

OBSTACLES TO WORK OPPORTUNITIES AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AMONG LEBANESE WOMEN IN SIERRA LEONE

Lina Beydoun

Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology
Blodgett Hall 102
Adelphi University
Garden City, NY, USA

Abstract

This paper examines Lebanese women's work opportunities in Sierra Leone from the early twentieth century to the present. It argues that migration sustained the manifestation of inequalities between Lebanese men and women. Although some women became small business owners or salaried workers, the majority played a supportive role that enabled durable ties between home and host country and contributed to economic gains for their male counterparts. The Lebanese Women's Association neither created a venue for organized feminism nor supported the economic independence of Lebanese women. It is dependent largely on the financial support of Lebanese men for its sustenance. Community organizing is hindered by the absence of a strong connectivity between Lebanese women and Black women, the latter being regarded as sexual competitors rather than sisters in solidarity. Global feminist networks are slow to develop in a patriarchal society that shows no signs of radical mobilization. Lebanese men, because of their migratory decision making, their ability to choose their sexual partners, and their extensive entrepreneurial skills in the public realm, encounter many fewer obstacles to work than do Lebanese women in Sierra Leone.

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century Lebanese transient merchants began settling in the coastal cities of West Africa, where they found economic success in the region's coastal cities, with their developing colonial centers, railroad-driven commerce, and new opportunities for trade. Today Lebanese comprise the largest non-African immigrant minority in Sierra Leone (Leighton 1979). The early migrants (ca. 1894–1910) were predominantly male. Because there were so few Lebanese women, they often married Temne and Mende women, and as a result, there are now a substantial number of Afro-Lebanese. At the time, Sierra Leone was a British colony, and its cosmopolitan port city of Freetown attracted foreign capital and labor. Lebanese men worked in Freetown as peddlers selling corals and other small items, then progressed to street hawking, petty trade, store ownership, and retail, rapidly establishing themselves as a privileged middle class.

The early migrants were predominantly Christian Maronites, mainly from the northern Lebanese town of Akkar. Many had left to escape taxes and levies imposed by the declining Ottoman Empire. By the 1920s, there were a large number of Muslim Shi'i immigrants from southern villages and towns such as 'Ain Nibl, Harees, Bint Jbeil, and Jwayyah. Later in the twentieth century, there was a smaller migration of Druze and Sunni Muslims. By the 1960s, however, it was apparent that the Shi'i were the largest of the Lebanese immigrant groups in Sierra Leone. They owned the largest number of Lebanese family stores in Freetown's vibrant business district and had the most families in the Lebanese Embassy registry, although there is no official count by religion. Furthermore, Christian Lebanese families tended to stress university education; as a result, young Lebanese Christians often left Sierra Leone permanently to seek better prospects elsewhere, while young Lebanese Muslims stayed on after school completion. After Sierra Leone's ten-year civil war began in 1991, many Lebanese Muslims also left Sierra Leone; many relocated to the United States, where women have attained better opportunities in higher education and work than was possible in Sierra Leone.

In contrast to the literature that assumes that immigrants are the most underprivileged and exploited group of society (Anthias 1990; Castles and Kosack 1973), Lebanese gained economic success that was largely attributed to Lebanese men. Lebanese women tended to follow their husbands, fathers, or brothers. This paper explores whether Lebanese migration to Sierra Leone empowers migrant women or perpetuates the traditional roles of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers.

Did Lebanese women achieve major economic gains through independent businesses, salaried work, or community organizing? Gender awareness provides an important lens through which to examine migration. Women construct their own worlds of activity (Laslett and Barbara 1989), and their immigrant experiences are different from that of men. There are gender differences in the adaptation process and in work opportunities among immigrants. Although gender and class are analytically distinct concepts, they cannot be treated as distinct sets of relations (Anthias 1990). Existing literature on gender and class has focused on Western capitalist societies (Maynard 1990) and suggests that women gained a new status that was not predicated on their family membership. In Britain, France, and the United States, the opportunity for wage labor within the factory system opened up for women the prospect of economic independence outside the household and apart from husbands, and allowed for organized feminism (Jaggar 1988).

In contrast to migrations to other countries, there are few opportunities for economic mobility for Lebanese women in Sierra Leone. The availability of domestic workers and nannies has not freed up women to participate in paid work. Women lack skills and training opportunities. There are few high-income jobs and low-income work is stigmatized. Patriarchy discourages women's participation in public roles, and when they engage in paid work it has limited significance on their class position, which is determined by the status of their male counterparts. Women have also been excluded from what are considered male occupations and, for the most part, depend on their husbands' income. Some women have had limited success with independent businesses. Others have attempted to use community organizing as a vehicle of activism, but with mixed results.

Race also plays a role in Lebanese women's exclusion from paid work. Gilroy (1987) argues that race is a particular articulation of where and how boundaries are constructed and upheld and how the process of "inferiorization" takes place. Lebanese arriving in Sierra Leone were regarded as white and often equated with British colonials, who historically exerted power and influence in Sierra Leone. Blacks viewed the new arrivals through the racial lens they had internalized under British rule. In 1962, leaders of the newly formed Sierra Leonean state, fearing the political extension of Lebanese economic influence, established citizenship laws that discriminated against non-Blacks. Legal racism excluded "those that are seen to threaten the maintenance of the nationalist project" (Anthias 1990:37-38). Meanwhile, Lebanese "inferiorized" Blacks in order to maintain their privileged socioeconomic status. They discouraged Lebanese women from engaging publicly in work activities that would bring them in close contact with Blacks. Moreover, the privileged status of the Lebanese community was predicated on their women's modesty and regulated sexual behavior. Black women were seen as expressing a sexual assertiveness that was considered appropriate for men only. By avoiding work that would lead to interactions with Blacks, Lebanese women would dissociate themselves from the behaviors of the "immodest" and "sexually loose" Black women.

The first section of this paper explores work opportunities in the early twentieth century. During this time Lebanese women largely played a supportive role for the male merchants and strengthened ties between home and host country. One exception was Madam Sassen, who was a successful and independent businesswoman. The second section examines work opportunities in contemporary times. It looks at how Lebanese women began to play multiple roles as homemakers, small business owners, and salaried workers. The third section examines the charitable role of the Lebanese Women's Association. Because of its dependence on Lebanese men for its financial support, the association fails to create a venue for community organizing to support the economic independence of Lebanese women. The fourth section discusses the intersections of gender, class, race, and citizenship. These interrelated concepts help explain why Lebanese women maintain links to their counterparts in Lebanon instead of forming connections to Black women and developing a Sierra Leonean national identity. Lebanese women's interpretation of citizenship is "cultural," while Lebanese men's interpretation of citizenship is "entrepreneurial." Lebanese women in Sierra Leone are still not engaged in local community organizing and global feminist networks that would provide radical mobilization and more work opportunities. Lebanese men in Sierra Leone, given their migratory decision making, choice of sexual partners, and skills in the public realm, have much fewer obstacles to work than do Lebanese women.

Methodology

This article is based on archival materials and field research that was completed in Sierra Leone between 2000 and 2002. A total of thirty-four persons were interviewed: fifteen Lebanese men, six Lebanese women, two Afro-Lebanese men, ten Sierra Leonean men, and one Sierra Leonean woman.

The bulk of the archival material were British Colonial Office documents dating back to 1881 and housed at the archival library of the University of Sierra Leone.

For this article I attempt to put at center stage the subjective definitions and voices of the six Lebanese women interviewed. Because of the small sample size, I used observations at the Lebanese Women's Association meetings as well as the Lebanese households for analysis. I was struck by the reluctance of Lebanese women to consent to interviews. Amal, a 44-year-old first-generation art teacher and interior designer, was one among several who initially told me to interview her husband instead of herself, because he "can explain everything to me." She believed that Lebanese women "do not have the skills to speak [publicly] in an educated way" and feared not being able to answer the interview questions correctly. Her response suggests that Lebanese women were not accustomed to having a public voice. They considered that their lives and histories could be recounted authoritatively by their male counterparts. My sample was limited to Lebanese women who stayed in Sierra Leone after the civil war ended in 2002; it does not reflect the remarkable advancements in education and work of Lebanese women who emigrated to other countries such as the United States.

Work Opportunities in Early Times

In 1919, soon after the end of World War I, British colonials faced dwindling resources and decided to lower the wages of railway workers in Sierra Leone. Angry protests erupted and rioters broke into Lebanese shops, claiming that Lebanese merchants were increasing the price of crops, making them unaffordable to many Blacks. Extensive damage and loss of property and goods occurred. Many merchants requested compensation for their losses from the British Colonial Office.

The claims submitted to the British court provide insight into the role of Lebanese women in the 1920s as well as the prevailing sexual relationships between Lebanese men and Black women that continue to influence race relations. There were no reported cases of sexual relationships between Lebanese women and Black men. Lebanese men such as Kalil Kidsi,¹ Charlie (Charles) Zaher,² Jamil Charabati,³ and Taher Rajah⁴ mention their native wives in the claims. However, a district commissioner pointed out that Lebanese do not generally trust their native wives with their goods and business.⁵ Kalil Bagdash accused his native wife of stealing a "sum of money which he had entrusted to her" when he ran from the riots to Freetown.⁶ Allie Najib had a native wife whom he did not trust with the cash in the shop, so he took the cash home to Lebanon with him.⁷ There were, however, exceptions. When Allie Santee escaped a mob in Freetown his native wife managed to save some goods and nearly the whole of his stock.⁸ Mustapha Musa's Liberian "wife" (quotes are part of the document) saved an appreciable portion of his goods by going with the crowd into his shop.⁹

During the 1920s, road access between the provinces and Freetown increased and travel conditions improved, becoming faster with the steamship and more affordable. At the same time, Lebanese men had accumulated sufficient wealth to travel home or send for a bride from their village or town. Marriages among Lebanese became more endogamous, which eventually led to a higher concentration of wealth among families. However, Lebanese families in Sierra Leone maintained a patriarchal structure in which women had few opportunities for economic mobility. Lebanese women were not part of the decision-making process of migration, and their roles were not associated with filling a demand for labor. Rather, they were seen as powerful forces in maintaining transnational ties as well as replicating aspects of the culture of their homeland.

¹ University of Sierra Leone Records Office, Box 684, Bundle 25, Colonial Secretary Office (CSO), 1/7 Confidential Minute Papers 1919: C/138, 21 August 1919, Compensation of Syrians for stores alleged stolen out of the Barracks at Port Lokkoh.

² University of Sierra Leone Records Office, Colonial Secretary Office (CSO), Form 18: N0. 1424/1920, 14th April 1920, Distribution of Copies of the Syrian Undertakings to Provincial Commissions.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ University of Sierra Leone Records Office, Colonial Secretary Office (CSO), Form 18: N0. 1424/1920, 14th April 1920, Distribution of Copies of the Syrian Undertakings to Provincial Commissions.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

While many women were homemakers or looked after their husbands' stores, others made advances in the realm of small business ownership, and a few become quite prominent businesswomen. One such was Madam Sassen, a very wealthy trader in kola nuts, rice, and other foodstuffs, clothing and cotton goods, and luxury goods. Sassen had a Lebanese business partner, Najib Rizk. Her business was a branch of Rizk Frères, a large firm with offices in Guinea and Europe. She had a wide business network and shipped goods regionally to Freetown, as well as to Conakry, Guinea, and Dakar, Senegal. She had sharp business skills that impressed British officers, and her extensive commercial experiences enabled her to make direct contacts with local chiefs and farmers.¹⁰

The district commissioner's report after the riots made no mention of other Lebanese women that were of Sassen's stature. Some women were made to appear at court by their husbands or fathers because of potential for more gains from claims, most of which were exaggerated. They were pressured to make false claims about lost cash, trinkets, and jewelry. When Mary Alexander Mahawish claimed that money was stolen from her handbag, the British officer dismissed her case:

She treated the matter lightly – rather too lightly....The ordinary ladies handbag is a small thing she carries in the hand or on the wrist and that will not hold a bundle of notes of the value of 200 pounds easily. I submit that her claim be reduced by 50% and she be given 100 pounds compensation.¹¹

Both Mrs. A. J. Bamin and her daughter were probably asked by the men to make a reluctant appearance at court. The commissioner remarked:

To have **seen** [word typed in red ink] as well as heard the claimant is to make the conclusion inevitable that this claim was simply a "try-on"...claimant was apparently acting on suggestions made to her that were distasteful to her. In the husband's own claim both he and his son made out beyond a doubt that the living portion of their house from which the articles in this claim were said to have been looted was never touched nor entered into by any one but themselves and their servants....I cannot recommend any compensation in this case.¹²

Rosa Bamin, the daughter, was also not convincing to the commissioner because she appeared to be very affluent and not to be concerned about losing money:

[Miss Bamin] gave her evidence with great reluctance and conveyed the impression that she was performing an unsavoury task....She does not know how many trunks she had....She had simply done what she was told to do. The lost money, according to her, was left in her trunk, according to her brother it was kept in a cupboard. Claimant does not remember if she left the money in the house...before the riot. The demeanor of the claimant and the nature of the evidence make it impossible for me to recommend any compensation.

Adieby Solomon filed a separate claim from her husband, Nicholas Solomon, because she claimed that she was trading on her own. She requested compensation for 100 pounds, jewelry, apparel, kola nuts, and lamps that were stolen from her house during the riots.¹³ But her evidence was unsatisfactory and no compensation was recommended. Some Lebanese immigrants were already economically well established, as noted by the appearance of some of the women in court and the amount of jewelry they wore. But the rapid socioeconomic mobility of Lebanese immigrants at the time did not expand work opportunities for Lebanese women.

Work Opportunities in Contemporary Times

Since the 1920s there have been rapid changes in patterns of international migration. With the development of a global economy, the number of women workers migrating to industrialized nations has increased substantially. International migration often alters gender patterns to the benefit of immigrant women (Sassen 1996).

¹⁰ University of Sierra Leone Records Office, Colonial Secretary Office (CSO) Form 18, Files Relating to the Anti-Syrian Riot of 1919: CLAIMS MADE BY SYRIANS AS A RESULT OF THE 1919 RIOT. SYRIAN IMMIGRANTS AND EMIGRANTS 1921-1922

¹¹ University of Sierra Leone Records Office, Colonial Secretary Office (CSO), Form 18: N0. 1424/1920, 14th April 1920, Distribution of Copies of the Syrian Undertakings to Provincial Commissions.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Migrant women may make the decision to migrate on their own, travel without their male counterparts, and have access to economic resources in the host country. Earning wages enables them to gain a greater degree of decision making within the household, to feel self-empowered and gain greater control over their lives. Female migration has increased because of female-dominated jobs (Stalker 1994), and women now have greater freedom and personal fulfillment.

In spite of expanding work opportunities for immigrant women worldwide, Lebanese women still experience inequalities as a result of a rigid patriarchal structure. Pateman (1989:35) cautions that “if we abandon the concept of patriarchy, the problem of the subjection of women will...vanish from view within individualist and class theories.” Generally, the structure of Lebanese households in Sierra Leone conforms to a traditional system of organization that has survived over a century of migration. Macmillan (1968: 237) notes that in the 1920s, women from Lebanon accompanied their husbands to Sierra Leone, “standing the climate as well, working as hard, and trading as keenly as the men.” This pattern of following men continued over successive generations. According to Amal, a Lebanese woman settles wherever her husband decides to, wherever his business takes him. Another respondent, Rana, a small boutique owner, said that one of her sisters is in Zambia, the other in Kuwait, and the third in Sierra Leone, “all because they followed their husbands.”

Establishing independent businesses has been an area dominated by Lebanese men, and often requires a degree of hawkishness¹⁴ that discourages women from participation. According to Rana, men are better at determining the prices of goods and dealing with other businessmen. They have learned strategies to ease the import of goods, such as bribing customs officers. The business community is more accustomed to men purchasing and supplying goods. The husbands who let their wives go to the stores with them, says Rana, are those who are still starting their lives and trying to make some money. Wealthier husbands “don’t want their wives to be involved – they want to secure all the money.” Lee (2002: 90) explains that women are “maternal brokers” who adopt work roles in which they have more contact with their customers. They are more likely to “chitchat with customers” and “thereby bring a humanizing dimension to the commercial encounter” (Lee 2002:90–91). Women also have the capability of defusing tensions because their gender makes them less threatening to customers (Lee 2002). Seen from this perspective, Lebanese male merchants place women at the front end of the business to keep the business routine in order. At family stores, Lebanese women are seen behind the counters counting money, preventing theft by watching out for shoplifters, and negotiating prices with customers.

Moreover, Lebanese men have fewer restrictions on interactions with Blacks than do Lebanese women. Their sexual relationships are less regulated than that of women. Lebanese women are expected to show restraint in their interactions with Blacks. Amal distinguished Lebanese women, who behave themselves, from Black women, who “cannot be trusted” to remain loyal to their partners. Rana concurs that “Lebanese women...don’t go around the streets all day long from man to man, from man to man.”

Underlying these negative perceptions of Black women is a fear among Lebanese women that their husbands will have affairs with them. Rana said that Lebanese women “get upset” with Black women “because they know that their husbands are going out with them.” If Lebanese women socialize with Black women and bring them home, “their husbands would flirt with them.” And if someone saw a Lebanese woman socializing with a Black woman in public, “they would think she is doing whatever the Black woman is doing.” Lebanese women preoccupy themselves with purchasing high-end clothing on frequent visits to Europe and spending countless hours entertaining each other over meals to show off their wealth and privileged status vis-à-vis Black women. Circulating stock stories – about how “bad” African women are and how “good” and family-oriented Lebanese women are – is an attempt by Lebanese wives to discourage their husbands from being involved with Black women.

Therefore, a social dichotomy between Black and Lebanese women in Sierra Leone has been constructed that limits broad-based community organizing efforts. The isolation of Lebanese from Blacks is also evident at Lebanese households that are gated and fortified by high security walls.

¹⁴ The term ‘hawkishness’ was employed by Sierra Leoneans under British rule to describe the highly competitive nature under which merchants operate due to limited types of trade available to invest in. Since the majority of the population is poor, crops and produce would be the highest in demand; other fancy items stores would not make a profit unless merchants place a monopoly on their trade.

Inside the gates are private gardens, providing an environment of confinement and retreat from the outside world. Many households have housekeepers, nannies, cooks, drivers, and guards or watchmen at the gate.

Sassen observes that women's status improves when domestic servants and nannies are available because it frees wives to seek paid employment. The abundance of domestic workers who work for exceedingly low salaries in principle cuts the time needed for household maintenance and child rearing, leaving women free to take employment and be active as business owners. But in reality, this has not led to an increase in independent work outside the home among Lebanese women. Instead, women are expected to help their husbands in their own businesses. Husbands pay servants' salaries in addition to other household expenses, ensuring their role as breadwinners. Becoming a wife and homemaker is still one of the major ways through which most women can find a recognized social identity. Their lack of education and training and separation from Blacks does not allow social mobilization. Patriarchy is reproduced among immigrant groups. For Lebanese men, there is merit in having a Lebanese wife. The marriage establishes a diasporic family and maintains cultural values and ties to the homeland. As a result, integration into Sierra Leonean society is discouraged.

Contrary to the patriarchal trends described above, some Lebanese women participate in public roles by taking up entrepreneurial niches when excluded from other areas of work dominated by men. They operate their businesses – such as hairdressing salons – from their homes. Others own small stores, mostly selling items of interest to women and children. Mary, a 57-year-old fourth-generation Lebanese widow, took ownership of a shop in Sawpit (one of the most popular and busy streets in Freetown) after her husband died. The shop looks shabby and has very few items for sale (fishing items and refreshments). She cannot afford to get any imported goods but enjoys having control of her small shop. She is very cordial toward her Black customers, who sometimes stop by for refreshments during their work break. Mary speaks Krio and Mende fluently, but no Arabic. Her customers refer to her as an “honorary Mende woman.” When Mary and I walked on the bustling street of Malamah Thomas, many Blacks stopped to respectfully greet her.

Rana also enjoys owning her own business because it makes her life “meaningful.” But she has different experiences from Mary and interacts moderately with her Black clients:

Lebanese don't mingle. As for me, I mingle with Africans because they're the ones who buy from me...they get money everyday – I told you they have a hundred guys – so I'm obliged to talk well to them. I need to know about their personal lives because they don't pay me instantly all the time...[I] need to know where they live, how to contact them...There is going to be this tie between me and them.

Had it not been necessary to keep her business going, Rana would have interacted less with the “sexually unrestrained” Black women. In fact, she does not meet with civil servants and officials and does not go to the port to pick up her goods. When she opened her boutique in 2001, her husband registered the business, and all she did was take over its management when it opened its doors. When she has an order coming by ship or plane, Rana arranges with a customs officer or airline company to deliver it straight to her shop for a charge. If she went to the port to get her products herself, she would have to interact with men to complete the paperwork and the Lebanese community would disapprove.

The role of women in the public sphere deteriorated during the civil war, especially after the rebels attacked Freetown in 1997. Women had businesses and sold upholstery, curtains, and fabrics, but because their shops were raided they closed down. However, the end of the war opened up new opportunities for salaried work outside the home or family business: for example, at foreign organizations, including the United Nations and NGOs, which were in Sierra Leone temporarily to help in the transitory and reconstruction period. Jobs at foreign organizations had the rare distinction of being acceptable within the Lebanese community in Sierra Leone, because they signify status and offer much higher wages, in dollars, than other national organizations. Mariam, for instance, worked for the United Nations Relief Organization as a ground hostess arranging shuttle services back and forth to the airport.

Some Lebanese women are self-critical of their limited work opportunities. Women's work is seen as secondary, for “entertainment.” In contrast, men's work is seen as a source of livelihood. Rana believes that Lebanese women are accustomed to their roles as housewives and they are to blame for their lack of training and experience:

Women could open up a small business to entertain themselves and see people but they don't want to work themselves. They are used to being dependent since they were at their parents' place. A woman could go abroad and study to become an esthetician and open up an institute here because there is no such place...Other women [could] teach...They could work at the bank...One woman got a job at the bank but she turned it down because the owners, Nigerians, told her she has to go for six weeks to the United States for training. Her mother refused because the owners are Nigerian.

There are also some limited possibilities for salaried work. One notable example of a woman with a salary is Najat Suleiman, who was principal of the Lebanese International School for over thirty years before her retirement to Lebanon in 1997. She made decisions at meetings with the school board, which was always made up of Lebanese men. The Lebanese International School is a private school established in the late 1960s by members of the Lebanese immigrant community. Its initial purpose was to provide immigrant children with a Lebanese-style curriculum taught in Arabic and English at the primary and intermediate levels. In the 1970s, the board added the term "International" to the school name to attract a broader student body. They also made Arabic instruction both optional and limited. Approximately 80 percent of its students are Lebanese; 16 percent are African, and the rest are children of diplomats and the staff of NGOs.

Among immigrant women in other countries, the demand for workers draws women out of the household into the labor market (Sassen 1996; Harris 1995). However, Lebanese migration to Sierra Leone did not open up opportunities for greater economic independence for women through skilled, semiskilled, or unskilled labor. The availability of cheap domestic labor does not provide a means of escaping patriarchal bonds because of limited higher-status jobs in the labor market. Lebanese women are rarely seen as full-fledged entrepreneurs. They are raised with the expectation that men alone bear the responsibility of earning the income of the family unit. A household headed by a single woman is nonexistent among Lebanese in Sierra Leone. Conversely, Lebanese men have had more opportunities for integration in Sierra Leonean society because of established businesses and sexual relationships with Black women. From the onset of migration, Lebanese men circulated capital and loans among themselves. Chain migration led to the recruitment of male relatives or townspeople from Lebanon for work in their stores as partners, managers, or salaried employees. Lebanese women followed when newly arrived immigrant men established themselves and earned enough capital. They are caught up in migrations negotiated among men. There is no evidence of a business partnership between a Lebanese man and woman in recent times such as the partnership between Madam Sassen and Mr. Rizk.

Hence, the roles of Lebanese men and women fit a traditional patriarchal system in which men have the responsibility of breadwinners and women that of nurturers and homemakers. As breadwinners, men gain better access to the public arena, learn to interact more frequently with other businesspeople and officials and gain an understanding of what networks to tap into in order to make economic gains. Economic security provided by Lebanese men often translates into a greater sense of control over their wives. The practice of promiscuity by Lebanese men is acceptable while Lebanese women are expected to be chaste. Patriarchy, entrepreneurship, and the control of the sexuality of women are all tied up together in a web of power relations that provides gain for men while excluding women from empowerment, earnings, and sexual choices. To gain more work opportunities and change their present condition, women would need to be involved in community organizing. I now examine whether Lebanese women have been able to organize effectively through the Lebanese Women's Association.

The Lebanese Women's Association

The Lebanese Women's Association (LWA) was established in 1978 by the wife of a Lebanese diplomat who was "displeased with the low profile the Lebanese women are playing in projecting their role and image in Sierra Leone."¹⁵ Being founded by an elitist outsider, LWA has not taken the course of a grassroots organization that would aim at empowering its members.¹⁶ Although it has carried out some charitable activities, LWA has not attracted broad-based support and popularity. Lebanese women experience inequalities that need to be addressed on the institutional level, but nonmembers view LWA as a way for bored homemakers to pass the time rather than as a constructive avenue for community organizing.

¹⁵ Lebanese Women's Association in Sierra Leone. 1992. Lebanese Women Association Magazine. New Era Printing Press Limited, Freetown, Sierra Leone, pp.1-49.

¹⁶ In contrast, the Young Sports Men Club, founded in 1952 for recreational purposes was homegrown and supported by over 50 prominent Lebanese businessmen. It has hosted regional soccer and volleyball championships.

Members avoid using LWA as a forum for discussing ways to improve their own education and employment skills because they view themselves as members of a privileged socioeconomic class. They provide assistance in the form of cash, food, clothing, and construction to the “less privileged.” In 1987, at a national seminar entitled “Women and Self-Development,” the LWA’s head of public relations spoke of the association’s efforts to provide for the needy. There was little discussion of Lebanese women’s public roles. Instead, this was all that was said:

Gone are the days when the place for the average Lebanese woman is considered to be the home, when she was only allowed to wander about the garden and during the evening driven by her husband around the beach for fresh air.¹⁷

Although LWA does not discuss ways to increase Lebanese women’s work opportunities, it provides a public space in which women feel they are active participants instead of passive recipients of their husbands’ benevolence. However, its membership never exceeded thirty members, and it had a high turnover. All but one of its presidents left Sierra Leone for good during the civil war (1991–2002).

The LWA is largely supported by members’ contributions and an annual fundraising dinner. In 2002, I attended several LWA meetings organized to plan their annual dinner. The treasurer stressed that the event has to be “prestigious” because it is what brings them money. There were only twelve active members planning the fundraiser, including the wife of the Lebanese ambassador, but they did not seem able to arrive at a consensus on several issues that were raised. Some suggested giving out awards to older members at the dinner event, but members could not agree on who to recognize. The younger ones said that they should also be recognized for their efforts to come to the LWA meetings. They leave their homes and kids. They need to arrange for both a car and a driver. Even though they have nannies and domestic workers, they still have to convince their husbands that participating in the LWA meetings – among the few public spaces that would enable them to meet together and plan activities without men – is worthwhile. If they received awards their husbands would better understand that the trips to the meetings were productive.

Since very few women earn an income, they have to depend on the contributions of Lebanese businessmen for the association’s survival. Member contributions do not come from the women’s earnings but from their husbands’. Businessmen get publicity by advertising in the LWA magazine, making valuable cash donations, and donating gifts for the popular annual raffle.¹⁸ Because the LWA depends on men for its financial survival, the goals and objectives of the association must also meet with their contributors’ approval. According to one prominent businessman, most important to the success of the LWA is “the cooperation [the members] receive from their husbands.”¹⁹ There is little room for independent activism on the LWA agenda.

LWA members helped Black women become self-reliant by funding projects to improve their skills in farming, basket weaving, sewing, and catering. They have donated money for a training school for illiterate women,²⁰ and collaborated with the first lady of Sierra Leone to conduct charitable activities. LWA mirrors the elite status of its members, an immigrant minority in the service of a disadvantaged majority. Cash contributions from their husbands enable Lebanese women to assist many local institutions. However, LWA does not provide a forum to discuss ways to increase work opportunities and skills among Lebanese women.

Gender, Class, Race, and Citizenship

One man told me that when he first came to Sierra Leone in the 1960s, it was to “seek adventure with native women in the exotic jungle.” Today, a double standard exists regarding sexual relationships and marriage: Lebanese men may choose to have relationships with both Lebanese and Black women, but Lebanese women may not have relations with Black men. Daughters of immigrants are socialized into accepting this double standard. These restrictive relationships imposed on Lebanese women do not promote integration within Sierra Leonean society; in fact, they hinder it.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lebanese Women’s Association in Sierra Leone. 1992. Lebanese Women Association Magazine. New Era Printing Press Limited, Freetown, Sierra Leone, pp.1-49.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

British colonials also made it unthinkable for British women to have relationships with the colonized people. In *A Passage to India*, by E. M. Forster (1965:227), Adela, a British woman, accuses Dr. Aziz, an Indian, of molesting her on a trip to the Marabar Caves in India. Aziz is immediately arrested and the European settler community unquestioningly accepts Adela's confused account of the events at the caves. A trial is set to protect an Englishwoman from the "contaminating and 'evil' contact with an Indian – and so is about marking and protecting the lines separating the British and Indian communities" (cited in Benton 2000: 129). Lebanese women fear losing their men to Black women. In 1997, Hala, a 40-year-old first-generation Lebanese woman, fled to Lebanon with her six children during the war. Her husband, who had stayed behind to take care of the business, got involved with a Black woman. Hearing the news, Hala returned to Sierra Leone in 2000 as soon as some peace was restored. She prefers life among her relatives in Lebanon but feels the need to stay close to her husband to decrease the chances of his becoming involved with other (Black) women. Although her husband has had multiple affairs with Black women, and has an Afro-Lebanese son, Hala prefers to avoid contact with Blacks. She complains about an increase in the number of Blacks at the Lebanese International School. She wishes there were a private hospital that only admitted Lebanese patients, similar to what the British colonials established before independence. She never uses public transportation and never walks in the downtown area to shop from street vendors.

Lebanese women in Sierra Leone, given greater restrictions on their choice of sexual relationships and mobility, develop different conceptions of citizenship than men. They are trapped in what Ong (1996) calls "cultural citizenship," a process in which subjects are self-making and being-made in webs of power relations that define how and where they belong in a nation-state. In order to fully identify as Sierra Leoneans, Lebanese women would have to break out of their traditional maternal and homemaker roles. They would have to be entitled to the same sexual and marriage preferences as their male counterparts. Patriarchy plays a significant role in the process of naturalization. It is often sufficient for a Lebanese father or husband to apply for naturalization at the immigration office to be able to extend citizenship to the rest of the family. Hala's husband obtained Sierra Leonean passports for her and the children to facilitate travel to and from Lebanon. But to Hala herself, Sierra Leonean citizenship does not carry much significance.

Hala and other Lebanese women share a sense of nostalgia for "home" – that is, Lebanon. This nostalgia is exacerbated by the "myth of return," which, according to Safran (1991:94), serves to solidify ethnic consciousness. However, when Lebanese return home they are sometimes treated as strangers with an Afro-Arabic accent. The outsider status of returned migrants is felt more strongly by third- and fourth-generation Lebanese woman. When Mary went to live in Lebanon in 1966 with her two daughters, she realized that there was a language barrier. None of them spoke Arabic. She chose to return to Sierra Leone but continued to hold on to her Lebanese citizenship. One of her daughters lives in Dublin and has Irish citizenship. Another daughter lives in England and has British citizenship. Her son lives in the United States and has American citizenship. Although Mary identifies with the place she grew up in, she finds it "useless" to obtain Sierra Leonean citizenship.

The above anecdotes point to the limited role Sierra Leonean citizenship has in the lives of Lebanese immigrant women. Citizenship is about participation in the public realm (Dietz 1987), but Lebanese women expressed no interest in voting or political activity. Lebanese men are more involved in the process of obtaining Sierra Leonean citizenship, but they also view it in a pragmatic way. They see it as enabling them to more effectively pursue their economic interests in the marketplace. While Lebanese women's citizenship is cultural, Lebanese men's citizenship is entrepreneurial. Men identify individualistically and competitively with the market (Lenz 2000; Einstein 1996). This view is derived from a set of values and practices that privileges men and excludes women. Men's position as breadwinners and women's position as housewives is connected to their citizenship. According to Pateman (1989:184), "paid employment has become the key to citizenship and the recognition of the individual as a citizen of equal worth to other citizens."

Conclusion

Female immigrants in rich countries have had greater access to education and job training, enabling them to forge new identities and break away from strong patriarchal ties that have governed their lives since the inception of the modern capitalist system. The growing "feminization" of work opportunities has altered gender hierarchies. Immigrant women now have access to wages and salaries, even if low (Sassen 1996). Women have gained greater personal autonomy and more control over finances and other domestic decisions. Improved access to public realms has given female immigrants a chance to be incorporated in mainstream society.

Many scholars are optimistic about the inevitability of global feminist networks. Formation of cross-border solidarities enables women to gain visibility that would influence the practice of international human rights (Sassen 1996). Women Working Worldwide (WWW), a small UK-based NGO, provides solidarity and support for a network of women's worker organizations in the commodity-producing zones of the global South (Hale and Wills 2007). It ensures that the needs and voices of women workers were put on the agenda for action. The broader question is this: is gender inequality among migrants best addressed at the global level, or must it be achieved within the particular historical, cultural, and political circumstances of each immigrant group? Mohanty (1991) suggests tensions within feminist movements. Malti-Douglas (1996) proposes universalistic perspectives under which both Western and non-Western ideologies operate. For Eisenstein (1996), the only hope for gender equality among migrants is a brand of feminism that makes possible a global network made up of women who share different ethnicities, races, nationalities, religions, and economic classes. Ong (1996) suggests that non-Western women should organize movements that redefine the patriarchal system. Women's emancipation is seldom just a question of individual rights, but fundamentally about culture, community, class, and nation.

This article shows that work opportunities and community organizing among Lebanese immigrant women in Sierra Leone are limited. At present there are no signs that they can come together with women from disparate locations in a unified global struggle to improve their economic conditions. There are preexisting inequalities among Lebanese men and women regarding migration decisions, access to employment, sexual partners, and citizenship. Lebanese men have an elite status within which most Lebanese women must negotiate their rights and self-identity. The Lebanese man's role as breadwinner sustains a patriarchal structure that does not favor women's paid work. The system guarantees the economic and social well-being of Lebanese women and children in return for social conformity. Compliance with these cultural norms is critical to the social stability and economic success that are desired by the family and the entire immigrant community. Rarely do Lebanese women want to challenge this system. They would be discouraged by the effect of increased privatization around the world, which has contributed to substantial suffering for women by placing the triple burden on them of homemaker, worker, and mother (Eisenstein 1996). Why would Lebanese women in Sierra Leone make substantial efforts to change their "restrictive" roles as mothers and homemakers, when they have available to them assistance from domestic workers and they do not have to deal with the consequences of juggling triple roles as other immigrant women do? Even working women who are not fully independent enjoy the support they get from their husbands and families as well as the availability of domestic workers.

Even if Lebanese immigrant women in Sierra Leone are willing to balance different roles, they are in a very disadvantaged position to negotiate or challenge the existing system. Politically, Lebanese immigrants have a weak relationship to the state. Under the laws of Sierra Leone it is often difficult for them to obtain full citizenship rights. Lebanese women are especially divorced from the process of applying for and obtaining Sierra Leonean citizenship. Economically, Lebanese women lack adequate work opportunities to provide leverage for the struggle for justice and equality. Socially, Lebanese men set the terms in which debates on women's rights, if raised at all, should proceed. The men are not restricted in their access to sexual relations with Blacks. Asymmetrical gender relations lead to limited work opportunities for Lebanese women, who are expected to distance themselves from public spaces that would encourage interactions with Blacks. Lebanese women are not entirely powerless within the structural restraints of this gendered migration. Without them, the strength and durability of ties between home and host country would not have lasted. During the earlier migration, it seemed that Lebanese men were assimilating into African Sierra Leonean culture through intermarriage and alliances with local chiefs. Through wealth and the ease of travel, they were able to connect with Lebanese women from their homeland, continue to establish Lebanese families abroad, and maintain key aspects of the homeland culture. Women provide stability and security to Lebanese families in a place that has remained strange to them. Gender does matter in the shaping of identities among Lebanese immigrants in Sierra Leone.

References

- Anthias, Floya. 1990. Race and Class Revisited: Conceptualising Race and Racisms. *Sociological Review* 38(1):19–42.
- Benton, Lauren. 2000. *Law and Colonial Culture*. Cambridge, MA: University of Cambridge Press.
- Dietz, Mary G. 1987. Context Is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship. *Daedalus* 1: 5.
- Eisenstein, Zillah. 1996. Stop Stomping on the Rest of Us: Retrieving Publicness from the Privatization of the Globe. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 4(1):59–95.
- Forster, Edward Morgan. 1965. *A Passage to India*. New York: Harvest Books.

- Gilroy, Paul. 1991. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Culture Politics of Race and Nation*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Government of Sierra Leone. 1976. *The Sierra Leone Citizenship (Amendment) Act*. Government Printing Department, Sierra Leone, pp. A47–A52.
- Hale, A., and J. Wills. 2007. Women Working Worldwide: Transnational Networks, Corporate Social Responsibility and Action Research. *Global Networks* 7(4): 453-476.
- Harris, Nigel. 1995. *The New Untouchables: Immigration and the New World Worker*. London: I. B. Tauris Publishers.
- Jaggard, Alison. 1988. *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Laslett, Barbara, and Johanna Brenner. 1989. Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives. *Annual Review Sociology* 15:387–404.
- Lebanese Women's Association in Sierra Leone. 1992. *Lebanese Women Association Magazine*. Freetown, Sierra Leone: New Era Printing Press.
- Lee, Jennifer. 2002. From Civil Relations to Racial Conflict: Merchant-Customer Interactions in Urban America. *American Sociological Review* 67: 77–98.
- Leighton, Neil O. 1993. "Lebanese Emigration: Its Effect on the Political Economy of Sierra Leone." In *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration*, edited by Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi. London, UK: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Lenz, Ilse. 2005. *Gender, Transnationalism, and Economic Citizenship in Care Work*. Unpublished.
- Lister, Ruth. 1997. *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Macmillan, Allister (ed.). 1920 (reprinted 1968). *The Red Book of West Africa*. London: Frank Cass & Co.
- Multi-Douglas, Fedwa. 1996. As the World (or Dare I Say the Globe?) Turns: Feminism and Transnationalism. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 4(1): 137–144.
- Maynard, Mary. 1990. The Re-shaping of Sociology? Trends in the Study of Gender. *Sociology* 24(2):269-290.
- Mohanty, Chandra. 1991. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1996. Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States. *Current Anthropology* 37(5): 737–762.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1996. Strategic Sisterhood or Sisters in Solidarity? Questions of Communitarianism and Citizenship in Asia. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 4(1): 107–135.
- Pateman, Carole. 1989. *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pateman, Carole. 1988. *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Safran, W. 1991. Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return. *Diasporas* 1(1): 83–99.
- Sassen, Saskia. 1996. Toward a Feminist Analytics of the Global Economy. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 4(1): 7–41.
- Sassen, Saskia. 1991. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton & New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Stalker, Peter. 1994. *The Work of Strangers: A Survey of International Labour Migration*. Geneva: International Labour Office.
- University of Sierra Leone Public Records Office, Box 684, Bundle 25, Colonial Secretary Office (CSO), 1/7 Confidential Minute Papers 1919: C/138, Compensation of Syrians for Stores Alleged Stolen out of the Barracks at Port Lokkoh, 21 August 1919.
- University of Sierra Leone Public Records Office, Colonial Secretary Office (CSO) Form 18, Files Relating to the Anti-Syrian Riot of 1919: N0. 1424/1920, Distribution of Copies of the Syrian Undertakings to Provincial Commissions, 14 April 1920.
- University of Sierra Leone Public Records Office, Colonial Secretary Office (CSO) Form 18, Files relating to the anti-Syrian riot of 1919. Claims Made by Syrians as a Result of the 1919 Riot, Syrian Immigrants and Emigrants 1921–1922.

Personal Interviews

- Amal, a 44-year-old first-generation interior designer. She is a Muslim from the city of Tripoli in north Lebanon and is married with two children. Interviewed February 16, 2002.
- Hala, a 40-year-old first-generation homemaker. She is Muslim and is married and has six children. She is from Bint Jbeil in the south of Lebanon. Interviewed January 30, 2002.
- Mariam, a 28-year-old first-generation employee at the United Nations Relief Organization. She is a Christian from the north of Lebanon and is married with two children. Interviewed January 30, 2002.
- Mary, a 57-year-old fourth-generation small storeowner. She is Christian and a widow with four children. Her forebears originally came from the coastal town of Jounieh in Lebanon. Interviewed February 28, 2002.
- Rana, a 35-year-old second-generation small boutique owner. She is Muslim and is married with three children. Her parents originally came from 'Ain Nibl in the south of Lebanon. Interviewed February 27, 2002.
- Wadia, a 96-year-old first-generation widow. She is Christian from the village of Tleil Akar in north Lebanon. She has no surviving children. Interviewed February 16, 2002.