequently than when I was on my own.

• **What other things disturb you?**

N.C. Subtle things that dictate a woman's behavior which, in general, emphasize not taking too much space, like 'don't speak too loud, be shy, don't argue too much,' and so on.

H.A. And women are not treated as individuals but are always associated with men. The silliest example is in going to a restaurant with a man a number of times and the waiter acknowledging that "Mr. comes here often," as if the woman with him does not count.

• **Didn't these conditions exist before you left for your studies? Why is it so difficult to readjust?**

N.C. Yes, and I didn't question them then. But living on your own and especially in the American society makes you question matters. The hit thing nowadays is to deconstruct and analyze.

H.A. I left Beirut because I wanted my space, even then. Being away did not change the way I feel on this issue, I have always felt very strongly about my independence and my equal place

in society.

• There are many young professionals like yourselves who are experiencing the same difficulties. You have knowledge, status and exposure, therefore, as you grow in number you can have power to influence changes and create more awareness.

N.C. Yes, I wish we had met earlier.

H.A. I think that if we meet we can start discussing these issues because at a certain point you start to think you are alone and not normal.

N.C. At that point I felt I was probably the only woman in the world. I felt I was the only weird one.

H.A. Especially if your parents, the ones who love you start looking at you thinking 'she is not normal'. These people who are very close have a strong effect on you. They look kind of disappointed.

• **Are they disappointed?**

N.C. They are disappointed. Disappointed is very important. When you come back and you think you have achieved so much and at great cost because it was not easy to go there in the first place and change all the perspectives, and learn all of these things and be happy to have learned all of these things. They tell you, 'God, is this what you learned? You should have only learned from your books. Don't learn anything else.' Suddenly, it's like you might as well have married at eighteen. This is the look you end up getting. My mother, however, has outgrown this situation.

H.A. The women, maybe because they are women like us, are more understanding and tolerant of our attitudes than the men. But then again their support is limited because they too are wives and must accommodate their husbands and all the social demands that come along with it.

*H.A. We're fighting it. It is really a very complex thing, because one is fighting against one's self, against society and against one's parents.*

*At a certain point it's like a war, a war against everybody and it is exhausting. And it is a very long road and it's a very slow process.*

N.C. They (our mothers) are checked by their female peers too, and must constantly worry about being embarrassed or losing face.

• **You'd be surprised to know that there are feminist men in this country. One of them feels that women's war is with men. Based on your experiences with men in Lebanon, is this true?**

H.A. What do you really mean by feminism? What does it really mean here? All we do is make a logical statement and we get labeled, while men are always acknowledged and heard! It is an entire system that ignores women. Therefore, the few men who do agree with our remarks prefer not to raise the issue publicly. They feel it unnecessary to confront society as long as our beliefs are respected in our private lives and by

our friends. N.C. For men, our feminism is on the level of getting equal salaries and therefore we have nothing more to complain about. I don't care about the salary as much as the very subtle and very small codes of behavior that women are supposed to follow, especially in terms of not taking too much space. These attitudes do not only affect our social relations but our career as well. For instance, in a meeting we have less chances to talk, and if a male colleague opposes us, his statement carries more weight.

• **How do you propose to change the system? Will debates and discourses serve the purpose?**

N.C. It is a combination of both. Living on my own is a statement that will help more women do the same. Publications like Al-Raida are also



Dr. Nadia El-Cheikh,

very important although I think it should reach more and more people.

• **They do not want to read it. They do not want to rock the boat!**

N.C. I know. I do not want to rock the boat for the sake of rocking the boat. I simply feel that my horizons are limited by these codes of behavior and our social ways. Have you ever observed how an Arab woman walks down the street? She looks in front of her and down on the ground because if she happens to look up and her gaze meets that of a man, he will immediately harass her. She can't look up at the buildings, the road, the trees or whatever. And we're supposed to have wider horizons, right?

A Jordanian friend of mine wrote an article about her experience with the Personal Status Code. In a legal court, she was called by her number whereas, men were called by their names. When she spoke with the Cheikh, the judge, her gaze could not go higher than his shoe strings. Now, how are women supposed to get the same education and awareness as men under these conditions?

H.A. It's because they criticize your weaknesses. After all we have been raised here. So it is not like we do not also have inherent in us some weaknesses.

N.C. Oh, very much so. We are completely brainwashed while

growing up and it has taken a lot of effort to try to erase it. This is why when we come back here we are completely at a loss since we don't want to hurt them because we actually care about their opinion of us.

• **Are we talking about people in general or about the parents?**

N.C. No, the parents we love. We are talking about the rest of the people. With your parents, even if they hate you, it is more covered up. With the others, we don't want to be seen as trivial. We care about their opinion. It is very internalized.

• **What do you do about it?**

H.A. We're fighting it. It is really a very complex thing, because one is fighting against one's self, against society and against one's parents. At a certain point it's like a war, a war against everybody and it is exhausting. And it is a very long road and it's a very slow process.

• **Do you think these limitations will eventually drive you to leave?**

H.A. Hum!

N.C. Yes, you have to eliminate one of the wars. Even if you are in a different traditional society, you eliminate one of the fights. Then you will have to fight two wars only, the society and yourself. You have to eliminate something. So either you

move completely to a different setting where you don't have to engage in any of these fights or you move to another Arab country and try to eliminate one of the fights, if you want to stay more in this environment.

• **Would you conform?**

N.C. No, oh! no, no.

H.A. It is not feasible.

N.C. Actually, on some levels you do conform because you are dragged into it without noticing it.

Nadia El-Cheikh has eliminated one of her wars by accepting a job with the Arab Women's Center in Tunisia. Hanine Abdallah is continuing her struggle and pushing through with her beliefs, although cautiously, while pursuing a career as an economics professor and consultant, a predominantly male profession.

Young men and women like Hanine Abdallah and Nadia El-Cheikh have yet to get together and create a force for change. Maybe they will begin by addressing the many blanks that Wasila Tamzali noticed in the Lebanese frame (see Not Enough Debates, pg.12-14), and were implied in the opinions of Hanine and Nadia.