

# LEBANESE WOMEN IN POVERTY

Photography: LAU student



Myriam Sfeir, IWSAW Staff

“Poverty is no longer contained within national boundaries. It has become globalized. It travels across borders, without a passport, in the form of drugs, diseases, pollution, migration, terrorism and political instability.” (Human Development Report 1994)

“Poverty is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon resulting from deeply imbedded structural imbalances in all

realms of human existence - the state, the economy, society, culture and the environment.” (Policy Eradication: A Policy Framework for Country Strategies. UNDP, 1995). A person is considered poor if he/she fails to procure a minimum standard of living, considered the norm, which is socially determined. Poor people usually lack sufficient nourishment, good income, permanent shelter, basic social services, good health and a proper education. Moreover, they suffer from social exclusion, marginalization, vulnerability, stigmatization, seclusion, impotence.

Poverty in Lebanon is on the rise, contrary to what some people may think. The truth of the matter is that life’s hardships are constantly increasing while the gap between income and expenditures keeps widening. People work very hard and often need more than one job to procure life’s basic necessities. However, most of the time they fail to do so and are constantly in debt. One million Lebanese live in poverty and 250,000 are extremely poor. Twenty-eight percent of Lebanese families are estimated to live below the absolute poverty line,<sup>1</sup> while 7.25% live below the extreme poverty line.<sup>2</sup>

Given the fact that women, especially in Middle Eastern societies, bear the full burden of the patriarchal system and endure a whole range of discriminatory practices embedded in the cultural, economic, political, and legislative aspects of society, it is obvious that they will suffer double, triple, and four-fold discrimination if they are also poor. Women constitute 70 percent of the 1.3 billion poor people worldwide and are severely affected by the adverse effects of poverty. Poverty enhances discrimination against women on all levels. Working women earn less than their male counterparts. Moreover, poor women are usually overworked due to the double responsibility of working both inside and outside the house. Their male counterparts are also favored in terms of nutrition, education and health-care. Moreover, women lack equal access to markets and institutions, and they are deprived of many legal, political, and other basic human rights.

The “feminization of poverty” refers to the over-representation of women among the poor and powerless, the rising number of female-headed households, and the growing female participation in the small-scale informal labor sector. The current rise in the feminization of poverty might be partly due to “institutional gender discrimination in all societies.”

Moreover, poverty in general, and female poverty in particular, is caused by "structurally reproduced distributional inequalities." Women tend to experience poverty differently than men because of their diminished access to resources that are becoming increasingly scarce. Women shoulders the load of the "deterioration of economic and social systems," and her chances of ever overcoming poverty are very low due to the "intergenerational transfer of poverty along gendered lines." (Policy Eradication: A Policy Framework for Country Strategies, 1995, P.9).

The following testimonials are offered by poor women and girls:

**Antoinette:** "My husband earns only \$258 per month. Given that we have five children, the only thing we can afford to buy is the bread that we consume ... Our debts are increasing, although we gave up buying costly food that yields pleasure to the palate, clothes ... "(*Houkouk An-Nas*, issue #21, 4/6/97);

**Ghada:** "I have no income and expenses are increasing. My son's education costs a lot of money so I had to sell my house ... I'm scared of what the future holds because I'm not medically ensured and will not be able to afford any medical expenses if the need arises; that is why I try my best to keep fit and healthy." (ibidem);

**Abeer:** "I earn \$185 a month, which is better than nothing. Most of the time my salary is not enough so I often borrow money from my parents ... I want to further my education, yet this is impossible given my financial situation." (ibidem);

**Iman:** "My salary does not exceed \$200 ... I help my parents from my limited salary. Buying new clothes is one of the impossible dreams these days ." (ibidem);

**Soultana -** "I only earn \$200 ... In most developing countries, people work in order to gain independence; however, in Lebanon it makes no difference if one works or not. (ibidem);

**Rania:** "My husband earns \$387 and we live with his parents, so we do not pay monthly rent. My mother-in-law buys the groceries and our daily needs. My husband, on the other hand, pays the taxes and ... whenever I ask him for some money it is always unavailable. I wish I had stayed at my parents' house and never married for I feel so embarrassed whenever I ask them for some money. " (ibidem);

**Hala:** "I feel so sad whenever my children ask me for new clothes to wear and claim that their friends are always dressed better than they or when they ask for a new toy or game and I'm unable to buy it for them. Moreover, I grieve when they are hungry and I take them to my parent's house." (*An-Nahar* Newspaper)

**Fatmeh:** Each morning, when Fatmeh goes to work she encounters girls her age entering the school next to her house: "Although I see them everyday I sometimes cry not knowing why ... maybe because I know that I will never be like them." Fatmeh left school when she was seven in order to contribute to the family income (her family consists of eight members) ... She walks from her house in the Maamourah to the sewing factory at *Bourg Al Barajneh* everyday in any kind of weather. She works ten hours per day and earns \$25 per week. She gives

her entire salary to her parents, but every six months she buys some clothes for herself. (ibidem);

**Huda:** is 13 and earns \$100 per month. Although she left school several years ago she reads Arabic very well ... She is the youngest of three children ... Her father is terminally ill and requires hospitalization approximately once a month. Her brothers pay for the medical expenses of their parents. Indeed, since recently her mother has been suffering from diabetes, Huda takes care of the household expenses ... In spite of the poverty and misery that engulf her life, Huda still dreams of going back to school and continuing her education once their financial situation improves. "All I wish now is for my father to be cured." (ibidem);

**Maryam -** "... I have 7 brothers and sisters. My father is a truck- driver and earns \$300 per month, \$200 of which are spent on rent, I work at a candy factory to help out and earn approximately \$110 per month. My sister also works and all our earnings go to our parents." Maryam's mother interrupts, cursing poverty because it prevents them from sending their children to school: "Maryam was a brilliant student and all her teachers admired her." (ibidem);

**Bassima:** Bassima is 12 and works as a maid together with her sister. She earns \$100 per month ... their neighbors give her their worn-out clothes. What hurts her most is that the girls in her neighborhood refuse to play with her because she is illiterate and does not go to school. (ibidem);

When poverty prevails and gender inequity reigns, the fate of the girl child is no different than that of the mature woman, because all the discriminatory practices suffered by the latter are passed on to the former. Girls' rights and realities depend on those of women. Girls will eventually carry women's double burden; they will in turn earn less, owe less, and control less. Girls will end up just like mature women: they will have less of everything: food, health-care, education, land, livelihood resources, pay for equal work. "The gender hierarchy is not a static structure but one that is actively reproduced through the inter-generational transmission of discrimination and violence against all female persons of all ages."

The stories of these girls cut deeply into one's heart; they make one inevitably wonder what kind of life society is handing over to them. What kind of world, plagued as it is with injustice and grievance; a world in which 20% of people possess and manipulate 85% of resources leaving only 1.4% of the latter for the bottom 20% to survive on (Heyzer, Director of UNIFEM). These stories may trigger other questions such as: Do we have a duty to assist? Should we, after buying the basic necessities (food, shelter, clothing, health services, and education) indulge ourselves in luxuries while others starve and live in misery? Apparently, these questions are likely to cross one's mind whenever one detects the prevalent inequality, yet, after a while one's conscience is easily numbed. We tend to resume our daily life and forget about poverty and its ill-effects. This neglect stems from one's certainty that we "cannot change the entire world over night; that one cannot solve all of life's complicated problems with the whiff of a hand; that the struggle for human

rights is much broader” (Women’s Human Rights Journal 4, March 1997, P.2). Certainly, the struggle for human rights is much broader, which is why it is necessary for all governments, civil society, and individuals to participate in the effort to secure food, education, health-care, training, credit, and land for those living in poverty, and especially, for the most vulnerable of the vulnerable: women of all ages. The policies and strategies adopted must take into account the specific gendered dimensions of poverty, *i.e.*, the needs and rights of women and girls must be considered first because they constitute the majority of the poor. “If poverty is not eradicated for women in this generation, then that will become the inheritance of girls in the next” (Women in Action, #1, 1996).

**Endnotes:**

1. *The absolute poverty line is defined as “the income level at which an average family of five can meet its food requirements and other basic needs such as health, education, housing; it was estimated at \$618 per month at the end of 1993 (ESCWA, Antoine Hadad: Poverty in Lebanon, 1995).*

2. *The extreme poverty line is defined as “the income level at which a family of five can meet only its food requirements; it was estimated at \$306 per month.*

*Source: (ESCWA, Antoine Hadad: Poverty in Lebanon, 1995).*