

THE GIRL IN THE LEBANESE FAMILY

ONE STEP AHEAD

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It should be evident to those interested in women's issues that the prevailing standards associated with Lebanese women are evidently changing. Given that we are passing through a stage where chaos and contradictions prevail, it is very difficult to obtain precise facts. However, we can shed some light on various aspects related to women's issues in general. One of the prominent features that characterize the transitional period through which we are passing is the sharp split in outlook and convictions pertinent to women. In this article I will analyze the girl's status in the Lebanese family and emphasize that she has progressed and that her conditions have improved. I will base my analysis on a brief survey and on published research written on this subject.

I would like to point to the obvious differences, caused by variance in time and methodology, between the reality of women in our society today and the claim made by earlier writers on the subject. In an article on the girl in the traditional family, Rose Ghurayyib stated that

we find an apparent decline in the status accorded to women for it relegates to men privileges where women are assigned the tasks refused by men. Equality with men concerning inheritance rights is disregarded and very often women are deprived of their inheritance rights. Moreover, although women's work inside the house and in the fields is essential and important, family members tend to diminish its importance and restrict the rewards accorded to them to food and clothes. Women's subordinate role in the family forces them to accept the double standards associated with the sexes where a differentiation in treatment occurs. Moreover, women are urged to accept male's domination and to practice traditional female traits such as self sacrifice, modesty...

This passage was published 17 years ago. Although traditional families still oppress women and deny them many rights we cannot generalize and state that the practices it describes are common in all families today. For example, there are many parents these days who protect their daughter's right to inherit. They appreciate

her work outside the home, and what she earns she keeps. I believe that more Lebanese women are aware of their rights as partners in the family and as citizens capable of embracing leading roles. Another generalization appears in Hijazi's book "*Al Takhalouf Al Ijtimaey*" when he claims that poor lower-working class women are exploited. They are obedient and submissive, and their will and desires are restrained. They are used as tools for production and reproduction. In middle-class families, some women are still prepared to play subservient and oppressed roles and they are used as tools. However, this pattern no longer appeals to the majority of women who find themselves in a conflict between their traditional role and their newly acquired maturity, intellect, integrity, and rights. As for the privileged upper-class women, Hijazi feels that, although they are well-off financially and enjoy all the material privileges available, their fate is no different, for they are discriminated against and are also used as tools to a certain extent.

One should keep in mind that Hijazi wrote his book about 18 years ago, which enables us to re-echo what has been said about Ghurayyib's article. Recent work reveals that Hijazi's findings may now be challenged. Modern Arab women from various socio-economic classes are aware of their needs and they partake in decision-making, production, work, and family management. This is not to say that women have reached the desired goals of liberation; however, they have taken big strides. More women are enrolling in educational institutions and are engaging in public life. Female participation in the labor force is noticeable and so is their political involvement. Women nowadays are aware of the necessity of taking charge of their lives. They constantly question their lot and refuse to be relegated to the private domain. However, one cannot deny the fact that the newly acquired values are still relatively weak in comparison to the traditional ones which control a woman and diminish her societal roles. Male domination is one of the reasons hindering women from working.

A study conducted in 1985 by the Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) revealed that, although the most important factor urging women to work was economic necessity, yet, 87% of the single women whose ages ranged between 20 and 30 years worked in order to interact with the public world outside the family. Moreover, 94% of the single women, 80% of the married ones, and all teen-agers who

worked, did so in order to gain experience in life.

I have also conducted a survey on a sample of 50 single working women in Nabatieh, a town in Southern Lebanon. Eight percent of the women interviewed came from the town itself whereas all the others came from nearby villages. I aimed at investigating male opinion concerning the female participation in the labor force.

The results showed that 60% of the fathers of these women did not object to the idea of their daughters working. However, 44% of these fathers had initially refused the idea but had agreed to it when pressured and convinced by other family members. It is important to note that the basic reason for a father's approval is economic necessity. Brothers also had had a say in the matter; 33% of them had refused to allow their sisters to work, while 77% of the brothers confirmed a change in mentality by allowing them to be employed. The survey reveals increased tolerance and willingness on the part of the brothers to accept new ideas. It also highlights the fact that rural women, most of them poor, are heading towards economic, social, and self-development.

The survey affirms that a woman's consciousness of her legislative rights is below average and practically nonexistent. Ninety-six percent of the women who participated answered that they work more than eight hours a day without requesting extra pay for overtime work. Moreover, 90% of these women earns less than the minimum wage set by the government, and 98% is not covered by social security. Only 4% of these women has applied for their salaries to be adjusted and to be registered for social security benefits.

The results that I have obtained indicate that, although the Lebanese woman views her future in a different light, she is still hampered by various obstacles, namely traditions, values, and norms. Although Lebanese women's conditions have improved, they are still not equal to those of men. Society is oppressive and tends to elevate the value of certain habits and traditions that inhibit women from progressing.



"The paper", 1994, Mixed media Rim Al Joundi