



## Lebanese Women: Liberals or Liberated



Lebanese women may be known as the Arab world's most liberal but they are by no means the region's most liberated considering conservative laws that reduce them to second-class citizens.

"The law in this country still considers a woman as being inferior," complained sociologist Rafif Sidaoui.

From domestic violence to rape to adultery, the rights of women often fall by the wayside in this multi-confessional sectarian society, nonetheless deemed avant-garde in the mostly conservative Middle East.

"One of the absurd laws on the books allows a rapist to be exempt from prison if he marries his victim," said Ezzat Mroue, vice-president of the Women's Rights Committee (WRC).

"A few years ago, there was a major scandal when a young man, who was after his cousin, kidnapped her from her university," she added.

"He raped her and then brought her before a sheikh who married them. "The result was that he was not guilty in the eyes of the law," Mroue said.

And although so-called "honor crimes" are not widespread in Lebanon, as in some other Arab countries, every year a number of women are killed by male relatives under the pretext of defending the family honor.

Under the law, the murderer can benefit from "mitigating circumstances".

But "murder is murder and you cannot apply different penalties" depending on gender, insisted Mroue.

She said when it comes to adultery, the picture is not brighter.

A woman can be sentenced to two years in prison if a third party accuses her of cheating on her husband, whereas a man has to be caught red-handed before being hauled to court.

If a man admits to adultery but apologizes, he is usually pardoned. The same does not apply to a woman.

As far as domestic violence, the law offers no protection to women.

"If a woman in Lebanon is beaten up or humiliated at home, there is nothing she can legally do about it," said Sidaoui.

"The husband has to break her neck, arm or leg, for her to be able to claim injury or damage, as you would for any car accident," said the sociologist. Many women who do turn to the police become the object of ridicule by officers who pat them on the cheek and suggest they deal with their problems "at home".

Sidaoui said that one of the main problems in changing the status quo is the lack of legislation to protect women's rights and the fact that religion permeates most aspects of life in Lebanon, including marriage and divorce.

For example, there is no civil marriage in Lebanon, although the government recognizes such a union as long as it is celebrated outside the country.

A woman also cannot transfer citizenship to her husband if he is foreign or to children born of such a union.

And in the event of divorce, a Lebanese man automatically gets custody of the children.

"For the religious and political communities determined to hang on to their prerogatives, this issue is a red line not to be crossed," Sidaoui said.

Labor laws are another issue that rights groups have been battling to change.

A married Lebanese man who works receives tax exemptions whereas a married woman does not. A man with children is also given a family allowance by the state whereas a woman can only receive it if she is widowed or if her husband is handicapped.

"If these laws are not changed, they will perpetuate this mentality through generations and a woman will always be considered inferior to a man, whatever her social status," Sidaoui said.(AFP)

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