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Women's Community Service in Beirut

Deeb, L.

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Lebanon

LARA DEEB

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During Ramadan afternoons in *al-dahiyya al-junubiyya*, the southern suburbs of Beirut, while most people are rushing through traffic to arrive home before *iftar*, a bustle of activity fills a warehouse on a prominent street corner. A crowd of over one hundred people waits impatiently on one side of the building. On the other side, separated by a colourfully wallpapered partition, fifteen well-dressed women volunteers rush around filling plastic containers with food and packing them into bags along with bread, soda, vegetables, and sweets. At a table along the partition's edge, two volunteers hand these bags to those in the waiting crowd. Another table is occupied by several wealthy donors, sitting with two more volunteers, who entertain them while keeping track of the many children rushing around trying to help. This is the scene one hour before sunset during Ramadan at the food distribution centre of the Social Advancement Association (SAA).

► **Volunteers shelling peas at the SAA centre during Ramadan.**

The SAA is one of the many Islamic *jam'iyyat*, or welfare organizations, located in *al-dahiyya*. The organization is active throughout the year, providing basic foodstuffs, clothing and shoes, essential household items, and health and educational assistance for approximately two hundred client families. The *jam'iyya* also conducts education programmes on topics ranging from 'correct' religious knowledge to how to store food properly or treat a child's fever.

All of this is done almost entirely with women's volunteer labour. Without the time and energy of women volunteers, neither the Ramadan centre nor any of the other activities and projects of this and the other *jam'iyyat* in the area would be possible.

Volunteering and piety

Women's motivations for volunteering vary, but no matter how and why a woman initially joins a *jam'iyya*, it soon becomes an integral part of her life and identity, especially her identity as a pious member of the community. Volunteers understand faith as a ladder they must continually struggle to climb. One of the fundamental rungs on this ladder is *mu'amalat*, mutual reciprocal social relations. As the vehicle through which personal piety is most clearly brought into the public realm, community service is an important component of these social relations; a component that encapsulates both the personal morality and the public expression that together constitute piety in this community.

Taking this to an extreme, some volunteers have internalized these social expectations into an unorthodox conviction that community service is a religious 'duty' on par with prayer.

As one volunteer put it, '[f]or us it's not that it's a good thing for us to do this work – no, for us it's become an obligation, like prayer and fasting.' Demonstrating a sense of social responsibility is a critical aspect of being a moral person for many volunteers, and it is important to fulfil that responsibility before oneself and God.

In addition, in order to be seen as a 'good' Muslim woman in *al-dahiyya*, barring exempting circumstances, one is expected to participate in at least some of the activities of at least one *jam'iyya*. Community service has become a new social norm. This expectation is conveyed by volunteers to their relatives, friends, and neighbours in conversations about *jam'iyya* activities as well as outright attempts at recruitment. Once a *jam'iyya* network identifies a potential participant who is judged to be of good moral character – or occasionally when an interested woman herself initiates contact with a *jam'iyya* – she will receive a steady stream of telephone calls and invitations to attend fundraisers and other

events. Gradually, she will be drawn into working with the *jam'iyya* more regularly.

As a social norm for women, community service provides an externally visible marker of a woman's morality. While not volunteering does not necessarily damage a woman's status or reputation provided she has good reasons for not participating and is not assumed to spend her time frivolously, participating in the activities of a *jam'iyya* adds significantly to public perceptions of her moral character. In this way community service has been incorporated into a normative moral system for women in *al-dahiyya*.

However, volunteers' prolific public participation is not without its critics. Despite its links to piety, a woman's volunteer activities are only met with approval if her household responsibilities are also fulfilled. Volunteers believe that with proper 'organization', women should be able to manage the double shift of household and community work, and many take pride in their ability to do so. This too is linked to piety, as the energy and ability to complete one's work in both arenas tirelessly and efficiently are viewed as gifts from God, and often taken as further indication of a woman's religiosity.

Why women?

As a public indicator of piety in *al-dahiyya*, community service is gender-specific, holding particular salience for women. To a certain extent, this obtains from the structure and method of the work itself. From among the myriad tasks and responsibilities fulfilled by volunteers, the most constant activity is regular visits to client families. During these visits, volunteers distribute material assistance, monitor changes in a family's economic, social, and health situation, draw on their personal networks to facilitate access to health-care or employment, and provide advice and education. In essence, they function as liaisons between these families and the material and cultural resources managed and distributed by the *jam'iyyat*. In a community where a woman's – and her family's – reputation would be severely compromised if she were to receive unaccompanied male visitors in her home, household visits are impossible for a male volunteer. Women volunteers, on the other hand, are able to enter homes readily. This is especially crucial as many of the households assisted by the *jam'iyyat* are female-headed.

Furthermore, women are believed to be inherently suitable for community work due to an understanding of essentialized sex differences that posits women as more nurturing than men. Both women and men in the community indicate that women's natural empathetic and emotional capacities equip them to handle the emotional stress of dealing with poverty, to contribute to the proper upbringing of orphans and the education of the poor more generally, and to be committed to community welfare.

Interestingly these essentialized sex differences are not necessarily interpreted as limiting women to domestically oriented roles in society. Many in *al-dahiyya* believe women have the potential to make excellent doctors, engineers, and politicians. The sole exception



PHOTO: LARA DEEB, BEIRUT, 2000

to this is the battlefield. Women are believed to be innately unsuited to military service, and taking up arms is considered inappropriate except in situations of self-defence. In the context of Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon (and after, as the border is still considered an active front), community work represents an appropriate way for women to participate in the Islamic Resistance without entering the battlefield. In this sense, the importance of community service is not gender-specific, but the form that service takes is related to perceived gendered proclivities.

Finally, it is necessary to factor in a gender ideology that values men's work and time over women's, a valuation linked to the persistent notion that men are the primary providers. Women's employment is assumed to provide a secondary income to a household, and women's household duties are assumed to allow for more flexibility in time than men's work. Compounding this is the notion that paid employment in a *jam'iyya* does not carry the same weight with regard to piety as volunteering does, because it does not represent the same level of self-sacrifice. Volunteering, for many women, is seen as a form of martyrdom, paid in sweat instead of blood.

Women in the public

So what does women's volunteerism in this community and its relationship to piety mean for gendered understandings of the public/private divide? As Suad Joseph has noted, researchers and theorists tend to view voluntary associations as a constituent aspect of civil society and to locate them in the public sphere. Coupled with assumptions about a gendered public/private divide, particularly in studies of the Middle East/North Africa, *jam'iyyat* and other such organizations are thereby associated with men.* By their mere visibility in occupying public spaces and engaging in public work, women volunteers in *al-dahiyya* challenge these assumptions and conclusions. Yet the gendered divide between the public and private has been critiqued as overly dichotomous, particularly in the context of the Middle East. Women's community service in *al-dahiyya* reflects the porosity and the blurring of the division itself.

On the one hand, women in *al-dahiyya* are challenging traditional gendered boundaries through their active participation in the public sphere. This is the view of many SAA volunteers. For example, while expounding on the importance of the SAA as a women-only *jam'iyya* one afternoon, Hajji Amal observed that '[m]en think that women can't have a *jam'iyya* that works, because they think that when women gather we just gossip or fight.' She went on to assert her hopes that, through the work of the SAA they would be able to change men's views of women in the community by providing an example of a well-run and well-organized women's organization. At the same time, women's volunteerism draws on traditional gender roles and definitions.

Women's community service is also public with regard to the public marker of morality it carries. The understandings of piety that include community service as a constituent component are understandings produced in part by women in the community. Volunteers' argument that women have the same capacity for rationality as men is often extended to state that therefore, community service should be the rational choice for good Muslim women in the community and the logical extension of one's moral responsibility. While this argument draws upon notions of gender equity, it also contributes to the construction of a social norm that carries moral implications for women with regard to status and reputation. In this way, women are participating in the construction of community service as a social norm, and the proliferation of a broader normative moral system that may be as constraining as it is liberating.

Note

* Suad Joseph, 'Gender and Civil Society' (Interview with Joe Stork), in Joel Beinin and J. Stork (eds), *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 64–70.

Lara Deeb is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at Emory University, USA.

E-mail: ldeeb@learnlink.emory.edu