

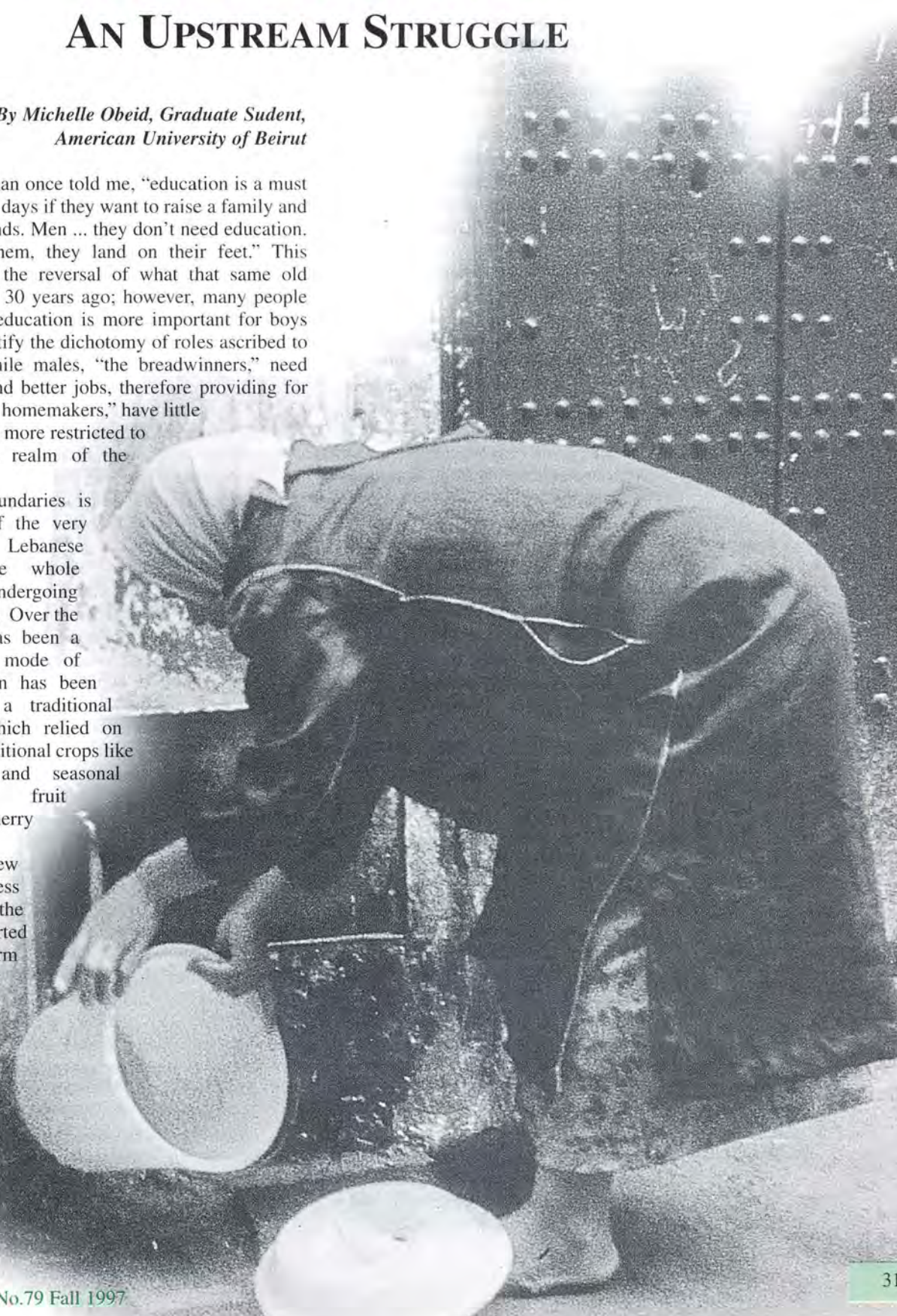
PURSuing DREAMS ... AN UPSTREAM STRUGGLE

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A 70 year old woman once told me, "education is a must for women these days if they want to raise a family and help their husbands. Men ... they don't need education. Wherever you throw them, they land on their feet." This statement seems to be the reversal of what that same old woman might have said 30 years ago; however, many people today still believe that education is more important for boys than girls in order to justify the dichotomy of roles ascribed to males and females. While males, "the breadwinners," need education in order to find better jobs, therefore providing for the family, females, "the homemakers," have little need for it since they are more restricted to the private space, the realm of the household.

A shift in boundaries is taking place in one of the very remote villages of the Lebanese Northern Beqaa. The whole village of Irsal is undergoing change on several levels. Over the past 30 years, there has been a major change in the mode of agriculture. A transition has been taking place from a traditional agropastoral system which relied on small scale farming (traditional crops like wheat and barley) and seasonal transhumance to fruit production, mainly cherry and apricot.

Since the new mode of agriculture is less time consuming than the former, villagers started opting for new off-farm income generating activities. A survey carried out in Irsal by the American University of Beirut in 1996 showed that fruit production, is the type of economic activity in the village followed by quarrying and jobs



related to it, military service in the Lebanese army, and finally agropastoral agriculture.¹

As a result, all conventional farm activities (ploughing, chemical spraying and harvesting) which had once consumed all the time of women involved in agriculture require now no more than two to three months per year. Thus, the image of rural women being engaged in on-farm activities all year long is no longer representative.

In response to these transitions, new roles have been assigned to women without, however, relinquishing the traditional ones. Thus, Irsal is a community which has ascribed a new value for education without renouncing the traditional roles expected of women. In this context, it is interesting to explore the self-perception of women with university or college education, who desire ambitiously (perhaps too ambitiously) to break away, yet find themselves entrapped in restrictive norms and traditions dictated by their culture.

There are ten schools in Irsal which are not enough for a population estimated at 32,000. Thus people send their children to schools outside the village. I spent four months in Irsal, in the summer of 1997, doing research. I had the opportunity to discuss the problem of education with both young men and women; however, I will only portray the views

expressed by women who are generally more restricted by cultural values. If they perceive higher education as an extremely essential asset, they encounter several intertwined and endemic problems that thwart many of their plans and aspirations.

The women I have interviewed are all currently registered at the Lebanese University in Zahleh, which is the closest university to Irsal. Clearly, the remoteness of Irsal forbids them from attending university on a regular or daily bases. Transportation costs approximately 200,000 LL. a month. This in itself constrains them in the choice of an academic specialization since they are compelled by virtue of their deficient financial resources to select an academic program that does not require daily attendance. Hence, they are inclined to pursue subject matters that do not really interest them such as Arabic Literature, Philosophy or Geography.

Since they are not bound by daily attendance of classes, Irsali university students are deprived of the privilege of being full and carefree college students. Instead of

being reduced to doing nothing in the idle winter season, many seek jobs. In a focused group discussion which I held with five university women whose ages range between 23 and 27, only one was a full time student. Three were school teachers and one was a secretary in a non governmental organization in the village. The jobs they held made their academic life even more difficult as studying was almost impossible:

I teach all year long. I have 40 students to worry about. For example, I come back home and I stay up all night correcting homeworks. One time I woke up suddenly and asked myself where I was. Then I realized that I had fallen asleep over a student's copybook. This is a burden for me. (Jamila,² 1997).

Jamila is hurt that her father keeps comparing her to her friend Nahla who does not have a job:

If I ever fail a subject, my father jumps to the conclusion that Nahla is more intelligent. He does not see that she has the luxury of reading all winter. She is psychologically relaxed. It does not occur to him that his daughter, for example, is tired and that she goes out to work in order to help him. He blames me (Jamila, 1997).

College students in Irsal are not only denied the expected and normal routine of attendance but also compelled to negotiate and compromise their time to comply with non-academic obligations. Because they are busy during the winter season, they are forced to sit for their exams during the make up sessions, that is in September. Hence, their most intensive study period coincides with the most active season of harvest, preparation of foodstuff for winter and other household chores they are expected to perform.

They all agreed that perhaps the fundamental problem which aggravates all the other difficulties they encounter are the restrictive norms and traditions Irsali women are entrapped in. There is a conflict between their desire for education, and for careers, and the gloomy prospects of marriage and domestic duties. Even if their parents believe in the value of education, the messages they often receive from them underlie other priorities:

Listen, our parents, for a very long time, have had certain traditions and norms which they very much preserve. Parents tell their daughters: You want to go all the way from here to Zahleh to attend a class instead of learning to become a good housewife. No matter how much education you acquire, you will end up at home [a housewife] ... In summer, my studies are always interrupted by my mother, 'Fatima, why are you sitting there doing nothing, come and help in the harvest.' 'Mother I have a degree to worry about.' 'Degree, what good would the degree do

Even though parents appreciate the value of education certain household duties cannot be ignored even if at the expense of a university degree.

you?" (Fatima, 1997).

Even though parents appreciate the value of education, there are certain household duties which cannot be ignored, even if at the expense of a university degree:

I am the only daughter in the house. I am in charge of everything. I did not ask for these responsibilities, they have been imposed on me ... For example, I clean the house before I start reading ... I do everything, sweeping the floor and wiping it, washing the dishes, washing clothes, cooking ... As soon as I finish I am exhausted. By then I don't have the energy to look at the book let alone memorize a word. How do they expect me to pass? (Zahra, 1997).

The women asserted that if only the parents and the community were less rigid, they would be able to accomplish many things. The five of them would have gone to Beirut or maybe Syria in order to pursue their studies:

I have a plan in mind. I have ambitions. But these are suppressed by reality because nothing can be accomplished. For example, I want to do something, I want to be an engineer. There is no engineering school in Zahle. My parents would not allow me to go to Beirut. I am forced in spite of myself to major in Psychology. I hate it. In our society we cannot realize the dreams we desire, for the prevailing restrictions destroy all our aspirations. (Fatima, 1997).

As a result of these conditions, university years drag on and on. Some students have been enrolled for more than three years, but they are still in the first year. This is reinforced by the lack of job opportunities. The village is flooded with school teachers. An educated person has no choice but to teach in one of the schools, even if he/she does not like doing so. Since girls are seldom allowed to take jobs outside the village circle, the alternative would be sitting idle and relying on one's brother or father for pocket money. Jamila, though, insists on earning her own living rather than end up a burden on her brother:

I make 200,000 LL. from private lessons. Why should I ask my brother for money. Even if he cares about me, tomorrow he will get married and nobody will care for anybody. Each person should take care of him/herself.

Aside from the above limitations, girls reach a stage where the community starts pressing them to marry. This is when a great dilemma starts taking place. The girls' self perception is quite positive. They see themselves as educated, motivated people with bright futures ahead; however, "old maids" have no place in their community, and they have to face up to the harsh reality of growing up and having to take steps

they had not necessarily anticipated. Jamila told me once that she would not surrender to the pressures because she was not just any girl. She is educated and wants to be independent. She is a philosophy student and a high school teacher and is quite capable of building her own future. She went as far as rejecting a suitor simply because she was not in love with him. By the end of my stay, I heard that she got engaged to that same person she had rejected. In the group discussion she admitted the following:

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Whenever I sit alone and reflect, I ask myself: what have I done? Why did I accept him? By God, by the Prophet, I can't believe I did this to myself. I am trying to convince myself, I am trying. I just want to live a comfortable life ... I am not happy with him. We are incompatible.

College women in Irsal remain victims of norms and socio-cultural expectations. While there is a strong tendency to educate women, education remains a secondary issue when it comes to other priorities. There is also a manifest ambivalence in the intrinsic value of college education when pitted against the prospect of marriage and domesticity. When the women are released from these normative constraints, they all fantasize or at least consider pursuing their education away from home. Some women are strong and are willing to fight. Others, unfortunately, find it difficult to "go against the current" and hence opt for the easy way out and give in to social pressures.

When I asked Jamila why she accepted her incompatible suitor, her reply was:

I am now 23 years old. No one is asking for my hand. They all prefer my younger sisters. Tomorrow my brothers will marry and I will stay at home only to serve their wives. Instead of struggling with my mother and my brother and my father, I'd rather struggle with myself. I will struggle with him [fiancé] and he will struggle with me.

ENDNOTES:

1 Darwish, M.R., Hamadeh, S., Sharara, M. & Baalbaki, A. (1997). "Economic Assessment of Land Use Shifts in Dry Land: The Case Study of Irsal, Lebanon." Unpublished paper, prepared for the DRMP workshop in Cairo, Egypt. Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences. American University of Beirut, Lebanon.

2 The names used are pseudonyms since the information passed on to me was done in strict confidentiality.