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Women's Employment in Lebanon and its Impact on their Status

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**Employment, Breadwinning and Women's Status:
The Case of Lebanon¹**

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Employment, Breadwinning and Women's Status: The Case of Lebanon

“It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice” (Simone de Beauvoir, cited in Fuchs, 1988).

Since the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's book “Le Deuxième Sexe” in 1949, women have followed her advice and have been more and more involved in “gainful employment”. With a few exceptions, the female share in the labor market has rapidly and substantially increased during the last two decades, as a result of the shift of female labor from the unpaid household and subsistence sector to the paid economy (United Nations, 1999). Whether this steady growth got translated, as de Beauvoir wishfully thought, into more “liberty” for women remains, however, to be seen.

A brief historical survey of women's involvement in the “production” process indicates that it has gone through a series of ups and downs. In this respect, Tilly and Scott (1987) distinguish between three phases:

- the “family economy”
- the “family wage economy” and
- the “family consumer economy”.

The “family economy” relates to that period of time when the workplace was the homeplace and in which all household members worked at productive tasks. It was characterized by “a small scale household organization of production and limited resources” (Ibid: 227). In this household setting of work, women had no problem coping with their domestic and productive activities. They were “both

producers and mothers”, allocating their time in a way that would promote the interests of the family economy.

As a result of industrialization, the “family economy”, gradually evolved into a “family wage economy” where the productive unit grew in size and moved out of the household. “As work, that is paid employment, moved out of the home, so did men” (Smith and Reid, 1986: 20). Women could not follow suit, as easily. They had, here again, to strike a fair balance between their reproductive and productive roles, especially that the latter entailed operating from outside the home. This led to the emergence of the “traditional” division of the three basic “work-family roles” (Pleck 1977) – namely earning income, domestic chores and childcare – in a very clear-cut manner: The man became the uncontested breadwinner and the woman became the homemaker.

This traditional division of labor was strongly supported on grounds of economic rationality and the collective nature of the household, by the proponents of the “new household economics”. Gary Becker in *A Treatise on the Family* (1991) states that: “Even small differences between men and women – presumably related at least partially to the advantages of women in the birth and rearing of children – would cause a division of labor by gender, with wives more specialized to household activities and husbands more specialized to other work... Even if a husband and wife are intrinsically identical, they gain from a division of labor between market and household activities, with one of them specializing more in market activities and the other specializing more in household activities (pp.3 and 4). Thus, women’s place was limited to the home. They could rely on the financial support of their fathers as long as they were living under his roof and on their husbands after marriage. One of the main indices of a successful man, of a good breadwinner was “a homemaker wife who devoted herself full-time to her family”. (Matthaei, cited in Smith and Reid, 1987: 22). Poor wives found it very difficult, if not impossible to comply with this sex-role stereotyped model.

As a result, married women joined the labor market only when there was a pressing economic need for it, during periods of family crisis. This participation led to a conflict between the two components in the concept of roles, namely “expectations or norms” on one hand – the women’s place is at home - and “conduct or actual behavior” on the other – namely, more married women in the labor force. (Bernad, 1976).

Technological changes and the ensuing increase in productivity led to higher men’s wages and an improvement in the standard of living of their families. The “family wage economy” mutated into a “family consumer economy” in which “households specialized in reproduction and consumption” (Tilly and Scott, 1987: 229).

After World War II, the prevailing economic conditions and the growth of the tertiary sector – with its flexible working conditions and its greater opportunities for part-time work – led to a substantial increase in the number of women joining the labor force.

Thus “the historical record shows a U-shaped pattern of female productive activity from relatively high in the pre-industrial household economy to a lower level in industrial economies, to a higher level with the development of the modern tertiary sector” (Ibid.).

Now that two-income families have become quite a common feature what has happened to the traditional division of roles? Does women’s remunerated work necessarily imply that they are assuming, if not totally, at least partially, the “breadwinner” role? The answer to this question is definitely not a straightforward one. Available evidence seems to indicate that no major changes have taken place in much of the world. Actually, what Smith and Reid coined as the “quasi-traditional” division of roles seems to be prevailing, whereby women with full-time jobs outside the home still carry the brunt of childcare and domestic chores inside the home. The latest available figures indicate that the average time allocated by females to market activities in selected developing countries represent

34%, compared to 76% for males, while in non-market activities the percentages are 64 and 24 respectively (UNDP, 1999).

Many interpretations of this phenomenon have been advanced among which one could mention the “stronger predilection of women for housework, as suggested by Becker, the concept of “maternal altruism”, as elaborated by Whitehead and “domesticity” as defined by Willams (Kabeer, 2000).

Has the history of the Lebanese woman in the labor market followed more or less the same paths? To what extent did her involvement in the labor force affect the division of roles within her family? Consequently what was the impact of her remunerated work on her status? These are basically the questions, which will be addressed in this paper. Before answering them a word of warning is, however, necessary. Despite the fact that Lebanon is a very small country, it is difficult to talk about the Lebanese woman. There is no Lebanese woman stereotype. The Lebanese women range between two extremes: the illiterate, conservative and highly traditional one and the highly educated, sophisticated and westernized one; with different attitudes and vision regarding women’s role and status in society.

The Lebanese Woman and Employment

In the present context, employment refers to work for pay or in anticipation of profit, rather than the other alternative definition given in the Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, namely “an activity in which one engages and employs his time and energy”, illustrated by a quotation from Rachel Henning (a woman of course!): “her baby will give her employment enough”.

The involvement of the Lebanese woman in the labor market could be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, when many Lebanese women mostly uneducated and in need, started working in the silk industry and as househelps. The most purposive and courageous ones among them emigrated on their own to the United States of America where they worked in factories, leaving

their husbands and children behind, and this after the famine that plagued Lebanon following World War I. A similar movement was witnessed in the 1930s when young female university graduates went to Iraq and Palestine seeking work in schools, with the purpose of collecting enough money to pursue their graduate studies abroad.

These activities outside the familial set-up implied a certain independence, which was not admitted in the social context, but was necessary given the pressing economic needs. Sewing was considered an attractive and socially accepted profession and was practiced by many women, because it could be done at home and did not, therefore, conflict with what was considered women's most important role, namely homemaking.

The case was different for the educated and well-to-do Lebanese women who did not have to worry about earning a living. They were active not only at the social level but got also involved in the public space through the associations they founded. These women's associations were of great help to working women, as evidenced by the creation in the 1920's of the "Cooperation Club" in Beirut, a club specifically designed to serve as a meeting place for women of different social backgrounds and as a home for the young women working in the Beirut factories, (Proceedings of the 4th Women's Conference in Beirut, 1931). It is also worth noting that these women, although not economically active, were interested through their various associations, in improving the economic conditions prevailing in Lebanon at the time and this by encouraging, improving and protecting domestic production. Economic issues were thoroughly examined and discussed during their meetings and solutions were invariably suggested to the government. The 1931 Women's Conference, for instance, recommended the creation of a committee to examine, with the help of economists, the level of domestic production of textiles and its adequacy to meet local demand. It was agreed that if it proved adequate, the committee would ask the government to

impose higher customs duties on the importation of commodities that could compete with domestic output.

Thus, prior to independence in 1943, women in Lebanon could be grouped under three broad categories:

- the economically active ones, who had to work out of necessity rather than choice;
- the well-to-do and educated ones who did not need to work but were seriously involved in non-remunerated social work and in the formulation of policy suggestions both at the economic and social levels and,
- a critical mass of women who abided religiously by the traditional role defined for them as housewives and mothers. (Khalaf, 1993).

How has the situation of Lebanese women in the labor market evolved since then, in the light of the 15-year civil strife and the ensuing economic recession of a magnitude never encountered before?

Prior to the outbreak of the war in 1975, Lebanon was characterized by an open and growing economy, with a strong currency associated with low foreign debt, limited budget deficits, surpluses in the balance of payments, high levels of employment, as well as efficient service and banking sectors which catered for the whole Arab region.

As a result of the war, a decline in economic growth, a fall in real tax revenues, a rising public debt and a sharp drop in the purchasing power of the Lebanese pound and its foreign exchange rate were witnessed. The war resulted also in an almost complete destruction of the basic infrastructure and services in the country. Disparities in income and social deprivation, which prevailed prior to the war, were exacerbated. As a result, real per capita income fell, income from labor dropped and a substantial redistribution of income against wages and in favor of profits was registered. Massive internal and external migration took place because of security and economic reasons, leading in the case of internal migration to social dislocation, and in the case of external migration to the loss of Lebanon's major

asset, namely human capital. It is estimated that 22.5% of the 1991 Lebanese resident population was displaced, excluding voluntary internal migration.

Despite the end of hostilities a decade ago, Lebanon has not succeeded in reversing the negative economic trends it has been facing over the last twenty five years. As the last report of the International Monetary Fund mission (July 2001) indicates, the situation is deteriorating further and at a fast pace:

“Over the past few years, real GDP growth has slowed down in the context of an erosion of external competitiveness, the government deficits have soared and the public debt ratio has risen to a level exceptional by both international and historical standards... The rate of growth of bank deposits has steadily declined, to the point where the commercial banks no longer have enough new resources to cover the domestic financing needs of the government... The fiscal deficit in 2001 is estimated at 22.8% of GDP... The gross public debt is projected to increase from 153% to GDP at end 2000 to 176% of GDP at end 2001. (International Monetary Fund, 2001).

This disheartening macroeconomic situation had severe repercussions at the level of the microeconomic unit of analysis we are examining, namely the household, and more specifically on the role of women within it. As indicated earlier, Lebanese women have joined the labor market basically because of economic need and at no time before in Lebanon’s modern history has economic need been so dire.

Female employment statistics in Lebanon are characterized by wide gaps and different methodological approaches in data collection which renders trend analysis quite difficult. The first official survey of the Lebanese labor force was carried out by the Central Directorate of Statistics in 1970. The second one, was undertaken twenty five years later (1995) by the Ministry of Social Affairs in cooperation with the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), to be followed by a third one in 1997 by the Central Directorate of Statistics. Significant discrepancies between the results of these last two surveys in matters as

basic as the size of the Lebanese population, clearly indicate that the available statistical data are only suggestive.

A steady increase in the rate of economically active Lebanese women has been witnessed between 1970 and 1997 (Table 1); if one is to take into account that the 1993 figures are based on a study carried out by the Université Saint-Joseph and where probably different survey methods were used. This increase has essentially been registered in the 25-29 year age bracket, reaching almost 32% in 1997. In fact, the over-all rate of growth would have been more significant, had it not been for the low level of economic participation in the older age brackets where the impact of norms and traditions is obviously much greater; coupled with the fact that women tend to leave their work after marriage or the birth of their first child.

Table 1.
Economically Active Lebanese Women by Age
1970 – 1997 (%)

Age	1970	1986	1993	1995	1997
15-19	14.8	9.4	9.3	6.4	5.4
20-24	23.6	20.2	31.5	23.8	23.4
25-29	20.3	25.3	37.9	31.1	31.9
30-34	16.1	21.6	30.6	26.7	27.0
35-39	13.6	16.7	28.1	25.4	25.3
40-44	13.2	13.2	23.4	23.2	24.8
45-49	11.8	9.7	17.8	19.5	17.8
50-54	9.9	8.9	15.1	13.3	14.0
55-59	7.1	5.7	10.4	10.6	12.4
60-64	8.2	4.3	6.1	7.8	7.9
65 & above	4.0	2.4	3.4	2.9	3.0
15 & above	14.3	14.6	21.8	18.5	17.7

Source: Comité National de la Femme, (1998). *La Femme Libanaise 1996-1997, Chiffres et Sens.*

If one compares the 1970 and the 1997 figures, one notices that in all age brackets – with the exception of the first and last two - and all of the five surveys undertaken, women have become more economically active with the greatest increase being registered in the 35-39 year bracket.

In addition, while in 1970, the decrease in the rate of activity started as of the age of 25, this rate did not drop until the age of 30 in 1997 which could be

explained by economic need on one hand, and a rise in the average age of marriage among women from 23.7 years in 1970 to 28.1 years in 1997, on the other (Comité National de la Femme, 1998).

This is particularly striking in the Employment Office's *Statistical Survey on Industrial and Commercial Enterprises* (2000), where 56.2% of the females employed in these enterprises are single, compared to 31.7% only of the males. The rates are particularly high in the 25-29 year and the 30-34 year age brackets (69.4% and 51.5% respectively).

Table 2
Celibacy Rate by Age and Gender
(%)

Age	Males	Females	Undetermined	Total
< 25	88.2	88.4		88.1
25-29	65.2	69.4		66.9
30-34	32.5	51.5		39.9
35-39	15.8	44.1		26.0
40-44	7.7	38.3		16.9
45-49	5.3	32.1		12.8
50-59	5.2	34.5		12.2
> 60	5.0	36.7		10.2
No answer	35.8	54.3	12.9	38.1
Total	31.7	56.2	12.9	39.9

Source: The Lebanese Republic, National Employment Office in cooperation with ILO and UNDP (2000). *Results of the Statistical Survey on Industrial and Commercial Enterprises, 1999.*

This is also substantiated by the prevailing trends over the 1990-1997 period where despite a greater increase in the enrollment of married women over the period under consideration (7.9% in 1970 compared to 11.4% in 1997), they still represent less than 40% of the economically active single women.

Table 3
Economically Active Women by Age and Marital Status
%

Age	Single				Married			
	1970	1985	1993	1997	1970	1985	1993	1997
20-24	39.4	30.4	39.3	28.4	6.8	5.6	7.6	7.5
25-29	51.9	50.3	67.1	52	8.9	10.4	10.4	10.9

30-34	48	53	66.5	56.3	9.9	12.8	14.9	12.9
35-39	36.3	48.2	68.1	56.6	9.6	10.8	17.8	15.4
40-44	40.2	40.7	61.1	52.3	9	8.8	17	18.5
45-49	36.9	34	48.3	51	8.4	5.4	13.2	12.9
50-54	26	37.6	41.4	40.6	7.2	5	11.2	10.2
55-59	28.4	27.7	43.8	43.2	5.5	3	7	8.4
60-64	29.9	22.2	22.6	27	5.4	2.1	3.6	4.8.
15 & above	28.4	25.9	36.5	28.7	7.9	7.6)	11.9	11.4

Source: Comité National de la Femme, (1998). *La Femme Libanaise 1996-1997, Chiffres et Sens*.

Economic need seems, however, to be the driving force behind the growth in the Lebanese women’s participation in the labor market. This is clearly apparent in the results of three studies that have been undertaken, one by the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University on the female labor force in Lebanon, and two others – one in the ready-made cloth industry (Khalaf, 1998) and the other in the banking sector (Khalaf, in progress). The Institute’s study indicates that the highest incentive for female work is economic need (35%) compared to 81% in the ready-made cloth industry and 49% in the banking sector.

It is important to note also here that despite the prevailing recession, women’s enrollment in the labor force seems to have significantly increased as indicated in the 1999 *Statistical Survey on Industrial and Commercial Enterprises* of the Employment Office, when compared to the 1997 survey: Females represent 34.8% of the total number of workers employed compared to 27.8% only in the 1997 study. This could be partly explained by the change witnessed in the statistical base used as far as the enterprises are concerned, and the migration of young men seeking better working opportunities abroad. But these possible explanations do not negate the fact that Lebanese women seem to be more and more “attached” to the labor force in terms of full-time work and on a more permanent basis (Smith and Reid, 1986).

Table 4
Distribution of Employees by Age and Gender
(%)

Age	Males	Females	Undetermined	Total
< 25	6.6	5.2	0.0	11.8
25-29	10.0	7.3	0.0	17.2
30-34	10.0	6.3	0.0	16.3
35-39	8.9	5.0	0.0	13.9
40-44	7.2	3.1	0.0	10.4
45-49	5.6	2.2	0.0	7.8
50-59	6.9	2.2	0.0	9.1
> 60	3.4	0.7	0.0	4.1
No answer	5.1	2.9	1.4	9.3
Total	63.7	34.8	1.4	100.0

Source: The Lebanese Republic, National Employment Office in cooperation with ILO and UNDP (2000). *Results of the Statistical Survey on Industrial and Commercial Enterprises, 1999.*

Another positive variable to be accounted for is the level of education of the Lebanese women. During the academic year 1999-2000, they represented 53.2% of students enrolled in universities and institutions of higher learning and 52.4% of these establishments' graduates (The Lebanese Republic, Ministry of Education and Higher Learning, 2001). This is clearly reflected in the level of education of the working ones among them, as illustrated in Table 5, which indicates substantial discrepancies between males and females in favor of the latter, at the secondary and university levels.

Table 5
Distribution of Employees by Educational Level and Gender
(%)

Educational Level	Males	Females	Total
Illiterate or below elementary	3.4	1.6	2.8

Elementary	18.6	7.0	14.3
Intermediate	18.2	13.5	16.3
Secondary general	13.5	28.2	18.4
Secondary technical	5.3	8.3	6.3
Technical high level	2.1	3.2	2.5
University	19.9	27.3	22.2
No answer	19.0	10.9	17.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: The Lebanese Republic, National Employment Office in cooperation with ILO and UNDP (2000). *Results of the Statistical Survey on Industrial and Commercial Enterprises, 1999*.

It is interesting to note also that the husband's profession has a significant impact on the level of economic activity of his wife; while the average rate of economic activity of married women in the 25-44 year age bracket is of 14.4%, it is of 35.6% for the spouses of men exercising a scientific or liberal profession (Comité National de la Femme 1998).

Table 6
Economic Activity Rates of Lebanese Married Women
in Relation to their Husband's Profession
1997 (%)

Husband's Profession	Age in 1997	
	25 – 44	45 - 59
Military	7.7	2.7
High management, owner of business enterprise	16.7	9.7
Liberal or scientific profession	35.6	27.4
Middle management	22.0	18.8
Administrative employee	20.4	18.2
Employee in the services sector	14.2	12.6

Agriculturist	5.5	7.1
Skilled laborer	9.9	6.1
Machine and equipment driver	8.6	3.8
Unskilled laborer	6.9	8.1

Source: Comité National de la Femme, (1998). *La Femme Libanaise 1996-1997, Chiffres et Sens.*

Actually over 27 years, a spectacular change occurred in the level of education of working women, where the illiteracy rate among them dropped from 40.6% in 1970 to 7.1% in 1997, while that of university graduates increased from 3.4% to 29.6% for the same years (Comité National de la Femme, 1998).

This improvement in the educational level of working women got translated into:

1. an increase in their representation in the higher echelons of the enterprises (25% in the high management and directorship ranks, and more than 50% in the specialists' ranks);
2. a decrease in the percentages of unskilled female laborers in middle positions, and
3. a substantial improvement in their wages which have become almost equivalent to those of men (96.9%) in the industrial and commercial enterprises surveyed (The Lebanese Republic, National Employment Office in cooperation with ILO and UNDP, 2000). Discrepancies persist, however, particularly in the top administrative positions, as indicated in the following table.

Table 7
Basic Average Monthly Salary by Occupational Status
And Gender ('000LL)

Occupational Status	Males	Females	Total
- Directors and high management	1590.7	1008.3	1404.1
- Managers	1363.7	1042.2	1233.4
-Health specialists	801.3	775.0	784.0
- Education specialists	998.1	838.6	896.6
- Other specialists	1306.6	941.2	1190.2
- Intermediate professions in physical and technical sciences	761.9	599.1	729.2

- Intermediate professions in health sciences	547.4	473.1	491.3
- Intermediate professions in education	660.3	605.7	613.9
- Other intermediate professions	804.3	766.5	784.6
- Administrative employees	655.9	564.9	599.5
- Individual service and security personnel	545.3	480.2	524.2
- Salesperson, product promoter	566.8	467.3	531.8
- Skilled laborer	556.9	478.2	549.3
- Machine and equipment driver	489.3	413.1	484.5
- Unskilled laborer in the services sector	427.0	410.4	422.8
- Unskilled laborer	425.1	312.7	413.6
Total	668.6	647.7	660.3

Source: The Lebanese Republic, National Employment Office in cooperation with ILO and UNDP (2000). *Results of the Statistical Survey on Industrial Commercial Enterprises, 1999*.

It should be noted here that the economically active Lebanese women cluster essentially in the services sector where they occupy 60% of the jobs available (Commission Nationale de la Femme, 1998). They work essentially in large enterprises, where their number is more than double that of those engaged in small enterprises.

In the light of the above, the Lebanese working woman: is young, single and well educated; she works in private large size enterprises and is essentially drawn to work by economic need.

The Lebanese Woman and the Division of Roles Within the Family

To what extent has the Lebanese woman's involvement in the labor force affected the traditional distribution of roles within the family? Has there been a redistribution of these roles or a mere extension of women's roles to encompass both the homemaker and the breadwinner roles? The answer to these questions will be drawn basically from the two studies mentioned earlier, namely, women in the ready-made cloth industry and women in the banking sector.

However, it is important, before doing so, to agree on a definition of bread-winning. According to Potuchek, (1997), "breadwinning is not synonymous with

paid employment. The breadwinner has a duty to work and leaving the labor force (even temporarily) is not an option... Breadwinning is not just a matter of behavior (being employed), but also a matter to the meaning attached to that behavior” (p.4).

This definition seems to be applicable in Lebanon, where most married women included in the surveys, regardless of their social milieu, level of education, field of work and level of contribution to family income still consider their husbands as the breadwinners of the household.

Characteristics of the Women Working in the Ready-Made Cloth Industry and in the Banking Sector

The study of the ready-made cloth industry covered 520 women, representing 85% of the total number of employees (men and women) working in twelve different firms located in different regions of the country. The selection of the sample of firms was done in cooperation with the President of the Syndicate of the cloth industry, according to the firms’ geographical distribution, using as guideline the 1995 Industrial Survey.

The women surveyed were young, the age of 75% of them was below 34 years and around 39% of them had moved with their families from rural to urban areas, looking for job opportunities.

The married ones among them represented only 9% of the sample. This could be basically accounted for on the ground that:

- Women tend to stop working after they get married and/or when they get their first child. This is less common these days, given the very severe recession plaguing the country. It is worth noting here that the Lebanese labor law gives the right, to the female wage-earner in case of marriage, to cash her end-of-service indemnity, if she resigns from her job within the twelve months following her marriage;
- Most firm owners prefer not to hire married women because they are viewed as a potential burden, in terms of maternity leaves, sickness of children...

In addition, their level of education was low: illiterates represented 10% of the sample, 38% had completed their elementary education, 42.5% their intermediate education, and 7% only their secondary education.

Their working days are long, between 8 to 10 hours. This applies more specifically to the married ones among them who, despite all their domestic duties, worked overtime (53.1% of them), and did not take any vacation (45%) to meet the economic needs of their families.

Most women cashed less than LL.400,000 per month i.e. less than \$300. More than half of the firms in the industry (53.8%) paid higher wages to men than to women in the same position. 52.3% of the women contributed more than half of their income to the family budget and 45.6% of them took care of specific types of expenditures, the most important of which are food (21.3%), rent (18.8%) and clothes (6.7%).

This brief sketch of the working woman in the ready-made cloth industry is quite different from that of the working woman in the banking sector.

The banking sector survey included 558 married women distributed in fifteen banks belonging to different banking categories, as set by the Lebanese Banking Association. 68.3% of them worked in banks' branches and 27.4% in banks' head offices.

Their level of education was high: 37.6% had completed their secondary education and 53.6% were university graduates. Their husbands were also highly educated with almost the same percentage (54.5%) at the university level.

The size of their families was small: 22.9% of them had one child, 40.3% had two, 16.5% had three and 0.7% had 5.

Their working days were relatively short: 30.3% of them worked between 31 and 35 hours per week and 27.8% between 36 and 39 hours. This is, in fact, the first reason given by 38.9% of them to explain why they had chosen to work in this sector.

Their salaries were higher than those of the women working in the ready-made cloth industry: 35.7% of them earned a yearly income between 5 and 8 million Lebanese pounds, while 24.4% collected yearly earnings which varied between 8 and 12 million. 36.2% of them earned an income which represented 25% to 50% of their husbands' earnings and 14% only among them earned more than 75% of their husbands' salary.

Working Women's Perception of their Role within the Household

How do these seemingly different groups of working women perceive their role within the household?

In answering this question, focus will be placed on:

- the latent conflict between their work outside the home and their homemaking role and
- the impact of their economic contribution on the traditional division of roles and decision-making within the family

Despite the growth witnessed in the level of economic activity of Lebanese women, the Lebanese society is still quite conservative and considers that the primary role of women is the traditional one of homemaking.

The results of both surveys seem to indicate that women's primary concern in this respect relates to their children. S.K. is the manager's secretary in a ready-made cloth factory. She has been at the job for 11 years and works daily from 8:00a.m. to 5:00p.m. Her daughter is 9 years old.

"The fact that I had only 40 days of maternity leave has adversely affected me. I used to lock myself in the bathroom and cry. I could not accept the fact that I had become a mother and could not take care of my child. I try now to make up for it after my work and during the weekends. I devote all my free time to her at the cost of my husband, my house and myself. I refuse to go out in the evening because I do not want to leave her alone. My mother was and is of great help. I used to take my daughter to her early in the morning on my way to work and take

her back home after work. Now that she goes to a school close to my mother's house, she picks her up at 2:00p.m. when the school is over. In addition my mother spends the summer with us in the mountain to take care of my daughter. My colleague at the office had to take a one-year leave without pay when she got her baby because both her mother and mother-in-law had passed away”.

The same feelings are shared by J.C., holder of a master's degree in international finance and senior assistant to the CEO of a bank. She has two kids and has never interrupted her work.

“When they were young, she recalls, I put my professional ambition aside. I used to leave my work at the regular closing time i.e. 2:00p.m. Now my children are 10 and 7 years old. I stay at work till 8:00, 9:00p.m., to the great despair of my husband who usually comes home before I do. He is also the manager of a bank's branch and a university professor. He would not want me to quit my work, but he would have preferred if I had a less important position, with less professional obligations. I always wonder when I stay late at work where my real place is; at the bank or with my children?...”

The dilemma facing these working women is not an easy one to solve: they face difficulties competing with men in the labor market; when for many of them “it is proving extremely difficult to decide whether they are mainly mothers who happen to work or workers who happen to be mothers” (O'Connell and Bloom, cited in Fuchs, 1988).

Women's work outside the home does not seem to have significantly affected the patriarchal system prevailing in the Lebanese society. Both surveys indicate that wives would be willing to quit their jobs if their husbands asked them to do so (53.1% in the ready-made cloth industry, 67% in the banking sector) and would cut on their career involvement in order to save their marriage.

Despite the fact that the Lebanese women surveyed admit that they work essentially because of economic need, they still consider their husbands as the breadwinners. This applies to 40% of the women who cash the same salary as their husbands in the ready-made cloth industry, and 67% of the total number of

women engaged in the banking sector. It is interesting to note in this respect that the latter percentage holds for women who have a secondary or university level of education. This holds true also in the case of single working women who associate breadwinning with manhood. S.T., 28 years old and head of the sewing workshop in a factory said when interviewed:

“I have started working as a pastime. My father was still alive. We are four girls, two are married, but do not work. You know their husbands work. But now that my father has passed away, my unmarried sister and myself are the breadwinners of the family.”

As far as financial independence and its impact on the empowerment of Lebanese women is concerned, the picture is not very clear: 45% of working women keep their wages for themselves, while 26.5% give them to their husbands in the ready-made cloth industry, compared to 66% and 21.9% respectively in the banking sector. Although the share given to husbands is not significantly different in the two surveys, the impact of work on decision-making within the family seems to be stronger in the case of women working in the ready-made cloth industry where 16.8% of all the surveyed women and 41.9% of the married ones among them indicated that their decision-making power decreases when they quit work, compared to only 1.8% in the banking sector where the question was answered by less than 25% of the women included in the sample.

Important differences emerge, however, when women are asked whether they would keep on working if they could financially afford it. While 61% of those working in the banking sector answered positively, almost the same percentage (62.4%) of women working in the ready-made cloth industry answered negatively; indicating clearly the heavier weight given to the economic variable in the latter survey. Actually in the banking sector, self-fulfillment was the second most mentioned reason (74%) for work after economic need (78%). This is reflected by the fact that women in this sector (53%) would keep on working, even if the earnings left for them after the deductions of the costs of

dual earner life (house-help, day care, catered food...) - which they consider basically as their responsibility – are minimal.

These few positive indicators might be timid signals that Lebanese women are slowly moving in the right direction. In general, however, most women involved in remunerated jobs still consider themselves as “working” women, rather than “career” women, especially the married ones among them. The responsibility of homemaking is still considered – by them and society at large – to be primarily theirs, while their husbands are viewed – at best – as “helpers”, with the prevalence, as a result, of the “quasi-traditional” division of roles.

Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate that the situation is slightly different in the case of young married couples, leading to the emergence of a much more symmetrical distribution of roles. Changing norms and traditions is not an easy proposition: “... The norms, beliefs, customs and value through which society differentiate between women and men, their approved models of gender differences are an important dimension of the core identity of individuals, shaping their preferences, defining their interests and regulating their behavior in ways that cannot be easily shaken off simply because there has been a change in prices of income” (Kabeer, 2000: 22).

Increasing both men and women’s awareness about the existence of competing “possibles” might be a good step in the right direction. “... Even if all that happens is the replacement of ‘tradition’ with ‘traditions’, the existence of competing possibilities opens up the space for manoeuvre available to subordinate groups” (Ibid, 48).

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