FAMILY IN LEBANON

Abdo Kaii, editor
Professor of Sociology at St. Joseph University
Summarized and translated by Ghena Ismail, IWSAW Staff

Discussions about the Lebanese or Arab family have largely revolved around the subject of the family's external duties towards society and public life. Issues related to the internal life, *i.e.*, one's attitude towards major concerns, one's needs and aspirations as well as one's emotional, intellectual, and humanitarian relationships have frequently been ignored. (1)

To examine the Lebanese family from the latter perspective, three field surveys were conducted (from January 13 to August 10, 1995) within the framework of Notre Dame de Loueizeh's social science program for 1995-1996: "Public Concern in People's Issues: Needs and Research, Planning and Supervision". Abdo Kaii supervised the study which covered a random sample of 400 individuals distributed throughout Beirut and its suburbs, Tripoli (North Lebanon), Saida (South Lebanon), and Zahleh (Bekaa). The sample comprised members of different age groups and socio-economic classes with whom personal interviews were conducted. An average of 13-14 questionnaires was distributed per day.(2)

The questions address four issues: the attitude of the Lebanese towards major beliefs and practices; the factors that influence marriage and the choice of spouse; the nature of the family, its main problems, and the strategies suggested by the Lebanese for overcoming these problems; and finally, the values that the Lebanese would like to transmit to their children.

The first part of the study reveals that more than one third of those surveyed think that the essence of all monotheistic religions is the same. However, more than fifty percent believe that their religion represents the absolute truth. Consequently, it is not surprising to learn that most respondents prefer a religious marriage to a civil one. They still adhere to a conservative and rigid value system, and their attitude towards socially unacceptable patterns of behavior is not flexible. Except for self-defense killing, such unacceptable practices are not tolerated, even though the interviewees are fully aware of their prevalence. It is worth noting, however, that divorce is becoming more acceptable than it used to be.

Since marriage remains the recognized custom for the formation of the family in Lebanon and in all the Arab countries, one cannot examine the concept of family without discussing marriage. Concerning the choice of spouse, most of the Lebanese interviewed emphasize morality, personality factors, level of education, and social background. Family status, the spouse's profession, and financial matters seem to be secondary considerations. The main reason for the increase of the average marriage age is not the individual's need for a wider space or greater sexual freedom, unlike in other countries, but rather the difficult economic situation. In Lebanon, a decent residence is very expensive, given that the monthly minimum wage is 300 000 L.L. (*i.e.*, less than 200$). It is worth noting that relatively few among today's young Lebanese solve their housing problem by living with their parents. As the concept of privacy is gaining more importance in the Lebanese society, the extended family-pattern is disintegrating.

Not only young couples who want to get married suffer from the difficult economic situation; in fact, the economy seems to be the basic problem from which the Lebanese family suffers in our time. Consequently, when asked to identify the family issues that need improvement, the vast majority of interviewees pointed to the economic conditions. They hardly mentioned the need to improve the internal life of the family, which does not mean that the internal state is in good shape but that the economic situation is tough. Their assessment of the relationships within the family was below the researcher's expectations of 7-8/9 while the actual ratio was 6-7/9. Relationships within the family appear to be neither bad nor excellent. As for the distribution of roles within the family, there is a clear trend towards equality. Duties such as raising the children, decision-making, and securing an atmosphere of love and compassion are no longer classified as either "purely female" or "purely male". This new phenomenon is worthy of attention and encouragement.

Finally, a majority of participants (46%) thinks that the human goal to be most emphasized by family and school education is the acceptance of the other (*i.e.*, someone from a different sect or political affiliation). The moral values and characteristics that the interviewees hope to transmit to their children are the sense of responsibility, faith in one's religion, chastity, forgiveness, and respect for the other; but values that enhance social development, such as hard work, independence, self-control, creative thinking, and leadership skills receive scant attention.

11