

# Determinants of Female Labor Force Participation in Beirut, 1990<sup>(☆)</sup>

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## Research problem

Although, universally, the most visible change in the economic status of women during the second half of the twentieth century has been the increase in their participation in the labor market, the Arab region is still characterized by very low female economic participation. Finding a job outside the home is not part of the sex-role socialization of Arab females. To become a wife and a mother is what generally occupies the soul and mind of a typical woman in this part of the world.

But, societal changes have been taking place. Inflation, the costs of industrialization, the high rates of small migration from labor surplus countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt and so forth to the Gulf states, have made it difficult for families to survive on the man's salary alone.

In Lebanon, the above variables are assumed to increase women's traditional propensity to join the labor force. Furthermore, the war also introduced additional socio-economic changes such as inflation and demographic changes such as displacement. All of these variables seem to act as a force driving women into the labor market and into the economic mainstream.

Consequently, the aim of this research was to examine, specifically, the factors determining economic participation of Beiruti women. Are factors related to poverty and economic need the key variables which encourage women to join the labor force? Or, do other factors related to demographic changes and the socio-economic characteristics of the respondent (woman) such as marital status, educational level, age and so on, determine whether women work or not? To what extent does working influence/affect perceptions and attitudes (of the women themselves) towards the image of the working-woman and her social role in society?

## Research design

The study identified two dependent variables. The first was economic activity or inactivity of women; the second was the attitudes of women in Beirut towards their social role. The independent variables assumed to influence women's propensity to join the labor force, were also identified, namely: socio-economic status (identified in terms of education, income, and profession), age, religion, rural versus urban background, marital status, fertility patterns, husband's and father's educational and professional level.

Ten hypotheses were suggested. They proposed that female economic participation rates in Beirut would be high if women were single, had high educational level, had liberal rather than conservative attitudes towards issues regarding women, had few children if married, and whose fathers and husbands had high educational levels. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that most of the working women do so because of economic need, while women who have high educational levels are working for personal satisfaction.

The sampling frame was based on an area sampling design which divided the capital into two geographical divisions: East and West Beirut, excluding the suburbs. The non-probability quota sample was the chosen sample design. This led to the stratification of the sample into regions and socio-demographic variables. In testing the data, contingency table analysis was used, whereas, testing for significance was done using chi-square statistics.

The field work took place between November 1989 and January 1990. The sample size was 278 women. The questionnaire was the survey method.

## Findings

The results reflected a spectrum of cultural, religious, demographic and economic factors. Some of the results were interesting and showed that a new trend of female labor force participation may be evolving. For instance, although women who work in the Arab world are generally young and single, nearly half of our sample in Beirut turned out to be married and of reproductive age. Furthermore, in Beirut, the number of Christian and Muslim working women is equally high, contrary to the common notion that Christian women in this part of the world almost always have higher labor force participation rates. Sect and education appeared to be important determinants of female labor force participation among married women. The respondents supported the right for women to work, irrespective of whether they, themselves, were working or not, or whether they were educated or not.

Finally, this study showed that economic conditions do play an important role in determining whether women work or not. Financial support is a primary factor which drives women into the labor market. According to our sample, higher educational levels and achievements of Lebanese women are other factors which lead to increased participation in the labor market •

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