

## Who Should Define Freedom For University Female Residents?

The war produced many observable changes in Lebanon. One obvious change is the deterioration of the country's infra-structure, such as tele-communication, roads, public transportation and socio-political demography. These facilities, if we may call them as such, acted as stimuli for other changes, positive changes?!

Thus, the rural regions of the country grew and developed to become, or try to become, self-sufficient because links with the capital, Beirut, are trying. Villages have grown into towns and towns into small cities. They have expanded their markets, their goods and services sectors, their hospitals and medical facilities and their schools.

However, Beirut remained the most efficient gateway to the outside world especially in terms of its institutions for higher learning. Consequently, Beirut-based universities such as the American University of Beirut and Beirut University College are the most sought for institutions for higher learning.

For students living in Beirut, attending classes is not a problem. But for those living in the peripheries and beyond the city limits, commuting on a daily basis is dangerous, expensive and exhausting.

The dorms seem like the better alternative. But the dorms are not home, neither in terms of their facilities nor in terms of their atmosphere, and last but not least, not in terms of traditional upbringing, especially for daughters.

Hence, the dorms do not guarantee the security blanket of parental guidance over daughters. There are two ways of looking at the issue of parental guidance. The first is actual guidance resulting from the physical presence of the parents'. The second is the shield from label and gossip which the parents' presence provides. In the latter case, the responsibility to conform and maintain a «good» reputation rests primarily on the parents.

However, daughters who live away from home and namely on campus bear the entire responsibility for proving that they are actually conforming to the conservative values of our society. Consequently, the demands and role-expectations placed on female university residents are high. On one hand, because of assumed liberty and freedom, the girls have to make an extra effort in order to prove conformity. On another hand, some of these residents are tempted to use this new-found freedom to lead the life of the liberal woman portrayed by the West (which is itself a stereotype of promiscuity for traditional societies<sup>(1)</sup>).

Only recently, the female residents of Orme-Gray Hall of Beirut University College (BUC) raised the issue. Their concern was how to deal with the misconduct of some of their peers and how to correct the «bad» image society imposes on them.

The parental guidance of the College's administrative body gave them a vote of confidence. They reassured them that achievement and high educational status is the strongest weapon they (the female residents) have against these rumors and labels. In the meantime, they should ignore them, lest they become destructive.

What is interesting is that the core issue in question here is **freedom**. Society, parents and the students themselves misinterpret freedom for sexual permissiveness. A young man may go and come unsupervised but even a supervised young woman's behavior is doubted and questioned.

Any issue that has sex as its denominator is taboo in society. Freedom for the youth has sex as its middle name. Everybody thinks it but nobody says it. The problem does not lie in the sexual values of society but in the absence of an explicit definition of freedom for the youth. Freedom goes beyond the question of sex. **Freedom entails responsibility**. It is responsibility towards oneself. Responsibility to take good care of oneself and to be mature and constructive. It involves avoiding temptations which could lead to stagnation, loss of identity and failure. One could probably visualize it better if we were talking about freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of nations and so on.

We approached students in the BUC campus and asked them to tell us what freedom means to them. Some of the replies were: «It is the ability to do whatever a person wants, taking into consideration social and physical constraints.» Another student said that «society has, sometimes, the right to trim some of the freedoms we have, such as sexual freedom.» Others understood freedom in terms of «freedom of thought, freedom of speech and the freedom to learn.» One student said «freedom to learn and use this knowledge within society and to go to other societies which suit my definition of freedom.»

Hence, as long as the issue of freedom is not defined, it will remain a source of frustration for the younger generations of changing societies like Lebanon •

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(1) «A New Arab Woman?», *Al-Raida*, No. 51, November 1990, p. 8.