"WOMEN WERE STRONG": GENDER AND MIGRATION FROM THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Akram Khater

At the entrance to the Port of Beirut there stands a statue. In Arabic it is titled "The Lebanese [Male] Emigrant: from Lebanon to the World".[1] It was erected in 2003—with a duplicate unveiled earlier in Mexico and another one later in Australia—to commemorate the departure of hundreds of thousands of emigrants from the shores of Lebanon to the Americas, Africa and Australia. In frozen bronze the statue collapses these myriad stories and experiences—which span the 1870s through the 1960s—into an essentialized image of "The Emigrant" and creates a normative and simplistic narrative of the complex history of immigration from the Eastern Mediterranean.[2] It depicts a lone peasant with a *kashé* (small sack) over his shoulder staring off over the Mediterranean with a majestic look and stance. Absent are the city and town folks, the families that invested their monies and dreams into this departure from the ordinary, and the doubts and failures that permeate these journeys. The statue's label also superimposes a national identity (Lebanese) onto predominantly pre-national peregrinations from a wider region. Thus, it presumes as Lebanese the many who today would be called Palestinians and Syrians, and simplifies the struggle over multiple identities into a singular fait-accompli. But most strikingly, women are nowhere to be seen in this representation of emigration; the gendered statue of a male emigrant, textually and visually, enshrines a romanticized notion of the individual man facing the world alone.

The story of emigration is, as can be expected, far more complex and certainly not all about men setting off alone into the distance. In this essay I would like—in necessarily summary terms—to present a different history

[1] Arabic is a gendered language. It also has a simple Spanish title which reads: "Statue of the Male Emigrant". This statue, and its replicas, was erected by the Lebanese Club in Mexico City.

[2] The Eastern Mediterranean, or Levant, refers to today's Lebanon, Syria and Palestine/Israel. While emigrants left from all these areas, the majority (60–80 percent) came from Mount Lebanon. They were known as Turcos in Latin America or more commonly as Syrians, which referred to the pre-WWI area and not the post-WWI nation-state.

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of emigration from the Eastern Mediterranean. I would like to complicate the simplistic yet predominant narrative of this historical movement of people between 1870 and the 1960s by looking at two frequently ignored aspects of this story.[3] At the most basic level I will argue that the ranks of those of who left their villages and towns were replete with women—married and single—who travelled not simply for family reunification but just as often on their own initiative for similar reasons that compelled their male counterparts to leave the shores of the Mediterranean. Of equal importance is to look at this migration not nostalgically as the "heroic" ventures of individuals, but rather as a family investment whose story is as much about women working alongside their men, and quite often toiling by themselves. Finally, I will argue that the predominant narrative which minimizes women's immigration in terms of numbers and causes, and makes them to be only wives, daughters and sisters residing within the confines of the home was a constructed one. It is a narrative that had little to do with the historical realities of early immigration and far more to do with the desire of second generation immigrants to enter the ranks of the "respectable" middle classes.

"Emigration Fever"[4]

Immigration from the Levant predates the nineteenth century. For centuries before, people moved in groups small and large within the region to avoid taxes, because of economic downturns, to seek seasonal work or to escape religious persecution. However, the trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific migrations only began in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first wave lasted through the early 1930s.

[3] Scholarship on Lebanese immigration has sought to include women in the narrative starting with Afif Tannous and his article "Social Change in an Arab Village", *American Sociological Review* 6 (1941): 650–662; and including the work of Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale, 1985); Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, 1997); and Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley, 2001). However, for the most part women have been nearly absent from all other writings about immigrants to South and Central America, and to sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, studies on early Turkish migration have been very male-centred. More to the point, gender as an analytical category is rarely used in exploring these histories.

[4] Fifty-Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1891, 225.

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There was not a singular reason for which Levantine men and women emigrated. Escaping a bad marriage, reuniting with family, fleeing real or perceived religious persecution were all reasons to leave home. But, in general, the great majority left seeking to make money and intended to return after a hiatus, and because legal and logistical changes permitted them to depart when residents of other provinces of the Ottoman Empire could not. As with other parts of the nineteenth century world, the Eastern Mediterranean (particularly Mount Lebanon) attracted European capitalists seeking markets for their manufactured goods and sources of raw material for their factories. In this instance it was silk that brought merchants from Marseilles and Lyons—through local intermediaries—to the villages that dotted the Mount Lebanon range. Higher prices offered for silk cocoons enticed local producers to sell to the newcomers as well as to increase their production. Typically—as the story usually goes at some point for incorporation into the world capitalist market—after a decade or so the prices started fluctuating. By the 1870s, they had definitely stagnated because of the entry of China and Japan into the market, especially as the latter was bent on industrializing through a massive production of higher quality silk. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and steamboat navigation contributed as well to the saturation of the silk market and to the fall in prices. Finally, the deathblow came from European-manufactured synthetic fibres that—starting in the 1880s—steadily undermined the silk market. For the villagers in Mount Lebanon this historical process had an intimate impact on their daily lives. After three decades of prosperity—in which they experienced a better standard of living that translated into, among other things, a doubling of the population—they saw themselves sliding back into poverty and dispossession of their land. This was effectively making them landless labourers rather than peasants. In an effort to counter this undesirable end, about one-tenth of the peasant population opted to send their daughters to work in silk factories. This family strategy for financial survival strained the gender "contract" to its breaking point.[5] But, it did not completely solve the problem, particularly as the factories were under-funded and could not compete with the technological superiority of French and Italian silk factories. Thus, by the early 1890s the decision to emigrate appeared as the most financially viable alternative.

[5] Akram Khater, "From 'House' to 'Mistress of the House': Gender and Class in 19th Century Lebanon", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996): 325–348.

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At the same time it was possible for large numbers of families—and individuals—to implement this decision because of Mount Lebanon's unusual political status within the Ottoman Empire. After the 1860 civil war which wracked Mount Lebanon, European powers—bent on increasing their influence in the region—worked with some local elites to force the Ottoman government to provide Mount Lebanon with semi-independent status and secure greater personal freedom of movement for its inhabitants. The residents of Mt. Lebanon in turn used the two new elements to their advantage by circumventing intermittent Ottoman regulations against emigration.[6] The presence of Western missionaries (particularly American Presbyterians) in the Eastern Mediterranean facilitated the imagining of America and allowed for the mental leap needed to depart from home and hearth. Additionally, the establishment of steamboat navigation from the late 1870s onwards greatly eased travel. Finally, World War One and the terrible famine, which killed nearly one-third of the population in Mount Lebanon alone, spurred another wave of immigration from the Levant after 1919 which lasted through the early 1930s.

By 1930, all these factors combined had led to the cumulative departure of around 628,000 men and women from the Eastern Mediterranean. Almost 90 percent of them travelled to North or South America. The three largest communities came to reside in the United States (165,654), Brazil (162,178) and Argentina (148,270).[7] Quantitatively, women made up a significant percentage of these early emigrants; a few examples will suffice to illustrate this point. From the earliest days of Levantine immigration to Mexico, women represented over one third of the community, and their share grew steadily over time. Thus, between 1878 and 1909 women made up 38.6 percent of the 2,277 immigrants to Mexico; for the period between 1941 and 1951, their numbers had grown to 41 percent of the population.[8] For immigration to Brazil between 1908 and 1941, Clark Knowlton notes that the "Turco-Arabs have the highest ratio of all nationalities entering Brazil, 229.9 men to every 100 women... followed by the Syrians, 190.0,

[6] Engin Akarli, "Ottoman Attitudes towards Lebanese Immigration, 1885–1910", in *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Immigration*, ed. Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi, (London, 1992), 109–138.

[7] These numbers were collated by Kohei Hashimoto from French consular censuses of Lebanese-Syrian populations across the world from 1919–1929 and 1930–1940. France was the Mandate Power over much of the Levant—with the exception of Palestine—and oversaw all the consular needs of the immigrant population.

[8] Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp, *So Far From Allah, So Close to Mexico: Middle Eastern Immigrants in Modern Mexico* (Austin, 2007), 176.

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and the Lebanese, 168.2."[9] In other words, men made up 62 percent of the immigrants, while women constituted 38 percent. In Argentina, of the 3,508 Muslim immigrants from the Eastern Mediterranean, 2697 were males and only 811 females.[10] This low ratio (23 percent women immigrants) seems to have been a common pattern among Muslim immigrants.[11] However, among the Christian immigrants to Argentina—who represented over two-thirds of the community—that ratio was nearly double reaching as high as 45 percent. Similarly in Australia, between 1911 and 1947, women regularly made up 42 to 48 percent of the immigrating population from the Levant. In the United States, during the peak years of "Syrian" immigration between 1899 and 1914, women constituted 32 percent of the immigrants.[12]

Numerically, then, women constituted a significant element of emigration from the Eastern Mediterranean accounting for around 200,000 of the estimated 628,000 immigrants. But the issue is not only about numbers. Rather, it also pertains to the reasons for women's immigration as well as the role they played in the *mahjar* (land of immigration) once they arrived there. There is no doubt that one of the reasons for the departure of many single women to the *mahjar* was to marry, and for most married women it was to reunite with their husbands. The (tall) tales of riches to be had in "Amirka" first slowly (in the 1890s) and then rapidly (1900–1924) stripped villages of scores of men, single and married. Michael H. recounted one such letter that prompted him to emigrate to the US.

> In 1892 not many people were going to America. This family went to America and they wrote back…[to say that] they made $1000 [in three years]…When people of ʿAyn Arab saw that one man made … $1000, all of

[9] Clark Knowlton, "The Social and Spatial Mobility of the Syrian and Lebanese Community in São Paulo, Brazil", in *The Lebanese in the World*, 296.

[10] Gladys Jozami, "The Manifestation of Islam in Argentina", *The Americas* 53, no. 1 (July 1996): 77.

[11] For example, Kemal Karpat notes that of the 1,000 Druze immigrants to the US before 1920 there were only a dozen women, and of the total 8,000 Muslim immigrants only "about two dozen" were women. Kamal Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860–1914", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 2 (May 1985): 180. John J. Grabowski notes the almost total absence of women among the 25,000 Anatolian Turkish immigrants who came to the US between 1890 and 1920. "Prospects and Challenges: The Study of Early Turkish Immigration to the United States", *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 1 (Fall 2005): 85–100.

[12] US Senate, Industrial Commission on Immigration, 1907–1910, *Abstracts of Reports*, vol. 1 (Washington, 1911), 95; Philip Kayal and Joseph Kayal, *The Syrian-Lebanese in America*, (New York, 1975), 70.

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> ʿAyn Arab rushed to come to America ... Like a gold rush we left ʿAyn Arab, there were 72 of us ...[13]

Remittances sent back and new homes built were an added incentive. In the words of the US consul general, Ravndal, "... a village in the most remote parts of the Lebanon ... has ... at least 2 or 3 new houses with tiled roofs and ... even whole villages have been thus constructed [with remittances from the US]."[14] These blushings of wealth that could be seen from all over the village and from afar, attracted the attention and excited the imagination of those who had remained in the village still pondering how to secure their future as farmers. Consequently, the tens turned to hundreds, and by the turn of the twentieth century they were followed by thousands who left "Syria" every year. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, single women were having a difficult time finding a husband, and wives were left behind and alone to contend with a host of new social and financial problems. In both cases, the patriarchal contract was being broken. Some women left for the *mahjar* seeking to salvage this contract, while others found in this an opportunity to step outside the boundaries of their gender roles.

According to the statistics available to us, the movement of unmarried women peaked around the turn of the century, when 38.6 percent of women above the age of 18 arriving in the United States were single.[15] In Mexico, this same group made up 27.6 percent of the 2,554 women travelling there between 1878 and 1951.[16] It would be quite facile to conclude that exploring prospects of marriage was the sole motivation behind these young women's excursions. Yet, in addition to seeking better financial status and escaping village life, seeking marriage partners was definitely one of the main factors pulling the majority of women out of Mount Lebanon. Married women also had their reasons to leave the Mountain. Some wanted to escape an unhappy marriage, others sought a better financial status, and a few were after adventure, but most went looking for the "family". Perhaps the most famous case of a woman leaving an abusive relationship is that of Kamila Jibran, the mother of Khalil

[13] Smithsonian Institute, Naff Arab-American Collection, Series 4-c-c, interview with Mike H. and Ghandura H. and Nazira, Spring 1962.
[14] US Consular Reports, 18, Consul General Gabriel Bie Ravndal, "Report on Emigration from the Levant", September 12, 1903.
[15] United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Immigration, *Annual Report of the Commissioner General for the Fiscal Year 1918*, 69.
[16] Alfaro-Velcamp, *So Far From Allah*, 175.

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Jibran the famous Arab-American writer whose book *The Prophet* (1923) has more than two million copies in print and has been translated into 40 languages. Born in the northern village of Bsharé around 1855, Kamila first married Hanna ʿAbd al-Salaam Rahmé. Unfortunately, Rahmé died on a trip to Brazil he had undertaken alone to investigate the possibility of emigration. Later she married Khalil Saʾad Jibran by whom she had three children: Jibran (born 1883), Marianna (1894 or 1895) and Sultana (born 1886). By all accounts Khalil was a drunkard and a bully, and Kamila had long resented the poverty he led the family into through his behaviour. When he got into trouble with the Ottoman administration for extorting taxes from the peasants and grafting some of the collected fees into his own habits, Kamila decided to leave him. She took all her children and emigrated to the United States, travelling in steerage and arriving in June 1895.[17]

"My Mother Peddled"

Some women legitimized emigrating and leaving their husbands behind in the Levant on the premise of wanting to work to improve their financial lot. "A woman who was strong and courageous would leave her husband, be absent about 3 to 4 years and come back with $300 or $400. Her family would open a new home and villagers would go and welcome her . . ."[18] Daʾad Fatuh was that kind of woman. In 1884, Daʾad—who was a midwife—departed from her village of al-Munsif and left behind her husband to take care of a son and two-year old daughter. Upon disembarking in New Orleans, Daʾad had a baby who she was forced to place in the care of the Sisters of Mercy—since she did not know anyone in the city—while she went out peddling. When she came back she was told that the infant had died. Devastated by this news, and confused since she never saw the grave, Daʾad persisted in her pursuit to save enough money before going back to Lebanon. We do not know how much money Daʾad saved, or if she built a new home, but what we do know is that after returning to Lebanon she convinced her son to leave for the US at the age of 15, and later went

[17] Robin Waterfield, personal communication, October 7, 1997.
[18] Naff Arab-American Collection, Series 4-c-5, interview with Nicola Shamiyyi, April 1965.

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back herself for another stint of peddling around Meridian, Mississippi.[19] Najibé Younis was another adventurous soul who was not satisfied with staying poor in Lebanon when she "could gather a fortune" in the Americas. So, she too left her village and went even further West than Da'ad, peddling in Billings, Montana. There she catered to prostitutes "who were the kindest women" and who bought from her the "nice" things she was selling, such as linens, lace, silk and other fabrics. Only after two years of peddling in Wyoming and Montana, when she had saved $3,000 in addition to the money she sent to her husband in Lebanon, did Najibé rejoin her husband in Lebanon in 1906.[20] Other women, like Martha Cammel and Annie Tabsharani, were widowed and subsequently left for the US and Canada (respectively) to work and make a living and life for their children through peddling for years and then establishing their businesses.[21]

These glimpses do not fully capture the complexity of immigrant stories. In many cases, the story of women's immigration is far too complex to reduce to linear processes and singular reasons. For instance, Katrina Sa'ade's thickly woven life-story stands in marked contrast to the flattened narrative offered by the statue at the entrance of the Port of Beirut.[22] Born in Bethlehem, Palestine, in 1900, Katrina took her first migratory trip as a child of six to Kiev where her father had established a store selling "Holy Land" objects in 1882. By 1914 the family was back in Bethlehem penniless because of the war and the revolutionary tumult. Katrina was married to another Bethlehemite, Emilio Kabande, who had immigrated to Mexico and settled in San Pedro with his family in the late 1890s. Within two years of her marriage, Katrina lost her husband to a train accident and one of her two daughters to influenza. This tragedy compelled her to move to Long Beach, California, to live with her sister and brother-in-law and to work to support herself and her surviving daughter. Five years later she met another immigrant from Palestine whom she married and together they moved between Mexico, Arizona and California opening various stores and working together as partners with Katrina providing

[19] Naff Arab-American Collection, Series 4-c-1, interview with Abe Abraham, August 23, 1979.

[20] Naff Arab-American Collection, Series 4-c-5, interview with Mrs. Tom Amelia C. Unes, 1980.

[21] Sara Gualtieri, "Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis: Women and Syrian Transatlantic Migration, 1878–1924", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 1 (2004): 67–78.

[22] All the details of the life of Katrina Sa'ade are from Kathy Saade Kenny, *Katrina en Cinco Mundos* (Long Beach, 2010).

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the business acumen she inherited from her family and which her husband lacked. The Great Depression and her new father-in-law's pleas took a very reluctant Katrina back to Palestine where her sense of independence, cultivated by years of immigration, quickly clashed with a domineering family and her inability to work. The tensions grew so strong that in 1936 she returned to California alone with the children and from that point forward established her own businesses and remained unmarried for the remainder of her life.

In short, then, marriage and family reunification account for only some of the reasons for the emigration of women from the Eastern Mediterranean. A significant number of women travelled on their own initiative seeking to make a new life for themselves or to escape a previous one. Even more significantly, we simply cannot assume that marriage encompasses the whole experience of those women who did immigrate for that purpose. For, regardless of the reasons that compelled women to emigrate, nearly all of them ended up working with male relatives or independently. Numbers provide us with a glimpse of that. In New York, for example, we know that *officially* 38.1 percent of emigrant Lebanese women worked in either peddling or at a factory. Further south the numbers were smaller but not by much. Ignacio Klich estimated that in Argentina somewhere around one-fifth of the women worked alongside their husbands, and Charles Knowlton dismissed emigrant women's work as minimal in Brazil by noting that only a quarter worked. In Mexico between 1878 and 1909, there were 718 women who were designated as homemakers, while 171 (or 19 percent) were registered as having one occupation or another ranging from cloth merchant to farming.[23] In fact, it is quite certain that emigrant women *worked at earning money* in far larger numbers, albeit in ways oblique to the eyes of male observers. Based on interviews with emigrants in the US, Alixa Naff contends that anywhere between "75 and 80 percent of the women peddled during the pioneer years [1880s–1910]."[24] Even women who never peddled, or who left that task, worked in other venues. Many helped in family stores, sewed items at home that were later sold by a male relative, and some even worked as servants in houses of rich emigrants. Informally, women took in boarders, cleaned and cooked and made certain of a modicum of order in a chaotic world and time. The sight of "Syrian" women working was so common in the US that in 1920

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[23] Alfaro-Velcamp, *So Far From Allah*, 173–174.
[24] Naff, *Becoming American*, 178.

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Harry Chapman Ford wrote and produced a Broadway play titled "Anna Ascends" which takes as its subject a young immigrant, Anna Ayyoub, who goes from working as a waitress to a best-selling author. Two years later, Victor Fleming turned the play into a silent movie with Alice Brady and Nita Naldi.[25] This affirmation of a persistent—and generally positive notion—of an ethnic identity stood in sharp contrast to Israel Zangwill's far better remembered 1908 play *The Melting Pot*.

Going back to the "tangible", we find many testimonials to the long days and hard work that women put into making certain their families (in the *mahjar* or back home) survived. In the words of one descendent of emigrants, "Women weren't afraid and were strong and even women up to 70 years of age peddled."[26] Budelia Malooley recounted how "Mother arrived and started to peddle in Spring Valley ... must have been in her mid-teens at the time. She resumed peddling on her return to Spring Valley from Lebanon after my father died and I was born [about the first part of 1904]. She'd make $5 to $10/week. She'd have to send money back to Rachaya to support my sister and brother."[27] Women were drawn to peddling for several reasons. Primarily, and as noted above, most families would not have attained their financial goals without the work of women. But at other times women had no other option but to work as they were the sole or main "breadwinners". For Sultana al-Khazin work was a necessity of survival for her and her children. Sultana travelled to Philadelphia in 1901 to join her husband. However, upon arrival she discovered, much to her dismay that he was living with another woman named Nazira. His plan was for all of them to live together in the same house as one family. Sultana was not quite so cavalier—to say the least—in her approach to marriage, so she packed up the three children and moved out on her own. Soon she was selling linens door to door.[28] Some women lost their husbands not to infidelity but to death. They, equally, had to contend with raising a family on their own. Alice Assaley was widowed when she was only in her twenties. In order to raise her son and daughter without her husband or any other male relatives, Alice was left to fend for herself by working first as a janitor and later as a peddler in Springfield, Illinois.[29]

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25 Harry Chapman Ford, "Why I wrote A Syrian Play", *Syrian World* 2, no. 1 (July 1927): 33–40.

26 Naff Arab-American Collection, Series 4-c-5, interview with Mayme Faris, 1980.

27 Naff Arab-American Collection, Series 4-c-5, interview with Budelia Malooley, 1980.

28 Naff Arab-American Collection, Series 4-b, interview with Dorothy Lee Andrache (grand-daughter of Sultana), January 18, 1991.

29 Naff Arab-American Collection, Series 4-c-5.

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Louise Houghton remarked on another reason for women's work while discussing the misguided attempts of American social workers to induce "Syrian" women to abandon peddling for more "honourable and lady-like" pursuits. Rhetorically she asked: "Why should she [emigrant] give up the open air, the broad sky, the song of the birds, the smile of flowers, the right to work and rest at her own pleasure to immure herself within four noisy walls and be subject to the strict regime of the clock?"[30] Of course, one must take the pastoral bit about "song of birds" and "smile of flowers" with an immense grain of salt; life on the road was hardly this romantic. However, hidden amidst the flowery language is a good deal of common sense and truth. Peddling for some women was not only a necessity, but also an escape. For instance, Mayme Faris vividly remembers arguments between her father and mother about the latter's peddling activities.

> My mother peddled when my father had the [supplier's] store. It was a controversy between them; he didn't like her to; he didn't like her independence. She wanted more for them. She worked hard; two or three days after my sisters were born, she would be up washing and not long after that she'd take her stuff and peddle. Once my father got mad and destroyed her satchel—in front of the other peddlers and the women who lived around there too. No, she wasn't disgraced... She stopped it for a while and when she felt they needed more money, she would go. But independence was a big thing in their lives.[31]

Sophia Mussallem was equally persistent and restless in seeking financial independence. Starting in 1885, when she first immigrated to the United States at the age of 14, she worked. From Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Greenbay and Watertown, then across to the Oklahoma Territory she peddled all the way to Muskogie. Throughout her expeditions she stashed away money for the dream of owning a store, which she finally accomplished in Muskogie.[32] And Oscar Alwan's mother made more money as a peddler than did his father. "She was a strong woman... She was never afraid, people [in upstate New York] loved her and waited for her to arrive. She knew how to deal with people, she was a good saleswoman."[33] Of the 300 or so women who arrived in North Carolina between 1890 and 1930,

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[30] Louise Seymour Houghton, "Syrians in the United States", *Survey* 26 (part 2, 5 August 1911): 648.
[31] Naff Arab-American Collection; Series 4-c-5, interview with Mayme Faris, 1980.
[32] Naff Arab-American Collection; Series 4-c-5, interview with Eva Frenn, November 18, 1980.
[33] Naff Arab-American Collection; Series 4-c-5, interview with Oscar Alwan, July 16, 1980.

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two-thirds either opened their own businesses or helped in the family store, and many were far more entrepreneurial than their husbands.[34]

Of course, not all enjoyed this "freedom", which for some was a burden more than anything else. In Toronto,

> There was a girl from Rachaya who peddled and it was cold and the snow would come to her waist and she'd have to walk from door to door, street to street. It was very difficult in those days. One day she despaired. She took her suitcases and angrily threw them aside saying "ah, when will I be rid of you, you kashé. When?" A Lady nearby asked her "what's the matter?" she answered nothing and sighed heavily. This lady turned out to be Arab—she asked the peddler in Arabic: 'Are you an Arab?' She answered: "yes". The helpful lady said in Arabic, "If I find you a husband will you marry him?" The girl answered yes, find me one. I will marry anyone so I can finish with this kashé and from peddling. The lady found her a man and the girl married him and was happy with him.[35]

While sounding like a variation on the story of Cinderella, this tale embodies the frustrations some women must have felt with the hard life they encountered in the *mahjar*. Hauling 25 or 50 pound satchels on their backs mile after mile was exhausting; knocking on doors and struggling with hand gestures and broken English to make a sale was agonizing and humiliating at times. This was so because the context of labour had changed in the crossing of the Atlantic. While in the village most people worked and lived along similar lines, the same was not the case in the *mahjar*. There the gap between rich and poor was far more glaring, especially to immigrant women who knocked on middle class doors all day long. The suspicious or pitying looks they received only added mental burdens to their physical labour. In comparison to the elaborate entryways and wallpaper with which middle class homes came to be decorated, the tenement housing to which they returned every evening must have been ever more depressing. And, even if many of these women were strong it does not mean they did not tire of the daily routine of working all day only to come home and work half the night.

It should be obvious by now, from all the "althoughs" and "whiles" that are sprinkled throughout the preceding paragraphs that the experience of immigrant women varied considerably. Their desire for work as well

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[34] These numbers are based on interviews the author carried out between August 2010 and May 2011 for an oral history project on the Lebanese in North Carolina. See http://lac.chass.ncsu.edu for details.

[35] Naff Arab-American Collection, Series 4-c-1, interview with Skiyyé Samaha, 1962.

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as their need and reasons for employ were hardly uniform. But the fact that they all worked, at one time or another, outside the "house" is the common thread running through their varying experiences. Abandoning the "private" space of the house and sallying forth on a daily basis into the "public" world of city streets was a new experience for most of these women. In the United States, Brazil and Argentina it was made even more so by the fact that these spaces were being articulated—at various moments—into a gendered division of society even as they arrived at New York, São Paulo, or Buenos Aires. In the US, social workers and the burgeoning middle class did not expect women—the repository of morality in society—to work in the sullied world outside the door of the home.[36] Thus, these women were not only transgressing their "imported" gender boundaries; they were also trampling—as it were—across the terrain of a middle class world rising all around them. Similarly, in Tucuman, Argentina the "turcos"—immigrants from the Eastern Mediterranean—were critiqued for allowing women to peddle outside the house.[37] In the *mahjar* women's work—borne of economic necessity and individual desire—was implicitly and explicitly questioning both the "traditional" and the "modern" notion of women's role in society. Equally, the crisscrossing between "private" and "public" spaces was wreaking havoc upon the lines that were being drawn between the two by emerging middle classes. Altogether, then, emigrant women were challenging the simplifying division of the world surrounding them, making the ideas of "modern" and "traditional" largely irrelevant.

"Humiliating Things"

But it was not only social reformers wanting to "nativize" the immigrants and nativists seeking to stem their flow by casting aspersions on their moral fibre and behaviour who critiqued and objected to women's work. Some members of the community raised questions about this work. In an article that appeared in *al-Huda*—an Arabic newspaper published in New York—in 1903, Elias Nassif Elias, a regular and early contributor,

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[36] For excellent studies of the rise of the middle class in America see Mary Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class: the Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (New York, 1981) and Stuart M. Blumin's *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (New York, 1989).

[37] Estela Valverde, "Integration and Identity in Argentina: The Lebanese of Tucuman", in *Lebanese in the World*, 328.

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contended that women's work tarnished the honour of the "Syrians". To make his point, Elias wrote of an experience he had while sitting in the lobby of the Central House hotel, in Bridgewater, Maine. "While talking with some men about various matters," he wrote, "[we heard] a light knock on the door, so one of us got up to open it only to find a Syrian woman weighed down by her heavy load . . . and she sighed saying: I will sell to those men for the amount of 4 or 5 dollars and I do not care if they laughed at, or made fun of, me."[38] With the stage set, Elias proceeded to describe a scene in which the "American" men ask the "Syrian" woman to do various "humiliating things" (such as letting one of the men tie her shoes) that carried dishonourable overtones. Elias could not stand the situation anymore, so . . . he left without identifying himself as a compatriot of the woman. Without reflecting on the irony inherent in his lack of intervention in the "degrading" affair, Elias proceeded—in his composition—to reproach the "Syrians" for letting "their" women work. He scathingly asked, "Oh, you dear Syrians who claim honor . . . is it honorable to send your women to meander and encounter such insults?"[39] As more of the immigrants made the move from itinerant peddling to a "respectable" settled life, such questions only became more persistent and the tone and intensity of opposition to women's work grew more strident.

The "concern" was not just about protecting an "honour" grounded in the "traditional" construct of patriarchy. Many of those objecting to women's work saw it as a departure not only from village "norms", but more importantly from the standards of the middle class in America, into whose ranks they were trying to gain entry. Using clinical terms, women's work was identified as the "disease" that was "infecting" the communal body, and simultaneously destroying "traditional honour" and "modern morality". In a singular turn of phrase, then, these authors collapsed women's economic independence with sexual freedom, and termed both as detrimental. Part of the "cure" for these problems was to subjugate women to male authority and confine them to the "home". This recommendation echoed the fears of the larger American middle class of sexuality and the restrictions which its members applied to confine female sexuality within the house.[40] And like the Anglo-Saxon bourgeois moralists who

[38] Nassif Elias, "Syrian Honor", *al-Huda*, May 9, 1903, 2.
[39] Ibid.
[40] In the 1860s American writers on sexuality, such as Doctor R.T. Trall, placed control of the "passional expression of love" to the house and its control to the woman. And while admitting the possibility that women can experience sexual pleasure, he and other writers

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surrounded them, these authors sought then to universalize the "true" gender identity that derived from middle class history and sensibilities. In fact, other authors argued that the only way to avoid the "fall" of women into "ruin" is to mix with "middle classes of America" and not the lower classes "with whom we the Syrians mingle".[41]

In the imagination of such immigrants, a woman's place was clearly within a middle class house which included only the immediate family of husband, wife and children. This was to be a sanitized space where foul language and rough play would be banished and where order in every aspect of life (theoretically in any case) presided over chaos. One American reformer depicted this life in the following manner:

> The social and moral life of a smaller family where the father earns enough to support wife and children, and where the mother can devote her time to the care of them, and where neither she nor the children go out and help in the support of the family, is superior to that of a family with a large number of children where the wife and often the older children must slave.[42]

Within such an isolated environment, sexuality would once again be contained within the marital contract and bond. More specifically, women's sexuality would be (again, at least, theoretically) controlled by the husband, who nonetheless would continue to have access to sex through his commutes into the "city" and public life from the privatized suburbs.

The criticism levelled against women's work was met with objections from more liberal elements within the Levantine immigrant community. These contrarian views did not advocate women's work as inherently good, but rather as a necessary evil. Articles and editorials appearing in Arab-American newspapers sought to dispel concern over women's labour by making statements to the extent that a woman's honour, "like pure gold", will not be tarnished by work. To emphasize that last point, *al-Huda*—the newspaper mentioned earlier—reminded its readers that women had worked in the silk factories of Mount Lebanon without any visible side-effects; and that was long before they had arrived in "Amrika".[43] Speaking from an equally "modernist" and middle class perspective, these latter writers tended to emphasize that the fault lay not with the women but with their "lazy" or "incapacitated" husbands or fathers. Read, for example,

either subordinated female sexual desire, or lust, "to the passive, loving faculties of feminine character or denied [it] entirely". Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 105.

41 "Improving our Syrian race", *al-Huda*, October 21, 1905, 3.

42 S. Adolphus Knoph, "The Smaller Family", *Survey* 37 (1916): 161.

43 *al-Huda*, March 5, 1899, 15–17, and September 11, 1906, 3.

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the following rejoinder by Nasrallah Faris. Reacting to Nassif Elias's story of the woman peddler in Bridgewater, Maine, Nasrallah wrote, "...we agree with the writer that women should not travel to sell if her husband is capable of properly taking care of her needs and the needs of her house, but if that woman had emigrated and left in the country a sick man... or one heavily indebted then is it not permissible for her to sell? Or if her husband is with her and he was sick, then who will take care of him, or if he was a gambling drunkard then how can she depend on him?"[44] Afifa Karam, one of the earliest and most prolific women writers in the *mahjar*, took up the same theme in a later article. Addressing those writers who were maligning the "honour" of women peddlers, she wrote: "you ascribe licentiousness, depravity and immorality only to the [female] *kashé* sellers, but you are wrong because an immoral woman is not constrained from committing ugliness simply because she is living in palaces, or because she is imprisoned there."[45]

Although women's work is not completely dissociated from the risk of immorality and dishonour, the anxiety over unbridled sexuality is shifted away from class and more onto individual character and personality. Afifa Karam, for example, categorizes and evaluated "womanhood" by creating four mutually exclusive and idealized types of "woman". In this construction, a woman—as an individual—is either "good", "deceitful", "working", or "ignorant". The "good" woman is the one who attends to her duties and helps her mother, and who later as a bride makes her husband happy and makes her house a paradise. "Working" women on the other hand are not—"God Forbid"—necessarily without morals, but they do exist in an environment that is filled "with dangers" which could compromise their honour. However, for Karam, the worst two kinds of women are the "ignorant" one who is "the disease of civilization and the curse of modernization", and the "deceitful" woman who pretends to be "good" but is in reality a "snake that poisons the honey of life".[46] Superficial beauty,

[44] Nasrallah Faris, "Men and Woman Were Created to Work", *al-Huda*, June 11, 1903, 3.

[45] Afifa Karam, *al-Huda*, July 14, 1903, 2. At the beginning of this article, Afifa Karam wrote, without the slightest hint of sarcasm, "I read above the article [of Yusuf al-Za'ini titled 'Women Qashé Sellers'] words from *al-Huda* asking educated men to respond and criticize without including educated women. But I ask from *al-Huda* to excuse this action of mine [writing in response]", At the end of the article, the editor of *al-Huda* wrote: "We wish if more of educated women were like the writer of this article, not afraid to appear neither in a literary setting nor of the objections against them by foolish people..." Both comments were indications that the entry of women writers into this field was a fairly novel event.

[46] *al-Huda*, April 8, 1900, 2.

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powdering the face, and wearing corsets to make thin waists were all considered frivolous affairs by Karam, whose purpose is simply to physically attract men and appeal to their "animal" instincts. In still another article, Ms. Karam chided men who, she argued, seduced innocent women and brought "dishonour" upon them by promising marriage only to take advantage of their bodies. Carnality, in her view, was the common and negative denominator in both of these instances ("deceitful" women and rapacious men), and it was directly responsible for the "sorry" state of the emigrant community. Thus, Afifa Karam still regarded sexuality outside marriage as a threat to family and community even if she saw its causes as men's rapacious appetites and "ghoulishness".[47] To civilize these monsters and eradicate the implied sexual predatory behaviour of men—let loose by the absence or even collapse of communal boundaries—Karam also advocated the construction of an ideal middle class family. However, in this family, where the woman is respected, educated, and house-bound, the man has to contain his sexuality within the household by refraining from visiting coffeehouses, cinemas and houses of ill-repute.[48] The house itself remains de-sexualized in the writings of these liberal emigrant thinkers, where every depiction of such abodes is full of marital bliss deriving from proper table manners, wholesome evenings of reading and needlework, and where the children are always in the presence of their parents. Any notion of physical tenderness let alone unbridled sexual pleasure is absent from these prosaic portraits.

It was not only in the US that this new narrative of a middle class (or elite) woman was being constructed. In Mexico, toward the end of the 1930s, two new newspapers—*Emir* and *Líbano*—appeared and they were aimed at the socially climbing members of the immigrant community. One of the prominent aspects of these magazines were sections dedicated to women readers in which an idealized Lebanese-Mexican woman was defined through articles on fashion, manners, beauty and health, cooking and maintaining cultural traditions. Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp notes that the construction of a feminine ideal—distant from the peddling and other forms of labour that women had partaken of—was intimately linked to the creation of a respectable Lebanese identity for the immigrant community in Mexico.[49] And while women were an integral part of the working

47 *al-Huda*, March 11, 1900, 3.
48 Afifa Karam, *al-Huda*, January 18, 1905, 2.
49 Alfaro-Velcamp, *So Far From Allah*, 143–144.

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immigrant community in Brazil, by the 1920s, the most successful firms—such as the Jafet, Abdalla and Salem factories—had become wholly male dominated. In 1952, at the re-establishment of the Syrian and Lebanese Chamber of Commerce in São Paulo, all the founders were male business owners.[50] All this led the Brazilian author Alfredo Ellis Junior to write of the "*syrio*" as "a merchant…[who] is able to barter *his* own life".[51]

Conclusion

Eliding women from the narrative of Eastern Mediterranean immigration was, thus, part of the process of creating an ethnic bourgeoisie in the *mahjar*. To become accepted by the indigenous middle classes, and to be less ethnic and more white, especially in a place like the US, necessitated the creation of a narrative of respectability whereby women were literally and metaphorically contained within the confines of the home. Noting that women were not in any sense marginal to the immigration story is an important first step in enriching and complicating the overly simplistic narrative embodied by the statue at the Port of Beirut. For instance, mainstream histories claim that the first immigrant from the Eastern Mediterranean to the US was a man, Ibrahim Arbeeli, who arrived in New York in 1878. His claim of religious persecution as the cause for his immigration was a common trope that had little to do with the realities driving him and his compatriots to immigrate.[52] Rather it was intended to elicit a sympathetic reception and admission into an American society replete with Orientalist notions that portrayed Islam and "Turks" (the term used for Muslims) as nefarious, violent, and repressive.[53] In reality, that same

[50] John Tofik Karam, *Another Arabesques: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil*. (Philadelphia, 2007), 28.

[51] Emphasis is author's. Quoted in Karam, *Another Arabesques*, 26.

[52] For a more thorough discussion of the causes of immigration see Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley, 2001). Also see "Becoming 'Syrian' in America: A Global Geography of Ethnicity and Nation", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 14, nos. 2/3 (Fall/Winter 2005): 299–331.

[53] Such Orientalist depictions of the Muslim "Other" as suspicious at best and certainly un-American were also peddled by anti-Mormon writers who sought to discredit the new American Christian sect by associating its founder, Joseph Smith, with the "false" prophet "Mahomet," and its precepts with those of "Arabian" Islam. In August 1843, for example, in Carthage, Illinois, an anti-Mormon committee published a manifesto that would culminate in the assassination of Joseph Smith and the expulsion of Mormons from Illinois. The manifesto declared that Mormonism is a sect that stands against the moral precepts of God and Christianity even as it perpetuates "the most lawless and diabolical deeds"

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year "a young woman left an unsuccessfully arranged marriage in Zgharta and headed for Alabama where others from her village had settled. Within the year, she had moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, and started in the peddling trade. She soon saved enough money to buy a wagon, and at the time of her death in 1932, she was the successful owner of a dry-goods store, affectionately known as "Queen Mary" for her willingness to assist new immigrants."[54] Her reasons for departing neither fit into the trope of religious persecution, nor can they be contained in the narrative of male emigrants working hard to bring over their families.

However, providing statistics and life stories which interject women into the narrative of immigration is not sufficient in and of itself. Rather, we must include gender as a historical lens refracting the tensions and challenges that immigration posed to patriarchal contracts, and the transformation it wrought not only in the lives of men and women who emigrated but in the society they left behind. By gender I mean the social relationships between men and women (as well within each group) that are historically constructed through cultural symbols, social institutions and economic transactions. Studying immigration through this prism allows us to see the decision to leave, not as the heroic venture of a single man, but as a familial decision that entails an investment of resources (including the dowries of women), and the re-negotiations of the role of those left behind, be they male or female. The distance and time spent apart further stretched these social relations almost to their breaking points (and beyond at times). It threw their contradictions into sharp relief: what is the real meaning of a man's authority if he be far away from his family; if a woman is providing all the income from her work in the *mahjar* then should she be able to make decisions about its expenditure? In the *mahjar*, social relations had to be reconfigured to allow for women's work beyond the space of the family and in the public sphere where it is potentially "shameful". This, in turn, raised questions about sexuality, love, marriage, family, education, rearing of children, cooking and food and a host of other matters that shaped the identity of immigrants and their sense of community. Finally, these very same dynamics and questions were brought back as immigrants shuttled between the Eastern Mediterranean and the *mahjar* and as over 30 percent of them returned permanently

through the prophetic pretensions of a "latter-day would be Mahomet". Richard Lyman Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling* (New York, 2005), 510.

[54] Gualtieri, "Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis", 68.

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after years of working in the Americas, Australia or Africa. Unfortunately, to this date we have very few studies that have focused on the gender (or race and class for that matter) dimension of immigration from the Eastern Mediterranean. It is only when such studies are undertaken more comprehensively that we can actually move beyond the public narrative embodied by a bronze statue erected by elites intent on romanticizing their past and sweeping it clean from the messiness of history.

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