

## FEMALE LABOR FORCE IN LEBANON\*

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The study aims at providing a profile of working women; estimating the size of the Lebanese female labor force in selected economic activities and sectors; highlighting the conditions in which women work; demonstrating the social and cultural problems that working women face; and detecting employer preferences to identify trends of demand. The study concludes with a set of recommendations. The following abstract is a summary of the results of the survey on working women that can be used to establish a profile of working women in Lebanon.

### *Geographical Distribution*

The Lebanese female labor force is concentrated in the *Mohafazat* (Province) of Mount Lebanon (43.7 percent), including the Beirut suburbs, and in Administrative Beirut (19.9 percent). The concentration of the female labor force in urban areas does not negate the importance of women's work in the agricultural sector in rural areas, both as paid labor and family-help. Higher female economic activity in urban areas is the result of many factors, including better access to education and employment opportunities.

### *Age Structure*

The female labor force highly concentrated in young age groups. Women in the 25-29 year-age group have the highest labor force participation rate (19.7 percent) and are followed closely by women 30-34 years of age (16.9 percent). Female participation in the

labor force declines after the age of 30. The relatively young age structure of the female labor force indicates that this phenomenon is somewhat recent and may be assumed to be directly related to the increased educational achievement of women. The decline in female economic activity after the age of 30 is in most cases due to marriage and the division of family roles, which decrease the women's ability to carry out income-generating activities.

### *Marital Status and Family Characteristics*

Marital status is a strong demographic variable affecting female economic participation: 52.6 percent of the female labor force is single. The regional variation in the marital status of working women reflects the norms and values that govern the communities in different regions of the country. In regions with conservative communities, lower economic activity rates for married, widowed, and divorced women prevail. In urban areas, and especially in Beirut, the economic activity rates tend to be higher.

In general, married working women have smaller families, with up to 2-3 children per family. The number of working women who are heads of household is significant (16.3 percent of working women). As expected, the majority of divorced and widowed working women are heads of household, and a considerable proportion of single working women are found to assume financial responsibility for their families.

As is the case for the female labor force in general, the economic activity of working married and single women decreases with age. However, the economic activity of widowed women increases with age as a result of the economic crisis they face especially after assuming the role of heads of household.



## Educational Status of Working Women

A majority of working women have completed secondary education, and the percentage of illiterate working women is low. University graduates and graduates of vocational education account for about 25 percent and 18 percent of the female labor force, respectively. The relatively high educational profile of working women implies that education is an important prerequisite for work and employment, and that the relationship between the educational status of female workers and their employment credentials is crucial. The educational profile of female workers varies according to region, with higher attainment levels in urban and peri-urban areas. The concentration of female employment in urban areas of the country is directly related to the increased educational level of women in these areas, in addition to the fact that job opportunities are mainly concentrated there. It is observed that higher female educational levels, in quantitative terms, have not resulted in a diversification of the acquired types of specialization.

## Socio-Economic Background of Working Women

The majority of working women live in households with family incomes ranging between LL500,000 - LL1 million. [\$320-\$645] Family income has a positive impact on women's incentive to work since female employment increases with the increase in family income, reaching a peak for family incomes about LL1 million, thereafter decreasing. This strongly suggests that the incentive for women from low-income families to work is primarily economic need. Average family incomes vary slightly among the various geographic regions and are generally higher in Beirut. Family incomes are lower in women-headed households.

## Type, Size, and Nature of Enterprises

As a result of the predominance of the private sector in the Lebanese economy, the majority of working women are concentrated in this sector (74 percent). Furthermore, about 45 percent of working women are employed in small and medium-size enterprises, *i.e.*, with fewer than 50 workers. Except in regions where agriculture prevails, permanent employment is dominant over seasonal employment.

## Professional Status of Working Women

As is the case for 66 percent of the total Lebanese labor force, four out of five female workers are wage-earners. Self-employment is a more prominent feature in the areas of Bekaa and in North, and South Lebanon. It is also particularly linked to activities in the informal sector and is associated with small-scale enterprise development- especially interesting for women with low qualifications and educational level. This does not, however, undermine the importance of female workers who are "professionals" and thus self-employed, such as doctors or lawyers or engineers running their own businesses. Self-employment is associated with age, marital status, and educational level, in general, self-employed women are older, married or widowed, and, except for the professionals, have a low educational background. Female paid employees are concentrated in enterprises related to industry, transportation, education, health-care, and social work. As a result of the predominance of informal small-scale enterprises in women's self-employed economic activities, salary scales for paid employees are higher.

Professionals make up the highest proportion of the female labor force (24.6 percent); they include mainly education specialists, accountants and specialists in administration and law, and specialists in health sciences. A considerable segment of the female labor force is made up of middle-level employees (24.8 percent), including workers in the sector of education, and executive office and sales employees. The majority of administrative female employees are secretaries and



accountants, and most female service workers are housekeepers and low-level sales personnel in small shops. In addition, most women working in the sectors of education, health-care, and social work are professionals and middle-level employees, such as teachers, education specialists, and nurses.

Female educational background and professional status are interrelated; higher educational levels are prerequisites for female access to higher professional levels. The same applies to vocational education: the percentage of professional and middle-level female workers increases along with higher educational profiles. As professional levels decline, the prevalence of permanent irregular employment becomes more evident; for example, seasonal employment is highly associated with unskilled workers.

The majority of working women value the importance of education as a means to access employment in the labor market and as a prerequisite for promotions and higher income levels.

### *Salaries, Working Conditions and Allowances\*\**

About half of female workers earn monthly salaries ranging between LL300,000 and LL500,000 [\$195 and \$320], whereas only 11 percent earns more than LL1 million per month. Salary scales are higher in urban and peri-urban areas and are positively related to educational and professional levels.

Only one woman out of five works overtime hours. Most employers compensate overtime work with additional pay, but the study revealed that they do not adhere to the amount stipulated by the Lebanese labor law (overtime pay should be 1.5 times regular wage rates)

About four out of ten women work fewer than 33 hours per week. Employment hours are related to female's age, marital status, educational status, geographical location, professional level, and years of experience. Women tend to work more hours in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, and young women work more hours than older ones. Employment hours are found to be negatively associated with educational levels, professional status, and experience. Long work weeks are highly associated with the service industry and with skilled workers.

The majority of employers are found to adhere to the duration of the mandatory annual leave stipulated by the labor law; one third gives transportation allowance; and more than 35 percent of employees provide access to social security. Also, about eight out of ten women are satisfied with their working conditions. The availability of good working conditions varies according to geographical location and is best in urban and peri-urban areas and in the private sector. The availability and quality of acceptable working conditions are related to the size of enterprises and the salary level of working women.

### *Limitations and Constraints That Working Women Face*



The hardships most commonly reported by working women are low salaries, lack of promotion opportunities, and lack of benefits. The impact of the various constraints identified by working women differs according to geographical location. In rural areas limitations resulting from family pressure and gender are more pronounced, whereas limitations concerning the work itself (such as low salary scales) are more prevalent in urban areas. Married women face more limitations as a result of family pressure and related constraints. There is also an association between the primary constraints faced by working women and their educational level. As educational levels increase, the effect of factors such as family pressure and gender implications decreases, while other factors

such as promotion perspectives become more pronounced.

For Only 15 percent of working women gender has a negative effect on their access to employment opportunities. The negative effect of gender is more pronounced in rural areas, low income families, and families with a low educational background. Furthermore, higher female educational and professional levels and more years of experience decrease the impact of gender on the access to employment opportunities.

A minimal percentage of working women faces problems in their parents' / husband's acceptance of their work. The main reasons for their families' objection to work are: employment hours, gossip from the community, and the type of work. Family acceptance varies according to geographical location (higher in urban areas), marital status (higher for single females), and educational level of families (higher when parents' education is higher) and of the working woman herself. Families' acceptance of female work also depends on the contribution by the working women towards family expenses.

One of the constraints commonly faced by working women is availability of time. Since women carry multiple burdens and responsibilities, they face problems finding sufficient time for themselves and their families. About 40 percent does not find time for themselves, and a lesser number face constraints in finding sufficient time for their families. Time constraints are related to marital status, family income levels, and professional levels.

### *Consistency Between Qualifications and Employment*

The low level of consistency between qualifications and employment is an important limitation that affects workers' productivity and output. About 85 percent of women feels that their qualifications are totally consistent with their work. The status in work is found to be related to the consistency between qualifications and employment. It is expected that self-employed women show a higher degree of consistency between their education and qualifications. As educational levels increase, female expectations and ambitions are higher, and the degree of suitability of the job declines.

### *Attitudes and Perceptions*

The importance of gender as a criterion in the selection of work is confirmed by 43 percent of working women. The degree to which gender forms a primary consideration within this context varies according to geographical location, female educational level, family's educational background, status in work, and professional level.



### *Incentives for Female Employment*

The primary incentive for women's employment is economic need, followed by financial independence and self-esteem. "Difficult family economic conditions" and "salary scales" proved to be major reasons why women chose to work and in which fields. The correlation of employment to women education and aspirations was a determining factor in the selection of work for 39 percent of working women. The gender perception by women also proves to be an important factor in selecting the type of employment.

Primary incentives for women's work vary according to marital status. Financial need and the desire to increase family income are especially relevant to married, widowed, and divorced women. It is the most important factor for women who are heads of household. Other incentives, such as self-esteem, are found more among women in urban settings and among those with higher educational and professional levels.

Regardless of their background and educational level, mothers motivate their daughters to work. Parents' encouragement for female employment is related to marital status (higher for single females), female educational level (higher for higher female educational levels), and family education background. In general, as family income increases, so does family support for female work. Husbands' encouragement for female work is directly linked to income levels and to the percentage of income spent on family expenses. As the wives share in family expenses increases, so does the husbands' encouragement.

### *Financial Independence and Share in Family Income*

Empowering women and mainstreaming them within



## Decision-Making

About 63 percent of working women does not associate work with changes in family attitudes, especially respect to decision-making. The effect of female employment on decision-making is associated with female educational level, income level, and participation in family expenses. As expected, women with higher educational and income levels are better equipped to break the male-dominated "authority" process within the family.

## Family Responsibilities

Employment as a means for altering family roles is not very evident. The study revealed that one out of two working women is primarily responsible for family chores, as compared to only 0.2 percent of husbands. The primary responsibility of child-care still rests with women even if they work. The burden of household duties

is mostly felt by working women with low educational levels. As the educational level of women increases, so do their income levels, allowing them to hire paid help for assisting in household chores. The major problem is that women are being encouraged to enter the labor market and to become income-generating members of their communities without being offered any assistance to handle their increased responsibilities. Husbands expect their working wives to contribute and share in family expenses, but they are not willing to participate in the other duties that burden these women.

decision-making positions begins with gender economic mainstreaming as a means towards financial independence. However, due to cultural and sociological barriers, only one out of three working women has established the link between their work and financial independence. Many variables are involved, including marital status, educational level, professional level, and income level. As educational levels are higher, professional and income levels are higher, and employment as a means of financial independence becomes more important. The factor of financial independence is also linked to the percentage share of working women in family expenses. As this share increases, women feel that they do not own their incomes, thus their satisfaction with the financial rewards for their work diminishes.

Most working women contribute more than 75 percent of their income to the family budget. The woman's participation in family expenses is a factor of marital status (lowest for single women), family size (as the number of dependents increases, so does the female contribution to family income), and family income (as the family income increases, the percentage of the working woman's contribution to family expenses decreases). The contribution to the family budget is also linked to the educational level of the working woman. Higher educational levels imply greater freedom of action on the part of the working woman, especially in issues related to income and expenditure. It also appears that women with higher educational levels feel more secure and financially independent than those who only work for financial reasons, i.e., to support their families.

References:

\* This study was conducted by the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World of the Lebanese American University. The sample of working women was extracted from the base sample used by the Ministry of Social Affairs and UNFPA in conducting the "Population and Household Sample Survey". The sample was consisted of 2,112 working women and 480 employers of women. The study took place over a period of ten months.

\*\* Within the context of this study, allowances are defined as including annual leave, sick leave, maternity leave, transportation allowances, social security, private insurance, bonuses, loans, education allowances, and the availability of day-care centers for children of female employees. Working conditions include comfortable seating, ventilation, lighting, bathrooms, rest places, drinking water, first aid, fire safety procedures, and cooling and heating.