

# The Lebanese Woman Is Half Citizen until Further Notice

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“Lebanon is a parliamentary democratic republic based on respect for public liberties, especially the freedom of opinion and belief, and respect for social justice and equality of rights and duties among all citizens without discrimination.” This is stipulated in the third clause of the introduction of the Lebanese Constitution which summarizes all great human values such as freedom, rights, justice, and equality. It is further supported by article 7 of the Constitution whereby “All Lebanese are equal before the law. They equally enjoy civil and political rights and equally are bound by public obligations and duties without any distinction”. However, an observer can describe the situation as follows: Not all Lebanese are equal before the law. Social justice is linked to many cultural, sectarian, class, and social criteria, and there is flagrant discrimination against some groups of citizens and preference for some other groups, with a huge difference in civil rights.

This remark is true for many groups, but here we are singling out discrimination against the Lebanese woman, who has only half of the citizenship rights which the Lebanese male citizen enjoys. For she cannot give her nationality to the husband she chooses, and she doesn't have the right to pass her nationality to the baby she carries in her womb, as if this infant is not hers. If she chooses to live in her country and marry a non-Lebanese, she will have to pay a price for her choice and bear the consequences. Neither her husband nor her children have any civil rights, not to mention political ones; they are deprived of their right to work and make a living, and they even have to open short-term bank accounts to acquire the right to reside with her in

Lebanon. This is the case even if they were born in Lebanon, spent all their money in it, embraced the Lebanese identity, spoke the same language, and shared the hopes and woes of this country. Neither the woman nor her family has a share in the system of *wasta* (i.e. connections or influence peddling). If this is to her dislike, let her find herself another country to live in, and let her join the hordes of tourists visiting Lebanon; only then will her country welcome her.

As for the Lebanese man, if he lived all his life in another country, and married a woman of any nationality, his wife will acquire the Lebanese nationality, and his children are one hundred percent pure Lebanese, even if they don't know Lebanon or feel any sense of belonging to it. The condition of the Lebanese woman is as follows: she is equal to the man at the polling stations when it comes to voting for him to reach decision-making positions. But she is definitely beneath him in human dignity, she has imperfect nationality rights, and she has incomplete access to her civil rights. There have been of late some voices demanding an end to this oppression, calling for justice for the Lebanese woman in her right to pass on her nationality to her family just like women in other Arab countries such as Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria do. In these countries, a mother can pass her nationality to her children, a part of an international trend to fight all types of discrimination against women.

However, there have been voices opposing the woman's right to equality. The most prominent of all might well be Deputy Nematallah Abi Nasr, who

has been striving for a long time to undermine efforts to grant women their rights. Although the Deputy has a degree in law and is an appeals attorney, he claims that the Lebanese woman has achieved a high level of rights and outdone fellow women in comparison to laws in neighboring countries simply because she “drives a car”. He also believes that a reform of the citizenship law could impact the country’s demography at the expense of Christians. It is known that the highest percentage of Lebanese women married to non-Lebanese are those married to men of Arab nationalities, specifically to Sunni Muslims. Thus, giving the woman her right to give her nationality to her family means an increase in the number of Muslims, an issue that might harm the Lebanese demography, according to Abi Nasr and his supporters. It should be noted here that the current political representation in parliament preserves equal shares between religious communities, regardless of the actual percentage of each community in forming the Lebanese population.

In the framework of his quest for secular change and reform, and as a member of the Maronite League and head of the Democratic Christian Union, Deputy Abi Nasr has proposed a law “restoring nationality” to all those of Lebanese origin, whereby they are entitled to obtain the nationality of their grandfathers who emigrated from Lebanon a long time ago. It should be noted that they have already acquired other nationalities in the countries they lived in all their lives.

It is no secret that the main beneficiaries of the above suggestion will be Christians. It is a beautiful idea that expatriates are able to reclaim the identity of their grandfathers so long as they are prepared for effective integration into Lebanese society, whether they are Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, or atheists. Religion is something personal that should play no role in this matter.

However, what is more important and urgent right now is not the needs of Lebanese expatriates who enjoy all rights in their second countries, of which they have become a part, but rather the needs of the husband and children of the Lebanese woman who

are residing in Lebanon. They are deprived of basic conditions of decent living at a time when they are more Lebanese than the expatriates because they live in Lebanon, have integrated themselves into it, and are an economic, intellectual, cultural, and social asset to the country.

It seems that the issue of Lebanese demography is troubling Deputy Abi Nasr more than the expatriates, as a lot of them do not know the Arabic language and haven’t visited Lebanon and are not closely acquainted with it. The least of their worries is the balance of religious communities within the Lebanese population. They are totally immersed in their countries that are free of the sectarian complex, and are comfortable where they are, away from Lebanese sectarian calculations. But their formal acquisition of the Lebanese nationality means a lot to the demography of Deputy Abi Nasr. It is worth mentioning that this very deputy calls for a separation between religion and state, and the elimination of sectarianism from our hearts and laws.

Lebanon will continue to drown in the whirlpool of sectarianism as long as the Lebanese woman must study demography before marrying a non-Lebanese. She must ponder the possibility that her fetus might destabilize the unique Lebanese formula, and calculate whether this addition befits the demographic vision of the Deputy. As for the Lebanese man, he has the absolute right to toss demography over his shoulder and marry any woman of any nationality and produce children with Lebanese nationality, whether they know Lebanon or not.

Lebanon’s strength lies in its ability to embrace diversity and merge it in one identity rather than in sectarian calculations that empty religion of its spiritual and moral aspects, and use it as fuel to spread hatred, oppression, and discrimination. Truth, justice, and equality are values that are not subject to partitioning, selectivity, and preference. They should determine the orientation of laws in Lebanon and elsewhere so as to establish a civil society that respects freedoms and the rights of humans and all creatures living on its land or flying

in its sky. This is the current international attitude, and it is in Lebanon's interest to enter this race, for it is the sole guarantee of reaching a high level of development and to increase the chances of progress and prosperity. The alternative would be depriving people of their rights using the pretext of democracy and religious balance which would only serve to fan the flames of sectarianism. The fire of sectarianism can break out anytime because this country sees its citizens as mere numbers in a religious community rather members of a homeland.

As for the latest procedure in the Council of Ministers that calls for issuing a decree that grants a complimentary three-year residency to the children of the Lebanese woman, it can be described as positive, but it doesn't solve any problems. Women will still be deprived of enjoying their rights in some areas, the most important being earning a decent living, a thing which severely limits the rights of the Lebanese mother and undermines her right to an economically stable life with her family. This decree of complimentary residency has been applied since 2003, but its application is as fickle as are other laws in Lebanon. For even if the mother is Lebanese and her son is living in Lebanon for twenty years, he might be denied this complimentary residency if he doesn't have valid reasons for it. And his request is often accompanied by mistreatment by the officials involved. Also, he

and his mother must both pledge that he will not work, or he can pay a sum of 300,000 LBP (around \$200 us dollars), only then can he obtain a one-year workers' residency like all other foreigners residing in Lebanon.

The time has come for Lebanon to rid itself of the law of the jungle and sectarian mini states and racist laws, and to abide by the Constitution and human rights. It is most unfortunate that many countries throughout the world are progressing while Lebanon is regressing, at a time when it is in desperate need of polishing its image in international circles, especially after repeated civil conflicts. We have experienced that there is a need for drastic and swift reform in the field of human rights in order to support ideals such as "tolerance" and "coexistence", which Lebanon claims to champion.

We urge the Minister of Interior to directly oversee the application of the law of complimentary residency pending complete justice for the Lebanese woman by which she would receive full citizenship rights and subsequently her right to pass her nationality on to her family.

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