

Women of lebanon and patriarchy essay



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The Women of Lebanon: How Does Patriarchy Rule Their World? Patriarchy is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line; broadly: control by men of a disproportionately large share of power.

Merriam-Webster continues on to state that it is a society or institution organized according to the principles or practices of patriarchy.

Patriarchy is one of the most powerful forces in the world today. It is a worldwide system that predates recorded history. Patriarchy has had to maintain its power in the subjugation of women as well as using varying forms of government. Cultures that are patriarchal uphold the privileges of men based on gender, social structures, religious practices and legal codes. In layman's terms, throughout history patriarchs have tried to take by force what does not belong to them.

In 1943, as a result of a progression of compromises between leaders from religious sects in the country, mainly Christian Maronites, Sunni Muslims, and the French mandatory power, the state of Lebanon was created. The Lebanese state was established where as each religious sect was assured representation in parliament as well as governmental and civil service positions. The leaders were responsible for providing education and social services to their sect-members, which reinforced the loyalty towards the sect.

By delegating these important functions to the religious communities, the state construction was made fundamentally weak. Rather than being

controlled by the state, the religious sects in fact controlled the state. Religious affiliation became the citizen's most important attribute and identity because their citizenship was connected to one of the recognized religious sects. In a recent article published by Jurist Legal News and Research, Megan McKee, a University of Pittsburgh School of Law, law student discusses the history of Lebanon citizenship.

McKee explains that current Lebanese law can be traced back to the transplantation of French civil law in Lebanon. When the Ottoman Empire was dissolved at the end of World War I, the Sykes-Picot Agreement partitioned the former Ottoman Empire into separate British and French mandates with France having the mandate over present-day Syria and Lebanon. The French disbanded the region's existing governments, and in 1926 instituted a new Lebanese constitution strongly modeled after the French Third Republics civil code. Lebanon has been governed by what is essentially the French Napoleonic Code.

The Code is remarkable for abolishing privileges based on birth and establishing freedom of religion. However, the transplantation of the Code in Lebanon was actually a step backward for Lebanese women. McKee further explains that French law placed women under the complete control of their male guardians. Despite the French inspired Lebanese constitution's attempt to distance Lebanon from its pre-colonial Ottoman history and place it in the "path to progress," Ottoman law was far more progressive in terms of women's rights.

Under Ottoman law an adult woman was able to enter into contracts and use the court system independent of her husband. Women enjoyed a particularly more advantageous position in the area of citizenship rights under Ottoman law. An Ottoman law dating from the early 1800's held that a woman had the right to pass on her nationality to her children, regardless of her spouses' nationality as long as her child was born on Ottoman soil. In the French Third Republic, married French women, even those of the age of majority were legally accorded that status of a minor.

A married woman's legal status made her subordinate to her husband and made it impossible for her to enter into a contract or even defend herself in court without the presence or consent of her guardian. French law continued to decree that men alone enjoyed the right to pass on citizenship until the late 1960's. While France made reforms in this area in the 1960's, Lebanon continues to enforce France's archaic laws (McKee). Human Rights Watch publically expressed concern that the Lebanese government rejected proposals affecting women, refugees, and migrants during a United Nations review.

During what is called the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a regular review of a country's human rights record at the UN Human Rights Council, UN member states raised their concerns regarding ongoing human rights violations in Lebanon and proposed concrete recommendations to address them. The country's delegation agreed to establish a National Commission on Human Rights and to improve the fight against torture by criminalizing all forms of torture and ill-treatment. But the delegation dismissed recommendations that would promote equality for women. Lebanon agreed

to some reforms but missed an opportunity to tackle some of its longstanding human rights problems,” said Nadim Houry, Beirut director at Human Rights Watch. Most notable among the government’s failures was its refusal to reform Lebanese laws that discriminate against women. Lebanon’s delegation reject recommendations to amend the citizenship law to allow Lebanese women to pass their citizenship to their spouses and children and to remove discriminatory provisions affecting divorce, child custody, and inheritance from personal status laws (Human Rights Watch).

According to the Lebanon constitution, while being a citizenship of the state, Lebanese citizenship is at the same time tied to religious affiliation. For the past four years, Maya Mikdashy has been researching the histories and applications of the Lebanese legal system. Ms. Mikdashy has written A Legal Guide to Being a Lebanese Woman to better explain the different laws that exist, but rarely are adhered to in present day Lebanon. Mikdashy explains that in Lebanese law, citizenship may only be inherited through men.

Men can pass on Lebanese citizenship to their spouses and children, whereas women cannot pass on Lebanese citizenship to their spouses or children. There are two exceptions to this rule, explains Mikdashy. The first exception to this rule states if the woman is a naturalized Lebanese citizen she can pass on Lebanese citizenship to her next husband and non-Lebanese children. The second exception to the rule states if the Lebanese woman is unmarried and no one claims paternity over her illegitimate child within the first year (Mikdashy).

As a result, a child is only considered Lebanese if his father is Lebanese. In the event a Lebanese woman marries a foreign man, the law requires that the woman choose between adopting the nationality of her husband and keeping her own Lebanese citizenship. A woman who chooses to take her husband's citizenship may later reclaim her Lebanese citizenship following her husband's death or the dissolution of her marriage (McKee). Due to their citizenship being paternally linked, Lebanese men always own the right to pass on their citizenship to their children, as well as to their foreign wives.

This gender-based discrimination continues to exist even though the Lebanese constitution prohibits such action. Article VII of the Lebanese constitution states: " All Lebanese are equal before the law. They equally enjoy civil and political right and equally are bound by public obligations and duties without any distinction. " Khatoun Haidar, PhD, is a researcher and writer who is specialized in development and women's issues.

She is the CEO of Oneco Consulting, consultant to the president of the Lebanese Council of Women and serves on the board of trustees of CMESC. In 2007, Ms. Haidar wrote an article for The Daily Star in which addresses several of Lebanon's laws. The Daily Star a newspaper that had initially circulated in Lebanon quickly expanded to cover most of the Arab world. It has become the web's leading source of Lebanese and regional news. Haidar addresses several laws in the article entitled Antiquate Laws Violate Women's Civil Rights.

Haidar writes that family laws in Lebanon follow the religious dictate, meaning that each of Lebanon's 19 denominations has its own personal

status codes, as well as courts and laws. Because of this, there is no applicability of the same personal status law to all women concerning divorce/dissolution of marriage and grounds for divorce, property right, custody of children, and maintenance for the divorced wife (Haidar). Ghada Khouri, a Lebanese-born freelance journalist based in Washington, D. C. , expands further on this topic in her article *Caught in the Middle: Women in Lebanon*.

Khouri states that personal status laws are governed by religious tribunals, thus making Lebanese women unequal not only to men but also compared to each other. For instance, non-Muslim women are entitled to the same inheritance as male heirs, while most Muslim women receive only half of that. In addition, polygamous marriages are permitted within Muslim communities while they are prohibited by Christian courts (Khouri). Khouri continues to write, that such distinctions evident in personal status codes led women's groups to call for the adoption of civil marriage law.

The proposal however, has been bitterly opposed by religious leaders of various denominations since it would divert power from the one area over which they exercise total jurisdiction and would facilitate intermarriages between people of different religious sects. Marriage between a man and a woman of different religions cannot be carried out unless one of the spouses, almost always the woman, converts. As a result, the woman may end up being rejected by her native religious community. Lebanese laws recognize civil marriages performed outside the country.

Many Lebanese couples of different religions get married in civil court in neighboring Cyprus or Greece as a result. In case of a dispute or divorce, the Lebanese courts must apply the law of the country in which the marriage took place (Khouri). Violence within families is generally viewed as being caused by either lack of awareness of the problem, or an accepting mentality in the society. This is an effect of how patriarchal norms view gender roles, in that the women themselves are being blamed for the abuse. A certain amount of battering is seen as normal.

Khouri continues to say that perhaps the most flagrant discriminatory law strongly influenced by patriarchy is that pertaining to “honor” crimes, which pardons men for murdering a female relative caught in the act of adultery or premarital sex. If the murder is based on suspicion alone, mitigating circumstances apply. In addition, premarital sex is tolerated for men, while adultery is defined differently for men and women. Thus, a married man is guilty of committing adultery only if the sexual act takes place under his roof and provided that he confesses to it.

If a husband admits to the act, but apologizes for it, he is usually pardoned while the charges against a woman would not be dropped. The punishment for an adulterer is one month to a year in jail, whereas the sentence for an adulteress is three months to two years, that is, if the woman is not killed at the hands of her male relatives, in which case her real sentence is death.

Women’s groups have so far been unsuccessful in their efforts to repeal the criminal code condoning “honor” crimes due in large part to cultural mores which measure women’s sexuality by a different standard than that of men (Khouri). Suad Joseph, Director of Women’s Studies at the University of

California at Davis, and founder of the Association for Middle East Women's Studies described the Lebanese state as a collection of "fragmented communities" glued together by patriarchy. Suad Joseph defines patriarchy as a social system, which is exercised through kinship-relations, that privileges males and elders at the expense of younger persons. Women are, according to its principles, supposed to respect and defer to their husbands, fathers, brothers, grandparents, uncles, and male cousins.

Women can gain power through the patriarch system by age or wealth. Sect and kin groups both privilege men and elders, and are reinforcing patriarchal power structures. Men have control over females in their kind group, but they also have the responsibility for them. As women are dependent of their kin for protection and care, socially and economically, their identity is tightly connected to their kin. Identity for women as well as for men is in many ways "locked" to family and community, making them hard to step out from and change (Joseph).

Nadya Khalife is a Middle East and North Africa researcher in the women's rights division at Human Rights Watch. Nadya has researched numerous human rights and development issues in her native Lebanon and in the region. Her past work also includes human rights work in the Great Lakes region of Africa and on US government-sponsored abuses after September 11. She has a Masters of Arts degree in gender and cultural studies from Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts and a Bachelor of Arts in international relations.

In her article *A Woman's Place, in Lebanon*, Khalife explains Lebanon's patriarchal culture, which has dominated its parliament, its ministries, and its municipalities since its independence from France in 1943. There are 18 political parties, though seven currently dominate and men control their leadership. Lebanon officially recognizes 18 religious confessions of Muslim and Christian denominations. The political structure sets quotas for each sect based on a 1932 census.

The major political parties thus include: Hezbollah and Amal (Shi'a); Future Movement, led by the son of the assassinated former Prime Minister Rafih el Hariri (Sunni); Phalange Party and the Lebanese Forces (Maronite Christians); Progressive Socialist Party (Druze); and the Free Patriotic Movement which in theory has members from all confessions, but remains predominately Christian. Especially after the civil war from 1975 to 1990, political parties compete to preserve narrow sectarian interests, not those of a unified Lebanon. In such a rigid system, women are less likely to be nominated or elected (Khalife).

Lebanon is a complicated place; the state of Lebanese women's political participation is no exception. Lebanese women like other women globally battle male-dominated culture in politics. Lebanese women won the right to vote and participate in national elections in 1952. Yet today, political participation by Lebanese women remains dismal at the national level. (Khalife) Lebanon's patriarchal political culture has continued through a system of what amounts to hereditary political positions, especially at the national level. The same family names there were powerful in the 50's and 60's still exist today (Khalife).

Dalila Mahdawi is a Palestinian-British journalist working between London and Beirut. Her work mainly focuses on political and human rights issues, particularly the rights of women and minorities in the Arab world. In July 2010, she was named a finalist in the Samir Kassir Awards for Freedom of the Press. Her work has been syndicated and has appeared in several publications, including: BBC (UK), Common Ground News Service (online), Hurriyet (Turkey), Electronic Intifada (online), The Guardian (UK), Inter Press Service (Italy), Philadelphia Inquirer (US), UNFAIR (UAE) and elsewhere.

In her article Lebanon: Women Want Greater Political Representation, she writes that women face considerable obstacles entering politics in a country where political dynasties and patriarchy rule. Most women who do enter politics do so “wearing black” filling a position made available by a deceased male relative (Mahdawi). The first woman Member of Parliament was Myrna Boustani, who was elected following the death of her businessman father Member of Parliament Emile Boustani in 1963, for the remainder of her father’s term of one year. Between 1964 and 1992, no Lebanese women have been elected to the parliament. In 1991, Nayla Moawad was the first woman to enter politics in post war Lebanon. She was appointed a Member of Parliament after her husband; the newly elected President of Lebanon was assassinated. Member of Parliament Moawad was then elected in 1992, and re-elected in 1996 and again in 2000. Over the last 15 years, there have been a handful of female Members of Parliament, 17 since suffrage. All did so by virtues of family connection, with the exception of Member of Parliament Ghinwa Jalloul. It is virtually impossible for independent, self-made women to enter the political arena.

Ghinwa Jalloul was the only Member of Parliament to have made it there on her own. Lebanon's instability has in the past helped drown out the voices calling for gender equality. However, those voices have become louder and more persistent, most notably in a campaign to alter Lebanon's discriminatory nationality law, which prevents Lebanese women married to non-Lebanese men from transferring their nationality to their husbands and children (Mahdawi). Lebanese women make up 49 percent of the population, yet they are a minute minority in stations of political power and responsibility such as councils, judiciary, and governmental areas.

Women will only be able to play a greater part in the governance of Lebanon if the country's political system moves away from the traditional status quo of a sectarian system towards a more secular meritocracy. A national commission to draft a new electoral law in 2005 suggested introducing a 30 percent women's quota but this was rejected (Mahdawi). Lebanon has a duty to eliminate gender discrimination. So long as Lebanon continues to hinder women's rights and prevents women from entering the political process, the country cannot enjoy true democracy. Men and women alike must work to encourage female parliamentarians.

If Lebanese women have had the right to die as part of their country's army for the last 18 years, they should also have the right to help formulate the laws that govern every Lebanese citizen, man or woman (Mahdawi). Mariam El-Fawal is a young Tripolitan woman living in Canada. She is also a student at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada majoring in Women's Studies. In a recent interview, she explained to me that a five-year residency in Lebanon helped guide her to choose her current major at the university. In her

interview, Ms. El-Fawal had this to share regarding the state of women's rights from a Lebanese woman's point of view: I realized today that the variety of experience amongst Lebanese women is vast. No matter how we turn it though, we find to have lost something. Along with that, we seem to find ourselves constantly in conflict; who am I? Versus whom do I want to be? We indeed, all have a story to share. These stories like us vary; some have happy endings while others have sad endings. These stories are of our sadness, happiness, our ups and downs, our freedoms, and our oppression. They are our veiled secrets and darkest fears. They cut across all forms of teaching, understandings of life as well as critical thinking.

These secrets are everything we hate and everything we love. That's the existence of a Lebanese woman. I met a young Lebanese woman who is in her first year of college. I don't want to probe into her life story, but what I do want to say is that she does not live the way she wants to. She has freedoms taken away and it is seen as just life, to her there seems to be no way to fight it. It has affected her deeply. There is a need in her eyes to live without the limitations enforced at home. She's not abused, but just wants to get away, ultimately wanting to be free. Patriarchy rules her life-like it does for thousands of Lebanese women.

It has put up walls and given her a place; a place she may never escape. I am myself, a young Lebanese woman who is rather casual and open-minded, while being a hijab and embracing Islam as per my own teachings of Islam and while that happens, I face challenges. People question my Lebanese-hood because I wear the hijab as if the two can't come together. I deal with the shame of choosing my life over marriage, my life over a man. I face the

challenge of trying to explain that while we are taught to believe one thing, doesn't mean it is true, I mean who decided that women and men can't walk the street at night as equals?

Women have made much progress in many places including the home, yet there is still much to be done, especially in Lebanon where change needs to happen and soon. The Lebanese people need to recognize that until the lack of scrutiny of women's issues and how they can contribute to the larger picture, Lebanon will always lag behind. Women matter and we need to give them the importance they deserve as well as the space to deal with these issues. Sure, everyone lacks in rights in Lebanon but when women in your society have no rights and no space to be women, generations will be raised with the wrong way of thinking.

It is a benefit to everyone for women in Lebanon to see a bright future.

Women are our future. Patriarchy has proven to be our disease. " (El-Fawal)

Improving the legal status of women in Lebanon has been a tenuous task rendered all the more difficult by the absence of women from political life. In her article Haider brought to light statistical data regarding women in the workforce. Numbers show that the gender gap concerning the access to education is quite slim in Lebanon; gender equality in access to primary education has almost been achieved. Adult female illiteracy has fallen from 37 percent in 1980 to 19. percent in 2000. Illiteracy among young females is no more than 8 percent. Half of all university students are females. However, Lebanese women comprise only 29 percent of the workforce. Twenty-four percent of employed women work in the professional sector. Females have established opportunities in government, medicine, the law, academia, the

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arts and business. Unfortunately, few of them have achieved senior positions in their field. For instance, 90 percent of bank employees are women, but there are no female senior bank directors in the nation.

Most women (81 percent) are employed in the service sector, with 14 percent in industry and 4 percent in agriculture. The above-mentioned data clearly highlights the fact that despite the progress made by girls and women in higher education, women continue to be under represented in the labor force. It is also important to note that women's share in the public service employment does not exceed 6.1 percent of the total number of posts and their distribution indicates the marginalization they suffer from in high-ranking offices and in the executive management linked to decision and policy-making.

At this level, the Government needs to take action to increase women's presence in the civil service, particularly in high-ranking positions. It is clear that some legislative or other measures are needed to promote equal employment opportunities for women in both the public and private sectors (Haidar). Change is happening in Lebanon, but at a very slow pace. Works Cited El-Fawal, Mariam. "The State of Women's Rights from a Lebanese Woman's Point of View." E-mail interview. 5 Dec. 2011. Haidar, Khatoun. "THE DAILY STAR: Lebanon Examiner: Antiquated Laws Violate Women's Civil Rights. Antiquated Laws Violate Women's Civil Rights. The DAILY STAR, 27 Aug. 2007. Web. 20 Nov. 2011. Human Rights Watch. "Lebanon: Heed Concerns at Human Rights Review | Human Rights Watch." Human Rights Watch. HumanRightsWatch.org, 25 Nov. 2010. Web 20 Nov. 2011. Joseph, Suad. Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, <https://assignbuster.com/women-of-lebanon-patriarchy-essay/>

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