

TAHTAL MIJHAR

MARRIAGE



"Head of a Woman", 1961, Oil on Canvas. Picasso.

Ghena Ismail, IWSAW Staff

Marriage was the subject of the third symposium of IWSAW's youth talk-in program, *Tahtal Mijhar* ("Under the Microscope") which was held on May 20, 1997. The discussion was moderated by Ghena Ismail, IWSAW staffer; the guest-speakers were Dr. Ilham Kallab-Bsat, professor, researcher in women's issues, and active member of several Lebanese non-governmental organizations, and Dr. Nabil Dajani, chairperson of the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the American University of Beirut (AUB).

The meaning and necessity of marriage, the factors that determine our readiness for it, and the method favored by young people nowadays to meet their future partners were major issues discussed. A video report prepared by Dina Dahboura, Friend of IWSAW, and which covered the Lebanese American University, American University of Beirut, Lebanese University, Beirut Arab University, and Saint Joseph University revealed that many young people stressed partnership and understanding in defining the meaning of marriage. A few respondents pointed out the importance of having children. It is worth noting that most participants desire a complete partnership with their future spouses. Only one woman noted that such a partnership is too ideal to be true.

Dr. Kallab-Bsat said that understanding and harmony are not easy to achieve. "It is unwise to seek a continuous understanding in a marital relationship. Marriage, if successful, may bring about moments of understanding and harmony. However, in principle marriage is about giving stability to a couple which enables them to be productive. Productivity in the family is what ensures the survival of marriage."

Dr. Dajani emphasized the importance of compatibility for achieving the desired level of understanding. "A couple intending to get married should be compatible on different levels, and they should not ignore social and

cultural traditions. It is pathetic how today's generation looks down upon tradition." While Dr. Kallab-Bsat attributed the high rate of divorce at the end of this century to the development of women's awareness and independence, Dr. Dajani linked it to the phenomenon of "westernization," and he held television partly responsible for the cultural pollution that we are facing today.

In the second part, the video report revealed something of a consensus among young men and women regarding the necessity of marriage. The majority viewed marriage as an "inevitable" event in their lives. While men stressed the importance of their financial standing in determining their readiness for marriage, women placed greater emphasis on finding the "right partner".

Dr. Kallab-Bsat commented that women are no less concerned than men about the financial aspect. "When referring to the 'right partner,' they often refer to a man who has financial means." Dr. Dajani stated that the financial standing is important; however, it should not be the determining factor for one's decision to get married. Both speakers agreed that a person should not decide to get married before having reached a certain level of psychological stability."

The female participants did not deny their concern about a man's financial status. They explained, however, that this concern did not imply an intention to find a rich man. "A man who wants to get married needs to have at least the potential to be able to produce in the future." One male participant noted, however, that "a woman should have such potential, too." He explained that, today, it is not possible for a Lebanese middle class man to get married if the woman does not help out financially.

How today's young people prefer to meet their potential spouse was the theme of the third part of the discussion. This part caused the most controversy. Reactions swung between the very traditional and the very liberal.

One man stated that he did not have any problem whatsoever to be introduced to a woman who was pointed out to him by his mother, grandmother, or even aunt. "After all, they know what I want." One woman who was totally against this traditional way objected, saying, "what about the woman's feelings? Is marrying a woman no different from buying onions? The traditional way may be convenient for people who are not educated or who are socially isolated." Although some other women preferred to meet a man on their own, they did not assume the same negative attitude towards the traditional way. "I may accept to meet a man at my parent's home on the condition that it was I who aroused the interest of the man and was not pointed out to him by his mother or neighbors," several women stated. One woman said: "although I prefer to meet the man I want to marry, myself, I have to say that one positive thing about the

traditional way is that the man's intention is clear."

This diversity in opinion among the participants was shared by the guest-speakers. While Dr. Dajani was in favor of the traditional way, Dr. Kallab-Bsat was not. "A woman may feel pressured by the traditional way," she commented. Dr. Dajani, in his turn, considered young people's rejection of the traditional way a very big mistake. He wondered about the difference between meeting someone through friends or through parents. "I cannot understand why the traditional way pressures or intimidates a woman. A woman may give herself the opportunity to meet the man, and if she doesn't like him, she can say so."

In conclusion, much ambiguity and controversy seemed to surround the term "traditional." While many young participants immediately rejected traditional marriage, they seemed to be more tolerant when terms other than "traditional" were used to explain what is also traditional. Is it that today's young people are incapable of taking a clear stand amidst the multiplicity of norms and values in our society? Or is it, as Dr. Dajani suggested, that young people experience a kind of inferiority feeling when speaking of tradition?

Publications by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World:

***Sisters of Men: Lebanese
Women in History*** by
Shereen Khairallah

***The Woman Artist in
Lebanon*** by Helen El-Khal

***Contemporary Arab Women
Writers and Poets*** by
Evelyne Accad & Rose
Ghurayyib (monograph)

***Woman in the Lebanese
Legislation*** by Laure
Moughaizel (Arabic)