

## A Country for all Ages

*"That is no country for old men" [and women]*

*"An aged man [and woman] is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick..." From William Butler  
Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium".*

Before the war, Lebanon was friendly and accommodating towards the old. As far as I remember there was charm and a peaceful contentment on the faces of old men and women in many families including my own. They were accorded a central and unique place within their households that bustled with life and energy. Continuity and group solidarity and cohesion were the main attributes of a family. There was ample space and a great deal of respect, affection, love and protection for the senior members. It was the natural thing to do, and our grandparents felt strong and secure amongst their children and grandchildren. In addition to residing with their children, the elderly women, in particular, maintained strong relations

with community members and friends and continued to enjoy close and enriching emotional attachments within their families. They acted as caretakers to their grandchildren and continued to manage the household and maintain a sense of achievement, independence, as well as a constructive attitude to the world around them.

Our culture ensures respect for the elderly and values highly the natural bonds of affection between all members of the family. In our society, the eldest members are a source of spiritual blessing as well as models of piety, religious faith, wisdom and love. Accordingly, the family as a group and as a close-knit entity assumes responsibility for their welfare and survival by helping them with daily chores, and giving them financial assistance and emotional support. In his book entitled *The Arab World: Society, Culture and State*, Halim Barakat asserts that in Arab societies, "children change from being



Picture Credit: Delphine Garde

'*iyal* (dependent) to *sanad* (supporters) once their parents reach old age. This explains why parents in some parts of the Arab world may refer to a child as *sanadi* (my support)."<sup>1</sup> In fact, the majority of old people in Lebanon (213,284 aged 65 and above in 1996)<sup>2</sup> remain with their families and only a minority live in homes and organizations, showing that the familial situation and the closely knit household structure linger.<sup>3</sup>

While such customs and traditions persist today predominantly in rural areas, it is proving impossible for many people and groups to preserve their culture in the face of inimical forces over which they have no control. One important factor is migration that has contributed to the break up of the extended family network. After the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, and the sectarian violence that ensued making it impossible to lead a normal and safe existence in Lebanon, particularly in Beirut, many individuals and groups were left with no option but to pack up and leave. The pressing problem of sheer survival and the difficulty of securing and maintaining jobs made them all the more determined to look for a new life outside the country. Since then, rooted kindred traits have been undergoing modification, and the old revered values are disappearing. The old ties are being severed and relations are crumbling causing a serious rift in the cohesive family unit.

The migration process had both individual and social consequences for the elderly, the majority of whom were women because of their longer life expectancy and the general tendency for men to marry women several years their junior. Many women were left behind to fend for themselves and bear the consequences of the physical separation from child and kin. One main reason for the exclusion of elderly women can be attributed to the selective nature of migration that privileges the young and active and excludes the old and disadvantaged. Under the pressure of a precarious existence manifested in bombardment, abduction and kidnapping, many families had no option but to rush into unpremeditated and hasty decisions. In the heat and flare of war and the terror and desperation felt at all levels, they opted to leave immediately and on the spur of the moment. In such a situation, the grandmother was seen as a nuisance or rather as a burden since the range and frequency of her activity and mobility was restricted.

On their part, many old women, or at least those still in good health, were unwilling to leave and preferred to stay behind to look after their own as well as their children's homes. Having lived all their lives in one

particular place, they found it difficult and perhaps too late to uproot themselves and start a new life on foreign soil. The fear of change taking hold of them, they could not leave the place that preserved their memories and their past. For many women, the fact that they remained behind to maintain their independent household must have afforded them a sense of contentment, independence and continuity. Their preoccupation with the various house chores must have reduced their sense of loneliness and yearning. Despite the anarchy and confusion that prevailed, these elderly women felt relatively safe in a society that - having internalized respect and veneration for its elderly citizens - could not possibly envisage its senior members as direct targets of aggression or violence.

It is important to note here that the elderly, meaning those who have reached the age of 65 (retirement age) and over, are not a homogeneous group and can be divided into three major categories: the young old (65-74), the aged (75-84) and the older old (85 and over)<sup>4</sup>, and these different groups do not necessarily have the same problems, and, therefore, their economic, emotional and physical needs tend to differ. If the elderly woman is still mobile, it means that the family can still provide support, financial and otherwise, at least from a distance. Such assistance is badly needed particularly for the mother who had spent her life as a housewife and thus was unlikely to benefit from a pension or any other source of income. Accordingly, children hope that financial assistance can substitute in some way for physical presence and help; however, if monetary remittances are useful when the mother is still active and healthy, they cease to be of any value as age and dependency increase. Furthermore, the number of children per couple is decreasing and the burden of supporting aged parents, therefore, falls on fewer shoulders making assistance to the elderly more problematic. The shift to smaller households as well as the increasing demands of life and the tight economic situation, cannot reduce opportunities for parents to depend upon their children and declining support for the elderly.

Another problem is that many more wives and daughters today are going to work and since the care received by the elderly comes from the daughter rather than the son, the situation is further complicated. Even though women's paid work outside the home creates opportunities for them and supplements family resources, it generates additional problems that demand new adaptations in the relationships among family members. If older men can rely on their wives for care more than the

opposite, a woman who survives her husband and has no female members in the family to look after her, may be left with little support in old age particularly that she may have limited access to pensions and property rights or accumulated wealth from the marriage.

Another factor is the transition of our culture from a rural to an urban way of life that has prevented children from assisting their parents and providing them with the living arrangements and medical care which they need. Consequently, the extended family and kinship relations have been weakened. While not necessarily coinciding with the Western model, the rise in the relative magnitude of the nuclear household is clear predominantly in Beirut.

If women who are still physically active and mobile can still involve themselves in a variety of social activities, there are others who are prisoners of their bleak and empty apartments living on meager incomes. Having lost all feelings of self-importance and hardly able to cope by themselves, they succumb to diseases and become resigned to their fate with little or no health services, being unable to afford a doctor or hospital. In addition to their deteriorating health, loss of family, and the sense of being a burden with no sources of emotional support, they live alone awaiting death that they see as a relief and alleviation from pain. One elderly woman I know had resided with her daughter who passed away three years ago. For years she had not left the house even though she is still mobile and active. Fearful of the outside world, she managed to restrict her activities inside her home and went as far as to cut herself off from needed assistance. Over the years, she has developed paranoid fears of the outside world, fears that she must have contracted during the war period when shells fell indiscriminately everywhere and car bombs terrorized people whenever they left their homes. Such fears must have intensified after her daughter's death. With limited income and fear of the worst to come, she has cut down on all expenses including food, not to mention that her refrigerator, her gas, and washing machine do not operate any longer. In addition to the fact that she cannot afford to fix them, she will not allow any stranger into her apartment.

Despite the general feeling among most people in Lebanon that sending an elderly parent to a nursing home violates our sense of sacred duty towards them, many individuals and groups are faced with situations where they have no other alternative. It is clear that the majority of elderly in homes are there owing to circumstances where the children cannot possibly look

after them. Among such groups are those whose families are abroad, unmarried women, old people whose children cannot support them financially, and those who suffer from diseases where professional care is needed. There are few cases where the elderly are healthy and need only minimum attention; nevertheless, they are there for social, and emotional support which they no longer receive from their children who are generally swamped with their own problems and daily work and simply have no time for them.

Keeping in mind a growing population of older people, the need arises for more serious government action not only to provide assistance to ill and handicapped elderly members, but to ensure that the potent elderly population remains productive rather than estranged and marginalized, and eventually a burden on society. In short, to make late life a potential period of enrichment and fecundity even as it is also a time of impairment and decline. The Ministry of Social Affairs can help in many ways such as to train current physicians in the field of geriatrics (Lebanon has only a handful of geriatricians since medical schools do not offer this specialty), to integrate awareness campaigns regarding the elderly by changing misconceptions about them, and to build nursing homes. A national policy for the elderly is needed to prepare them both physically and financially for old age: to create jobs for those who want to continue to work, to secure assistance to those who need to look after an elderly parent, and encourage research on health and demographic and social problems of the elderly.

While giving assistance to the sick and disabled, such measures will help those who are still fit to maintain an active and productive life away from the emotional deprivation, loneliness and depression that many feel in nursing homes. In this manner, we can, at least, begin to entertain the hope that we are on the right track heading "Towards a Society for all Ages."<sup>5</sup>

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#### ENDNOTES

1. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 98.
2. See "Elderly Lebanese Women in an Aging World" by Abba Mehio Sibai and May Baydoun.
3. *Ibid.*, p.11.
4. See G. H. Maguire, ed. *Care of the Elderly: A Health Team Approach*. (Little Brown and Co., 1985); K. Kinsella and C.M. Taeuber, *An Aging World* (New York: Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau Of the Census, 1992).
5. The United Nations slogan for the year 1999 which is designated as the International Year for Older Persons.