

# WOMEN AND THE FAMILY IN LEBANON

## FIGURES AND FACTS

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In collaboration with the United Nations Development Program, the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs has completed a survey<sup>1</sup> that provides for the first time in 65 years a comprehensive profile of the population in post-war Lebanon. One of its several objectives was to identify the demographic, educational, social, and occupational characteristics of Lebanese society. If properly considered, such information could play a major role in the decision-making process over several public policies in the country. The data of the survey are presented in 187 statistical tables. I will analyze selected tables related to the status and characteristics of women and the family.

### *Population Characteristics*

According to the census data, Lebanon has 2,993,302 inhabitants who live in 641,998 households. These households are distributed among three family types in the following order: 78% are nuclear families, almost four percent are nuclear families with relatives, and 9.4% are extended families. This transformation from the extended to the nuclear family-type seems due in part to the migration from rural to urban areas, employment patterns, and the willingness of children to live away from their parents. It is worth noting that of the nuclear families 20.3% consists of 5 persons, 20.8% of 4, and 15.5% of only 3 (Table 2-03).

One of the most surprising facts revealed by the survey is the number of households headed by women. Contrary to the traditional expectation that only men are capable of heading families, 14% of all households in Lebanon is at present headed by women (Table 2-04). Almost 40% of such households includes 3 to 5 persons. Among the many reasons that could account for this are separation, widowhood, divorce, and migration. Lebanese women are proving once more that they are not only capable of working inside and outside the house, but also of handling all family responsibilities and decisions. Despite her early socialization in a male-dominated society that does not provide her with the same entitlements and privileges as those available to men, the Lebanese woman is challenging all traditions and norms, and she is assuming greater responsibilities, for which she was ill-prepared. Her success or failure in her new roles could very well depend not only on her personal characteristics but also on the specific legislations that affect her status in society.

The distribution of the population according to gender reveals that unlike the limited 1970 survey, which showed that males outnumbered females (52% to 48% respectively)<sup>2</sup>, a reverse trend to the advantage of the female population has occurred (51.6% females to 49.4% males. Table 2.06). A partial interpretation of this change might include consideration of the loss of thousands of young men during the 16 years of war and of the continuing exodus of even more young men in search for job opportunities in the neighboring Arab countries.

### *Women and Marriage.*

Age at marriage is usually correlated with education, that is, the higher the level of education, the longer marriage is delayed. The situation among the young Lebanese is much more complicated, since other factors seem to contribute to such a decision, namely the financial status of young men who are practically incapable of securing the basic necessities for marriage, such as decent housing and a profitable job.

This situation leads to a low rate of marriage in the Lebanese population. The national survey reveals that 48.7% of young Lebanese who are of marriageable age - 14 years and above - is still single, while 45% is married. Among the married population between the ages of 15-19, the majority are females (96.4%), while they constitute 84% and 67% for the age categories 20-24 and 25-29 respectively. As for those married between the age of 35-39, the rate is almost equal for men and women.

Unlike women who are getting married at a young age, men tend to delay their decision to take this step. This is due in part to their financial status, which is too low to shoulder marriage responsibilities early in their lives, and to the severe economic crisis of the country. The data reveal that among those who have taken the legal steps to get married in the age category 30-34, males form the majority (84.5%) and females the minority (15.5%). The rate among young men between 25-29 is 70% (Table 2-10). This trend is corroborated by another set of data that show that among all those who got married in the age bracket 15-19, females are the majority (85.4%) while only a minority of males got married at this age (14.6%). However, in the age range of 30-34 the situation is reversed: men made up 81% of all those who got married (Table 2-11). Such evidence raises important questions about future trends in the Lebanese population concerning the size of the family, fertility rates, and even the population pyramid.



## **F**emale School Drop-Outs

The data reveal that school drop-outs for both males and females are more prevalent among the primary levels. It then increases for males age 15 at the intermediate level, whereas the rates for female enrollment for all age categories at all levels up to university exceeds that of males. Of all college graduates in the age category 20-24, females constitute 63.4%. This fact, however, should not overshadow the reality that, although the overall illiteracy rate in Lebanon is 13%, the female rate is 17% (Table 3-04). While it is true that more women are getting married at a younger age than men, it could be safely stated that among those who stay single, more women are capable of making it through college than men.

## **W**omen and College Education

The Lebanese woman has proven herself capable of competing with men in most scientific fields. She has achieved equal enrollment in the sciences, superior enrollment in the medical and allied health services, and an absolute majority in the areas of Arts and Humanities (19,410 women versus 8,899 men). She is also pursuing technical and engineering studies, at a rate of 1 woman to 5 men. Her participation in the teaching profession stands at 76% (Table 3-08). Such data reveal that the Lebanese woman has shown great interest in the specializations that were once considered turf reserved for men and that she is making great progress despite the many obstacles she faces.

## **W**omen's Education and Age at Marriage

There seems to be a positive relationship between the marital status of women and their level of education. Young single women tend to pursue a college education, which normally ends by the age of 22-24. Thus, female college graduates tend to have more freedom in choosing their partners. The survey data reveal that the percentage of women married at a younger age and who did not attend the university is far greater than that of men. Also, the rate of marriage among female college students is far lower. By contrast, the marriage percentage of illiterate women exceeds 64%. Also, multiple marriages are more common among illiterate women than among women with a college education (Table 2-13).

## **W**omen's Education and Fertility rate

The education a woman has received plays an impor-

tant role when it comes to deciding on the size of her family. Women with a higher education tend to have fewer children. The survey data reveal that 86% of illiterate women has more than three children while only 33% of college graduates has that many (Table 4-10).

## **W**orking Women and Fertility

Although many Lebanese women have a high level of education, and therefore greater access to work opportunities, the majority seems to choose the role of housewives. The data reveal that 87% of married women does not work whereas only 9% is actively involved in the labor force. Fifty percent of married women has 2 to 4 children; however, 74% of working women has 3 children or fewer (Table 4-16). According to the survey working women belong to the age bracket 25-49; the majority hold middle and lower ranking jobs. Only a small number (2.7%) occupy high ranking positions (Table 4-52). It appears that although Lebanese women have attained higher levels of education than men, they are still restricted to traditional roles and have to surpass great hurdles when trying to do better in the labor force.

## **C**onclusion

Although the economic, political, and social institutions of Lebanese society are undergoing rapid transformations, the resulting challenges are not so threatening as to endanger the existence of the family. The recent data showed above indicate that the extended family is being transformed into a nuclear one but the family as such, nonetheless, holds on to its traditional relationships, roles, and responsibilities. Parent-children relationships in Lebanon are still very strong - not only because of the patriarchal characteristics of the family, but also because women in general are playing meaningful and important roles in maintaining the structure of their families. Their educational and occupational pursuits are constantly adjusted to fit their responsibilities within the home. Women's own interests lie in those social relations that provide them with warmth and a sense of security. While it is true that women in the Arab world have a long way to go in their struggle to gain their rights, they do not necessarily consider themselves so unfortunate as they are often depicted. Like women everywhere, Lebanese women lead fruitful lives that oscillate between moments of happiness and moments of struggle.

### **References**

1. Lebanon: Ministry of Social Affairs. Population and Household Survey 1994 - 1996.
2. Lebanon: Central Statistical Administration. Statistical Survey 1970.