

WOMEN-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN LEBANON

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One cannot tackle the issue of the family in Lebanon without referring to the women-headed households. According to the statistical survey of the population and residence, conducted by the Ministry of Social Affairs and issued on October 14, 1996, 14.2% of families in Lebanon are headed by women (*i.e.*, 91,131 families). These women may be widows, divorcees, abandoned, or married to men who were kidnaped, worked abroad, or are sick and incapable of working. One common factor among these women, whatever the socio-economic background, is that they are in charge of their families by force of the situation.

To get to know more about these women, their perceptions, feelings, hopes, and expectations, IWSAW carried out the following interviews with seven women from different socio-economic levels who have become heads of households for various reasons. They were asked the same set of questions which aimed at investigating their feelings about their situation, the decision-making process in their families, their residential and health circumstances, and the basic problems they face.

Interviews

Lara is a 39-year old Lebanese Maronite who was married to a Palestinian Muslim man for only three years. After the divorce, three years ago, Lara became the head of a household consisting of herself and her two children. Financial difficulties constitute Lara's main problem; she nowadays works as a secretary. Her ex-husband does not contribute to the children's expenses, since he is "brainless", as Lara describes him. "Even during marriage, I was the main financial supporter, but whatever small contribution he made then was helpful." Currently, Lara lives with her brother and mother in a two-bedroom apartment where she and her children have their own bedroom. This situation has positive as well as negative effects. On the one hand, she need not worry about finding a place to live or about childcare during her absence. On the other, her mother and brother constantly interfere in the up-bringing of the children, so that there is no single obvious authority figure. Most often, Lara's mother and brother will side with the kids even if they do something that she does not approve of. However, this interference is limited to such matters as eating too many sweets or staying up late to watch a movie; when it comes to more important matters, such as the choice of school, it is always Lara who decides. The children's relationship with their grandmother and uncle is excellent, and although Lara's brother does not assume any financial

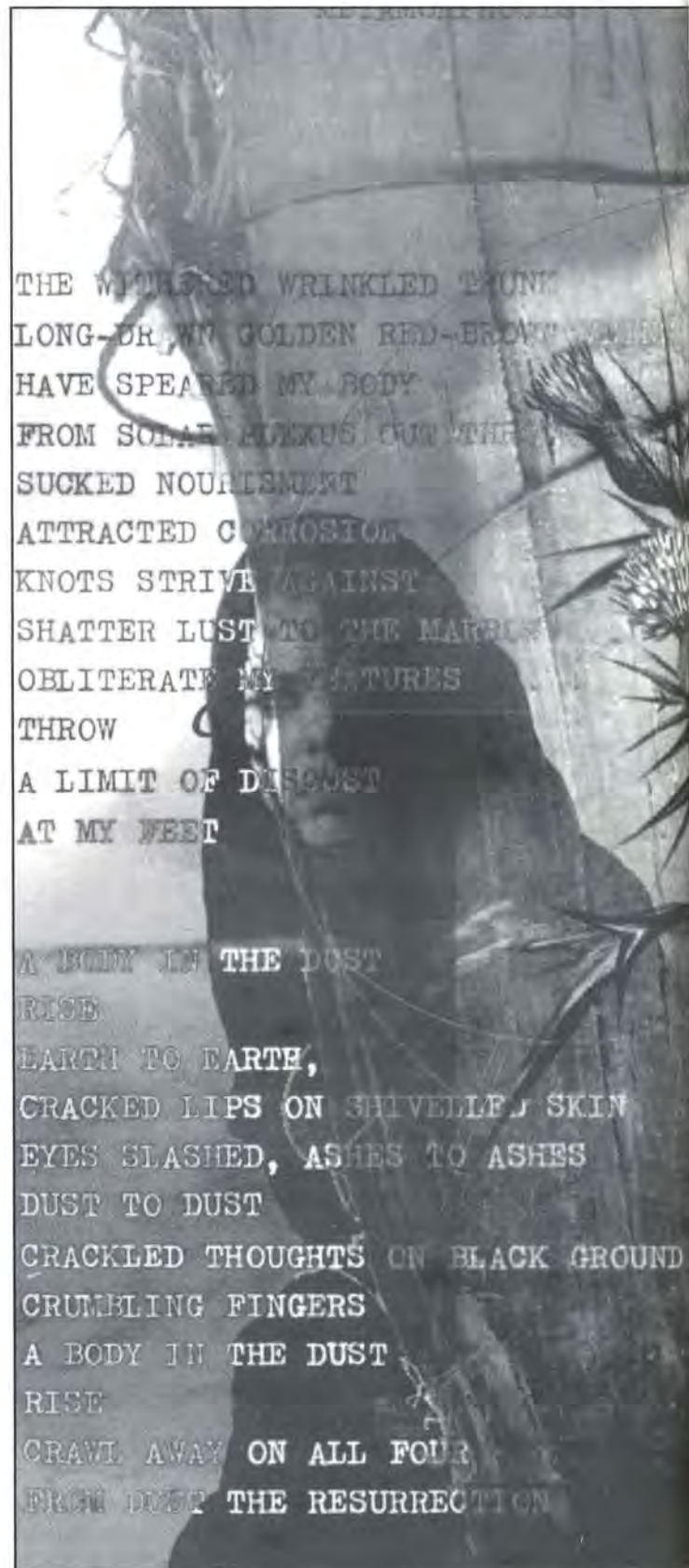
responsibility towards her and her children, he helps them indirectly. Lara does not foresee any improvement in her status: "On the contrary, the older my children, the bigger their needs will be; at the same time, my income is not likely to increase." Yet, since there is nothing she can do, she does not bother herself with unnecessary worries.

Faizeh is 49 years old; she is a Lebanese Muslim (of Syrian origin) whose smiling face radiates happiness and content. After the third child was born, and as her husband's health deteriorated, Faizeh started working as a maid. Faizeh's husband did not approve of the idea; however, since they were in desperate need of money to cover his medication expenses, Faizeh worked during his absence. Faizeh has a blind sister who has been living with them since she was married and who took care of the kids during her absence. "My husband of course knew that I went to work, but he turned a blind eye." Thus, being independent was not a new experience to Faizeh after her husband's death. Even before his decease, Faizeh was the primary provider and this never bothered her, for she believes that a good and clever woman should not be dependent on anyone - not even her husband. Moreover, Faizeh enjoys working and cannot see herself as a housewife at all. What started bothering her after her husband's death, was mainly people's attitude - especially when she went to Syria. People gossiped about the fact that she was living alone, and they inquired about every man who visited her - even if this man was one of her brothers. Her brothers wanted her to live with them, and they strongly suggested that she leave her children to their father's family, but this was totally unacceptable to her. Faizeh did not depend on any external help; she did not expect to be helped in the first place. Her brother-in-law tried to help her financially; however, he was often stopped by his mother who never extended a helping hand to Faizeh's family, not even during her son's stay at the hospital. "She has always been very stingy." One and a half years after her husband's death, Faizeh married her brother-in-law. This helped to put an end to people's gossip. Moreover, Faizeh's remarrying was very beneficial to the children, since their uncle loved them a lot; however, he failed to be strict with them, and thus she has always been the source of authority at home. Faizeh feels pride in telling us that her three oldest sons now own a bakery, are happily married, and live in two homes that she bought. Her sons want her to stop working, since they feel that she needs to rest, but she refuses. She loves her work too much to be able to quit.

Rana is a 48-year old Lebanese Orthodox Christian of Palestinian origin and has been a widow for nineteen years. Rana holds a B.A. in History but works in a

bank to support her two children and her father-in-law. Rana's pattern of life changed radically after her husband's death. "When my husband was alive, I needed not worry about anything. He worked in the Institute for Palestinian Studies," wrote for *An-Nahar* newspaper, and taught on a part-time basis at A.U.B. He loved me a lot and did his best to secure for us the best kind of life." His death did not break Rana, as she knew that she had to be strong enough to face the new challenges of life. For the first seven years, Rana did not work; her sister-in-law supported the family financially, while she stayed home to take care of the children. Rana's father-in-law and sister-in-law live close to her. However, her husband's family does not interfere in the decision-making process. "Right from the beginning, I made it clear that the children should be brought up by one person only." Rana explains that her husband's family is her true family. None of her own sisters or brothers (who are very well off) ever extended a helping hand to her. Rana's bitterness towards her family is obvious: "I hold much grudge against all of my family, and I meet my sisters only on special occasions." She feels proud of having been able to let her daughters achieve what they have achieved today. The eldest daughter studies at the Lebanese American University (LAU) and the younger one is at the International College school (I.C.). Rana has always insisted on matriculating her daughters in the best schools and colleges, and she was often blamed for that. To her, a good school does not only ensure a good education but also a good social environment. Giving her daughters the opportunity to interact with people from a high social class might help them in the future. "I know I am paying the cost of these words, but, honestly, I cannot imagine my daughters studying in schools of a lower rank. I have nothing to leave to my daughters but a degree from a respectable university." However, how is Rana able to manage with her modest salary from the bank? "I am falling under the weight of heavy loans and debts. Yet, the good performance of my daughters in their studies offers me the best consolation." When asked how she would be able to pay back her loans, Rana replied that her daughters should take care of that when they start working.

Dima is a 38-year old widow and one of the very few women engaged in the industry of wood trade in the Middle East. Dima received a B.A. degree in Economics from A.U.B, and was very eager to work and practice what she had learned. "I always had a curiosity to know what happened beyond the counter in the bank. My work in the bank provided me with an excellent experience from which I benefited a lot later in my life." At the age of 29, Dima got married and moved with her husband to Saudi Arabia. Up until then, Dima's life was characterized by one simple word: "happiness". Her childhood had been a very happy one, and her marriage was equally happy as she was deeply in love with her husband. One year later, her life took a different turn. Her mother died, and less than two years later, before Dima had absorbed the shock, her hus-



THE WITHERED WRINKLED PRUNE
 LONG-DR, MY GOLDEN RED-BROWN
 HAVE SPEARED MY BODY
 FROM SOLAR ALEXUS CUT THE
 SUCKED NOURLEMENT
 ATTRACTED CORROSION
 KNOTS STRIVE AGAINST
 SHATTER LUST TO THE MARBLE
 OBLITERATE MY FEATURES
 THROW
 A LIMIT OF DISGUST
 AT MY FEET
 A BODY IN THE DUST
 RISE
 EARTH TO EARTH,
 CRACKED LIPS ON SHIVELLED SKIN
 EYES SLASHED, ASHES TO ASHES
 DUST TO DUST
 CRACKLED THOUGHTS ON BLACK GROUND
 CRUMBLING FINGERS
 A BODY IN THE DUST
 RISE
 CRAWL AWAY ON ALL FOUR
 FROM DUST THE RESURRECTION



"Metamorphosis", 1996, Computer Art. Lina Ghaibeh

band became so seriously sick that his death was inevitable. Despite the emotional turmoil she found herself in, Dima decided that she should prepare herself to take her husband's place in work after his death. So, she went to the company and took care of the business. "It was then that I realized the importance of the banking background I had." Dima's work was not socially accepted. She was the only woman working in the wood-industry field in Saudi Arabia, and one of the very few women in this field in the Middle East. However, people around her sympathized with her as they understood that she was not working to defy any rules or traditions but to protect her husband's work. When Dima's husband died, her father was very much concerned about her. He wanted to give her a fixed income and provide her with whatever she needed. However, Dima thought that she was mature and old enough to take care of herself and her son. She accepted to transfer the business to Lebanon upon her father's request. Dima's father, with whom she enjoys a special relationship, encouraged her to live with her son in their own apartment to which purpose he supported her financially. I could see the tears in Dima's eyes when she talked about her husband's death; however, I could sense as well her willful and defiant attitude. "Life is a challenge," Dima asserted more than once. Dima refuses to view her situation as pitiful or burdensome in any way. On the contrary, she believes that she was lucky to have lived thirty years of absolute happiness. To Dima, life is a big challenge and one has to come out on top. "Of course, I would have been happier if I had my husband next to me, but there is nothing I can do, and life has to go on. Moreover, I have my son, who is the most beautiful gift life has offered me."

Sanaa is a Christian Lebanese who has been married for eleven years. She is only thirty-six, but she definitely looks much older. Four years ago, Sanaa's husband developed severe heart problems and could not go to work anymore. Thus, Sanaa found herself responsible for a family consisting of herself, her husband, and three children. Sanaa holds a baccalaureate degree and used to work in a pharmacy when she was single; however, she did not consider working in a pharmacy again after her husband's illness declared itself, because it was very important to her to be back home before the children would return from school. In the beginning, Sanaa worked in a sewing factory close to home; however, two months later the factory closed and the family lived in extreme poverty. In the winter, she started to look for another job. Eventually, she sold household objects and cosmetics to friends and neighbors. The most important challenge Sanaa faced was that of paying the tuition fees: the children attend a semi-private school, which charges 500,000 L.L. (*i.e.*, about \$325) per child. The school may be a bit more expensive than other schools but it has the advantage of being close which spares Sanaa having to worry about transportation expenses. Two years ago, Sanaa suffered from a severe hemorrhage, caused by a stomach ulcer. She had to stop working and could not pay

the tuition fees on time. Fortunately, Sanaa knew about the S.O.S. from one of her friends, and she filled out an application form. She did not expect that her application would be accepted that easily. The social worker explained that Sanaa's application was accepted because her husband was not capable of working and she had under-age children. In the beginning, the S.O.S. covered the schooling of Sanaa's children and allocated a monthly allowance to the family. Then they helped Sanaa enroll in a hairdressing and make-up training program. Sanaa's health improved much, and eventually she opened a hairdressing salon at home. Then, the S.O.S. stopped giving aid, and Sanaa's husband started to look for work. "Had we continued helping Sanaa financially, her husband would have never considered working. He had gotten used to being dependent on Sanaa," a social worker at the S.O.S. stated. Although Sanaa's work gave her a bigger role in the decision-making processes at home, she does her best not to let her husband feel useless. When asked about his role towards the family and the children, Sanaa laughed not knowing what to say: "The children love him a lot."

Lina is a 38-year old Christian Lebanese who has been married for twelve years. Lina's husband had been suffering of a serious psychological illness which prevented him from working. Only when Lina got married did she understand how seriously ill her husband was, and thus she knew that she had to be responsible for earning the family's keep. She started by doing housecleaning for other people. I could easily feel how uncomfortable Lina felt about the situation. "I only worked in two houses ... I did not do this kind of work for a long time ... It is not ayb (i.e., improper) to work," she kept emphasizing. Lina stopped working in other people's houses three years ago, after she found out about the S.O.S. At the S.O.S. she learnt sewing. Lina now does the sewing at the S.O.S. and receives a monthly salary. She does not have to worry about paying rent since the house is her husband's. Tuition fees are only 275 thousand L.L. (i.e. around \$180), which is not a problem. The big problem Lina faces every month is covering the daily living expenses and her husband's medicines. The situation bothers Lina a lot, especially because she knows that her husband does not put in the necessary effort to work. "It is true that he is psychologically ill, but he does not have the will to fight his illness and to find work. He has learnt to be dependent on me." Although Lina's husband does not assume any kind of responsibility in the family, she does not like to make him feel useless. "I make sure to consult with him on every single matter. If I think differently from him, I do not break his word, but it is apparent I try to persuade him." The children love their father, but they trust and love their mother more.

Suha, a forty-year old Muslim, lived with her family in Saudi Arabia for fifteen years. Six years ago, Suha and her husband decided that she would go to Beirut with her children while he would stay on in Saudi Arabia for

another couple of years. She did not find the task of being head of the family burdensome. "My life had to become more organized, since there was no one to help me. I got thinner and people thought that my health was affected by the big responsibility I was shouldering. However, my health was not affected. I only got thinner because I became more active. I refused to bring a maid in the beginning, because I thought that since I was not working I should be able to manage. In fact I managed well, but it wasn't easy, especially because my ten-year old son was weak at school and I had to teach him daily for no fewer than six hours. The second year I brought a maid." However, Suha says that even when her husband came, things did not change. The major challenge Suha was facing was helping her son to succeed in school. Although her husband was a teacher, he lacked the patience to teach their child. It was due to the fact that Suha's parents were living in Beirut that her husband had agreed to her living with her children in Beirut without him. Suha, however, did not depend on her parents at all. Their presence was emotionally comforting, since she knew that if something bad occurred they would be close to her. Suha made all the decisions concerning her family. When a big decision had to be taken, she told her husband about it. "I did not tell my husband because I did not trust my ability to make a right decision on my own, but to prevent him from blaming me if things went wrong." Suha did not face any difficulty in dealing with her children during her husband's absence. She does not think that a man is automatically more capable of controlling children's behavior. The person most affected by the absence of Suha's husband was her youngest son, who was only two when they left Saudi Arabia. "My youngest son missed his father a lot, and he started calling his grandfather "papa" as a means for compensating himself." Suha's husband came back three years ago, because he could not stand being away from his family any longer.

Discussion

None of the women I interviewed developed health or psychological problems except Sanaa who had a stomach ulcer. None of them lamented her role as the head of a household. Besides, they were all confident about their ability to make decisions in their families and to control their children's behavior. The basic problem facing all these women, except Dima and Suha, appeared to be financial.

If this is the case, can we say that the situation of these women is not unique? In other words, can we assume that the problems they are facing are merely economic and similar to those that any poor ordinary household faces?

Both Dr. Nabih Eid, a family doctor and an Associate Professor of Psychology at the Lebanese American University (LAU) and Dr. Touma Khouri, also an Associate Professor of Psychology at LAU, reject this assumption. Dr. Eid quotes studies that have shown that female-headed

households suffer from anxiety, which he attributes to poor parenting, since the mother becomes both the target and instigator with respect to her children. Children in the first year after separation become more defiant, negative, aggressive, and angry. If they are of school age, their school performance typically drops at least for a while (Frostenberg & Cherlin 1991, Hethengton & Clingmpal 1992). These effects are more easily visible in boys than in girls since boys lack the role-model with whom they would tend to identify themselves. As for the mother, she is likely to show wide mind swings, to experience problems at work, and to suffer from poor health. Parenting style changes as it becomes less authoritative and almost neglectful (Hethengton 1989). Women, in particular, do much less well in monitoring their children's behavior and setting clear rules or limits. "As time passes, accommodation takes place and the problem becomes less intense." Dr. Eid asserts that the feeling of anxiety is not experienced only by widows or divorcees, but also by women whose husbands are psychologically or physically ill. A woman's physical and sexual needs ought to be satisfied. Otherwise, she will experience frustration and anxiety which may lead her into depression. In our society where sex is a taboo, the woman very often sublimates her sexual needs into other activities.

Dr. Touma Khouri thinks that in the absence of the father the woman will feel more bossy and her children will start viewing her as the source of authority. If the children are young, they are more likely to accept their mother's new role. However, if they are teenagers, and especially if they are boys, a clash might take place. "In our male dominant society, the son might try to take the role of his father and thus share the authority with his mother. This will have psychological effects on the mother, especially if she is not capable of securing the livelihood of the family." However, Dr. Khouri draws attention to the fact that every case is unique: "The kinds of problems facing a woman who is the head of a household vary according to her age, the age and sex of her children, and the social norms to which she is subject."

Ms. May Majdalani, a clinical psychologist, also accepts that a woman might face some difficulties if she has boys, since boys need to identify with a male role-model. However, she does not think that this necessarily causes psychological problems for the woman. On the contrary, Ms. Majdalani believes that a woman who becomes widowed or divorced might find within herself the strength to cope with the responsibility, and thus may in many cases blossom a few years after the separation. Ms. Majdalani adds that the state of a woman after being widowed or divorced depends upon the previous family pattern and couple relation which might be a negative one. "Once a woman is in charge of the family, no one will belittle her, and if she is strong enough, she will benefit from the situation."

Ms. Mona Sharabati, a clinical psychologist, also asserts

that to say that any woman who is widowed or divorced is going to have problems is an incorrect generalization, and she does not think that it is more difficult for the woman to manage if the children are boys. "The boy can find the male figure with whom he needs to identify in his uncle." She adds that it is much easier for the woman than it is for the man to be in charge of the family: "The quantity of woman's presence is more important, and thus it is easier to bring a substitute for the man."

It is interesting to note that while both male psychologists I interviewed agreed that the female head of a household is likely to suffer from psychological problems - mainly resulting from the new double role she has to adopt as the mother and the father at the same time, the women psychologists pointed out the possibility of the woman "blossoming" after the separation; their rationale was that the previous family pattern was not necessarily positive. In fact, this applies well to the women I interviewed. If you take Lara as an example, you will notice that she was not much affected by the divorce, since she had been the main source of earnings even during her marriage. As for Faizeh, being independent was not new to her after her husband's death, since she had always been the primary provider. When Sanaa was asked about her husband's role towards the family, she laughed, not knowing what to say, and then she replied, "the children love him a lot." Suha did not face any difficulty in dealing with her children during her husband's absence; the one who was most affected by the absence of Suha's husband was her two-year old son, and the reason why Suha's husband came back after three years was his need for being with the family and not the other way around!

In conclusion, the status of the woman-head of household depends on many factors: financial status, social attitude, age, number and sex of the children, the previous family pattern and of course, two more factors that were stressed by all psychologists: the woman's personality and her perception of her own situation. "This makes the difference," one of them asserted. Apparently, it does. Otherwise, how could one explain Faizeh's high spirit, smiling face and forgiving attitude in spite of all the difficulties she encountered! Thus, no simple generalization can be made regarding the status of a woman who becomes the head of her household. The assumption that such women are likely to suffer from psychological problems is not to be totally disregarded, but it should certainly be restricted to a limited category of women, *i.e.*, those women who have enjoyed healthy relationships with their spouse. Thus, if we really want to know more about the status of a woman who becomes head of a household, we should first know more about the status of married women in our society.

(N.B. The names used in this article are not the real names of the women interviewed.)