Women's Community Service in Beirut

During Ramadan afternoons in al-dahiyya al-junu-biya, the southern suburbs of Beirut, while most people are rushing through traffic to arrive home before iftar, a busy crowd fills a lot near a prominent street corner. A crowd of over one hun-
dred people waits impatiently on one side of the building. On the other side, separated by a colourfu-
ly 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 vol-
unteers, who entertain them while keeping track of
the many children rushing around trying to help.
This is the scene one hour before sunset during Ra-
madan at the food distribution site of the Centre of the Social Advancement Association (SAA).

The SAA is one of the many Islamic jam'iyya, or welfare organizations, located in al-
dahiyya that are part of the local community. Women participate in voluntary associations for various reasons between these families and the mater-
al care or employment, and provide advice and education. In essence, they function as li-
technic and emotional capacities equip them
to piety as volunteering does, because it does not
require the same level of self-sacrifice. Volunteering, for many women, is seen as a form of martyrdom, paid in sweat instead of blood.

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 com-
munity. Volunteers understand faith as a ladder that
they must continually struggle to climb. One of the fundamental rungs on this ladder is charity, mutual reciprocal social rela-
tions. As the vehicle through which personal piety is expressed and a base for social welfare, community service is an important component of these social relations; a com-
pONENT that encapsulates both the personal moral and public expression that go
together constitute piety in this community.

Taking this to an extreme, some volunteers have internalized these social expectations into an unorthodox conviction that commu-
nity service is a religious ‘duty’ with par with prayer.

As one volunteer put it, ‘for 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 re-
sponsibility is a critical aspect of being a moral person for many volunteers, and it is implied and expected that responsibility before oneself and God.

In addition, in order to be seen as a ‘good’ Muslim woman in al-dahiyya, barring ex-
ceptions, 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 expectation. This expectation is conveyed by volunteers to their relatives, friends, and neighbours in conversations about community activities as well as outreach at-
tivities at recruitment. Once a woman in a jam'iyya net-
work identifies a potential participant who is judged to be of good moral character – or oc-
casional, when interested women herself initiates contact with a jam'iyya – she will re-
cieve 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 volunteer-
ing does not necessarily damage a woman’s reputa-
tion, it is significantly more difficult to maintain. This is due to the high visibility of
volunteers and the tendency for public perceptions of her moral character. In this way community service has become standardly incorporated into a normative moral system for women in all-dahiyya.

However, volunteers’ prolific public par-
ticipation is not without its critics. Despite their efforts to include and encourage women,
Volunteers believe that with proper ‘organi-
tation is not without its critics. Despite their efforts to include and encourage women, the double shift of household and commu-
nity work, and many take pride in their abil-
ity 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, hold-
ning 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 vis-
its to client families. During these visits, volunteers distribute material assistance, in addition to services such as advice and
education. In the jam'iyya’s ideology that posits women as more nurturing and inherently suitable for community work due to
their double shift of household and commu-
nity work, and many take pride in their abil-
ities to manage the time and energy required to
participate in the Islamic Resistance without en-
tering the battlefield. In this sense, the impor-
tance of community service is not gender-
specific, but the form that service takes is re-
lated 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 per-
sistent notion that men are the primary providers. Women’s employment is assumed to provide a secondary income to a house-
hold, and women’s household duties are as-
sumed to allow for more flexibility in time for 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 sphere

So what does women’s volunteerism in this community and its relationship to piety mean for
gendered understandings of the public/private divide? As Saud Joseph has noted, researchers and theorists tend to view volunteer associations as a constituent aspect of civil society and to locate them in the pub-
diplomatic sphere. This is the view of many SAA volun-
teers. For example, while expounding on the con-
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On the one hand, women in al-dahiyya are challenging traditional gendered boundaries through their active participation in the pub-
lic sphere. This is the view of many SAA volun-
teers. For example, while expounding on the importance of the SAA as a women-only jam'iyya after one afternoon, Hajji Amal observed that “[m]in 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 commu-
nity by providing an example of a well-run and well-organized women’s organization. At the same time, women’s volunteerism is seen in traditional gender roles and definitions.

Women’s community service is also public with regard to the public moral of morality. This carries the understandings of piety that in-
clude community service as a constituent component are understandings produced in part by women in the community. Volunteers’ argument that women have the same capaci-
ty for rationality as men is often extended to state that therefore, community service should be the rational choice for good Mus-
lim 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 implica-
tions for women with regard to status and reputation. In this way, women are participat-
ing 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