

Armenian Women In Jordan

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Armenians are among the smallest ethnic minorities in Jordan and have been in the country for a fairly long period of time. This paper will deal mainly with the position and role of Armenian women in Jordanian society by reviewing their general characteristics, social and economic status (based on data from a recent study about Armenians in Jordan), using indicators that reflect their position and role in the concerned areas from a gendered perspective.

Jordan

Jordan is located in south-west Asia, east of the Mediterranean Sea. The population has increased since the 1950's due to high natural growth rates and external forced migration, and is estimated to be around 4.900 million. The majority of the population are Arab Muslims, who make up about 95% of the population; Arab Christians make up most of the rest. However, there are also a number of (non – Arab – Muslim) ethnic minorities such as the Circassians, the Chechens, Druzes, Turkomans and Bahai's, as well as a small minority of Armenian Christians. Together all ethnic minority groups make up about 2% of the total population of Jordan. In spite of Jordan's general interest in collecting data about its population, there is no specific information on minority groups. The official argument for not collecting this data is that they are considered Jordanian citizens and

thus treated like all other Jordanians. The existing studies on Armenians in Jordan are very limited, and are mostly historical articles which focus upon the "Armenian Question" and their migration to the Arab world. The first sociological study of the Armenian community in Jordan was done recently by this author in an unpublished MA thesis, which explored their demographic, social and economic characteristics. It also sought to examine the extent to which Armenians have preserved their identity, as well as the extent of their cultural, social, economic, and political assimilation (integration) into broader Jordanian society.

The Armenians in Jordan

1. Historical Background and Migration:

The Jordanian Armenians originally lived in the southern Caucasus between Turkey, Iran and the Soviet Union. They were under Ottoman rule from the 16th century until World War I. Armenians were treated as second class citizens of the empire until their virtual elimination in 1915, when the Armenian homeland in Turkey was reduced to a wasteland and they were subjected to successive massacres by the Turks. There were several migrations throughout these difficult times. Those Armenians that arrived in Jordan migrated there after the First World War. Most Armenian refugees settled in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine; a few made their

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way to Transjordan. However, after the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967, a large number of Armenians left the West Bank and moved to Jordan. (During the sixties, many Armenians migrated to Canada, Australia and the US). According to Armenian sources, the estimated number of Armenians who now live in Jordan is around 3000. The majority of them live in Amman Governorate; a few are distributed throughout the other cities of Jordan. Upon their arrival in Jordan, the Armenians started building their own institutions. They now have their own churches, schools, clubs and charitable societies. The activities of their institutions and the fact that they marry within their own ethnic groups (NB: not with close relatives), helped the Armenians to maintain and preserve their ethnic identity. To some extent, Armenians were also able to integrate into social, economic and political life in Jordan, and consider themselves to be Jordanians by nationality.

2. General Characteristics of Armenian Women

According to the Jordanian constitution, all Jordanians are equal before the law and have the right to assume public office and the right to work. Women were given the right to vote and the right to run for general elections as of 1974. Various laws and regulations safeguard the equal rights of women and protect them against discrimination. However, there is still a gap between the law and its practical implementation. This means that women still suffer from discrimination to a large extent.

Women in Jordan have achieved some progress in a number of spheres and efforts have been made in order to enhance their participation in positions of power and decision making. However, the influence of women in the political, economic and social fields remains limited. Armenian women in Jordan are no exception; their position in society is similar to that of Arab Jordanian women. Female Armenian participation in the various fields of public life is still limited, as will be examined below.

The following information is taken from results of the MA thesis mentioned above, and was based on questionnaires distributed to 213 Armenian families who live in various parts of Amman. Questionnaires were completed by the women's husbands.

Age Composition

Age is an important factor in all demographic studies. The data collected for this study showed that there are disparities between the age distribution among Armenian women and Jordanian women in general. There are fewer Armenians represented in the lower age groups (20 – 29) and more represented in the higher age groups (40 – 50) than is typical for Jordanian society as a whole. These differences are the result of the rate of fertility among

Armenian women, who have fewer children than the population as a whole. Thus, the average size of the Armenian family is smaller than the average size of the Arab Jordanian family.

Age at First Marriage

Age at first marriage is an important factor affecting levels of fertility and is determined by demographic, economic, and socio-cultural factors.

It was found that 89.7% of Armenian women were married by the age 20 – 29 and 9.4% were married by the age 30 – 39. This indicates that Armenian women marry at a later age than do Arab Jordanian women. This affects the fertility rate among Armenian women and it was found that the maximum number of children of an Armenian woman did not exceed four.

Level of Education

Level of education refers to the highest level of schooling completed by an individual. The study revealed that the percentage of illiteracy among the Armenian women is lower than the percentage of illiteracy among men; 2.3% among husbands and 0.09% among wives. The study showed that more than half of Armenian women have an education that ranges between secondary and college, and almost a quarter of them have university degrees. However, those husbands who do have degrees in higher education have degrees that are somewhat higher than their wives, although their overall education levels are similar. These results demonstrate that Armenian husbands tend to marry wives of a similar educational background. It also indicates that Armenians are aware of the importance that education plays for both men and women in achieving progress in life. It is recognized that there is a strong correlation between a female's educational level and her employment success.

Marital Status

According to the above mentioned study, most Armenians are married. According to church records, divorce rates among Armenians are limited. There are different forms of betrothal among Armenians who live in a traditional society such as in Jordan. The data indicated that 63.4% of Armenian marriages were arranged by spouses with parental consent and approval, and about a third of the marriages were arranged traditionally by parents with the spouses' consent. This means that Armenians have been affected by modernization because it seems that a large percentage of them have the freedom to choose their marriage partners.

Another important issue in marriage behavior is the relationship between the husband and wife; considering that this is an important factor for any minority attempting to maintain its identity. The study revealed that individuals

tend to marry within the same group, though only 8.9% of the sample were married to someone from the same family, e.g. a close relative such as a cousin. The findings also showed that 10.3% of all males were married to non-Armenians (mostly to Arab women). This indicates that there is a low level of marital integration (mixed marriages) of Armenians in Jordanian society. However, there is also a tendency among Armenian women to marry Arab men. Being an Armenian myself, I know of some of those cases personally though the exact numbers are not a matter of record because the Armenian church does not keep files on marriages carried out in Arab churches. An increased number of mixed marriages between Armenians and the general population can be expected in the future, especially if the degree of social integration increases, particularly among the younger generation.

Economic Situation

Certain key indicators reflect the economic situation of Armenian women, such as monthly family income (from all sources), type and location of residence, occupation, etc. After studying these indicators, it was ascertained that the average monthly income of the Armenian families in the study is higher than the average income of Arab families in Jordan. Most of them own the home they live in (house or apartment), and the areas they live in are considered to belong to the good housing areas in Amman.

Concerning the occupational independence of Armenian women and the rate of their participation in the labor force, the study showed that their position was no better than that of Arab-Jordanian women. 73.2% of them do not work outside the home (housewives); 26.8% have joined the labor force, largely in the private sector. This means that their husbands remain the breadwinners of the family, a situation typical of traditional cultures. The study also identified the types of professions they prefer, indicating that 13.2% of all Armenian women work in the educational professions, while 2.8% are doctors, engineers, and lab technicians. The same percentage (2.8%), have their own private business. The data presented above illustrates that the rate of Armenian female participation in the work force is still low, similar to the rate for the rest of the Jordanian female population. All women in Jordan suffer constraints that limit their economic participation in general, including the following: low female educational attainment, early marriage and high number of children, the economic recession, unemployment, religious, social and cultural influences, and above all the weak female representation in decision making bodies, especially the legislative and executive branches.

Political Participation

Jordanian women's participation in politics, whether in the parliament or in the executive branch of government, in

foreign affairs, or in local councils, is very low. With respect to Armenian women in this area, their participation is limited to voting in parliamentary elections, since their chances of winning as candidates is very low. This is largely due to the fact that Armenians do not have reserved seats in Parliament as do other ethnic minorities. This is because of their numerically limited size and that they are lumped together with the general Christian minority. Though they can run for the Christian seats, their numerical size discourages Armenians from running as candidates. However, there is no law that forbids them or prevents them from running for election if they so desire.

The government of Jordan has made a tremendous effort to encourage and increase Jordanian female political participation. A new law was passed recently, whereby women were given eight reserved seats in Parliament, and this law was implemented in June 2003 elections. Armenian woman made no attempt to mobilize in order to win one of these eight seats for the above mentioned reasons.

Summary

In conclusion, the position of Armenian woman is similar to that of Arab-Jordanian woman. Their role and rate of participation in the social, economic, and political spheres is still limited due to many social and economic constraints. They suffer from gender disparities which are mostly the result of income disparities. These are reflected in the following areas. First, the female rate of labor force participation is much lower than that of men; secondly, their work is limited to certain professions, mostly to education. However, a trend towards gender equity can be ascertained in many areas. First: In marriage behavior, for both men and women have the freedom to choose their marriage partner. Second: Both have access to education, and women's rate of illiteracy is lower than that of men. Third: The political participation of both men and women is limited to voting in parliamentary elections.

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