THE STATUS OF AGING WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
The Process of Change in the Life Cycle of Rural Lebanese Women

by

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Date: 7-30-79

Approved:

Naomi Quinn, Supervisor

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Is there a reversal of the typical sex roles of women and men in later life? This question provided the focus for an anthropological investigation of 1) the differences in the psychological aging of Middle Eastern women and men in general, and 2) a possible transition over the life cycle in the relative status and power of Lebanese women and men in particular. Anecdote and allusion in the anthropological literature pertaining to many disparate cultures--including the Middle East--have suggested that with age, women become increasingly dominant and aggressive (i.e., stereotypically masculine), while men become increasingly passive and submissive (i.e., stereotypically feminine). Given that the features commonly attributed to Middle Eastern society include an intense concern for female modesty and institutionalized inferiority and subjugation of women to men, one would anticipate that Middle Eastern women (at least young women) would experience a very limited degree of power and autonomy. Therefore, the researcher expected that such a normatively patriarchal society like Lebanon would provide a most dramatic test case for this possible alteration in female status and increment in power, particularly if such a transition were, in fact, accompanied by a decline in the reputed hegemony of men in this society.

Although this study was guided by a developmental psychological approach to human aging, it was necessarily synchronic in nature. To compensate for this, the researcher examined the life stages of females (from infants to the very old) in a contemporary Sunni Muslim community in Southern Lebanon. The methods of participant observation, the interview, an "Arabized" Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), and (Cantril's) Self-anchoring Striving Scale (to assess life satisfaction) were employed to attain the following research goals: 1) to investigate the reputedly low status and degree of power of the younger women of this Lebanese community; 2) to establish whether in this society women become increasingly powerful and dominant with age; 3) to articulate the process of this transition in female status over the life cycle with regard to (a) changes in the style of female dominance-expression, and (b) the timing of these changes; 4) to investigate the effects of such a transition in female power on the degree and expression of male dominance and power in this society; and 5) to assess the life satisfaction of women and men, particularly in relation to the changing social status and degree of power experienced by each sex from early adulthood to old age.

The general conclusions reached by this study are: 1) a rural Lebanese woman is indeed powerful and dominant vis-à-vis men throughout her life, but increasingly so with age. Moreover, the style of feminine dominance in this society changes over the life-span. Specifically, there is a transition from a feminine influence that is implicit, covert, and marked by subterfuge, to one that is increasingly overt, and recognized at least by those in an older woman's immediate life space. Essentially this transition approaches a change from de facto to de jure hegemony; that is, feminine power in post-menopausal women acquires an aspect of authority; 2) the power enjoyed by men in this society is de jure; they have authority over women. However, due to certain psycho-socioeconomic components (delineated in the thesis), this masculine power is quite tenuous; as men age, the tenuous, fragile nature of the foundations of their authority is increasingly exposed and eroded. Consequently, the hegemony of rural Lebanese men appears to decline with age; and 3) throughout the life cycle, and especially in late middle age, women in this Lebanese community experience greater life satisfaction than men.